

Film and Philosophic Experience:
Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*

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ABSTRACT

Film and Philosophic Experience:
Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*

Adam Rosadiuk

Central to Terrence Malick's 1998 film *The Thin Red Line* is the lightning strike of insight. Insight: a potentially life-altering phenomenon, a rare melding of language, image, and feeling. Insight: a temporality joining the seductiveness of memory, the perceived purity of the moment, and the threat of insight's decay. This thesis is about the problem of insight, and explores cinema's intervention into the motivation, structure, and representation of this phenomenon as philosophy. Malick's drama of American soldiers struggling to survive the Battle of Guadalcanal depicts a crucible of private insight and compulsive public philosophy through a unique cinematic aesthetic pitched between the sublime and the banal. My discussion centers on Malick's use of 'linguistic' figurative tropes and their interaction with Malick's 'visual' cinematic events: a meeting of two forms of expression which reinvigorates the longstanding 'quarrel' between philosophy and poetry, tests the tension between visual and verbal discourses, and gives expression to the wonder, desire, inequality, and disappointment at the center of the experience of insight. By looking at some of the strategies of philosophic communication experimented with by Plato, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Walter Benjamin this thesis understands Malick's work as one that renews fundamental questions about the nature of both private philosophic experience and the public mediums through which it is communicated. *The Thin Red Line* is a unique expression of what is at stake in the meeting of film and philosophy—as well as a stunning artistic achievement—and deserves a thorough analysis.

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INTRODUCTION: The Experience of Philosophy

1. First Sight

The most significant pan of *The Thin Red Line* appeared in *Literature/Film Quarterly*: Tom Whalen accused the film of superficiality, pretentiousness, and called it “a purveyor of maudlin metaphysics.”¹ This was echoed in the popular press by Roger Ebert, who while positive about his film-going experience overall, states unequivocally that director Terrence Malick’s insights about war—and Ebert sees the film’s voiceover narration coming directly from Malick—“are simply not profound.”² For David Thomson, Malick’s *Badlands* (1973) may be “the most assured first film by an American since *Citizen Kane*,” but while *The Thin Red Line* “is ‘beautiful’... beauty has always been Malick’s greatest jeopardy. It is also flagrantly incoherent and terribly arty.”³ He

¹ Tom Whalen, “‘Maybe all men got one big soul’: The hoax within the metaphysics of Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 3, no. 27 (1999): 162.

² Roger Ebert, “Seeing ‘Red’: Malick’s return a film triumphant,” review of *The Thin Red Line* (Fox movie), *Chicago Sun-Times*, 8 January 1999, p. 27.

³ David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 552.

joins Stephen Hunter⁴ of the *Washington Post* and Stanley Kauffmann⁵ of *The New Republic* who both, simply, seem to hate the film.

In a *New York Times* article published just prior to the release of Malick's most recent film—2005's *The New World*—Caryn James perhaps best sums-up the popular critical climate, then and now, when she suggests that while Malick's films *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* (1978) may be as “nearly perfect as films can be,” *The Thin Red Line* despite “extraordinary scenes...brought expectations for any Malick work back to earth.”⁶ It is partly Malick's biography which made these expectations so lofty: as a Rhodes Scholar, a published translator of Heidegger, a former *Newsweek* journalist, an MIT instructor of philosophy, the director of a stage production of Mizoguchi's *Sansho the Bailiff*, and a true American recluse, Malick is unusual even as a cinema legend. This biographical trivia was part of the tremendous hype about *The Thin Red Line*—this was Malick's first film in 20 years—but it was a strange sort of hype: unlike a *Star Wars* prequel, or even a Spielberg helmed World War II film released the same year,⁷ the traditional mechanics of hype don't really apply to the story of an obscure American auteur of only two not well known films who is suddenly given 50 million dollars and an all star cast, and delivers what, in effect, is a 50 million dollar experimental tone poem. The film most certainly had, even then, its fervent supporters: Michael Wilmington⁸ of

⁴ Stephen Hunter, “Righteous Men Against the Big Guns: ‘Thin Red Line’: Cookie-Cutter Soldiers,” review of *The Thin Red Line* (Fox movie), *The Washington Post*, 8 January 1999, B.01.

⁵ Stanley Kauffmann, “After Twenty Years,” review of *The Thin Red Line* (Fox movie), *The New Republic*, 25 January 1999.

⁶ Caryn James, “The Terrence Malick Enigma,” *The New York Times*, 6 November 2005, sec. 2, p. 8.

⁷ For a useful reception study of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, see Tibe Patrick Jordan, “A war on two fronts: Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*” (master's thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 2001).

⁸ Michael Wilmington, “The Thin Red Line,” a review of *The Thin Red Line* (Fox films), *Chicago Tribune*, 8 January 1999.

the *Chicago Tribune* joined high-art film magazine writers like Gavin Smith⁹ (*Film Comment*) and James Morrison¹⁰ (*Film Quarterly*) in rapturous praise—though all three reviewers made claims for the film on its own terms, eschewing the kind of ranking which usually goes on when a critic thinks they have discovered a masterpiece. These critics couldn't muster much of an argument to save the film from those who simply found it boring. Jonathan Rosenbaum found it necessary to compare the film to *War and Peace*, if only to make it clear that Malick's achievement is far less than Tolstoy's.¹¹

I have no doubt that the film is a masterpiece—the word seems appropriate to a film of this ambition—but its push/pull strategies of communication create unusual frustrations which can, for some, be in themselves quite thrilling, and which for others appear as telltale signs that it's not worth the bother. This film is most clearly frustrating at the level closest to us, at the level where we are most susceptible to meaning, at the level of the film's voiceover. Spoken by multiple characters that at times are hard to distinguish, the ideas these often disembodied voices communicate tend to follow each other obliquely, and it is difficult to follow the lines of thought even line by line. Characters blend together; character motivation becomes abstracted or diffuse. These are all features that exacerbate a persistent criticism of Malick's work: that it is devoid of characters we can feel close to and that it lacks narratives which engage us. Please refer to Appendix 1 where I try to clear up a fundamental technical problem we encounter when thinking about Malick's film: understanding which voiceovers are spoken by which characters.

⁹ Gavin Smith, "Let There Be Light: *The Thin Red Line*," *Film Comment* 35, no.1 (Jan-Feb): 8-11.

¹⁰ James Morrison, review of *The Thin Red Line* (Fox movie), *Film Quarterly* 53, no.1 (fall 1999): 25-38.

¹¹ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Malick's Progress," a review of *The Thin Red Line* (Fox Films), *The Chicago Reader*, 15 January 1999, sec. 1.

And there are a lot of characters to follow. There is Pvt. Witt (Jim Caviezel), an idealist and humanist loyal to his company; there is Sgt. Welsh (Sean Penn), a cynical veteran also loyal, in his own way, to the company; there is Pvt. Bell (Ben Chaplin), a melancholy former officer now an infantry-man haunted by thoughts of his wife (Miranda Otto); there is Cpt. Staros (Elias Koteas), a Christian and former lawyer, who will defy orders to protect his men and assuage his conscience; there is Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte), a military careerist intent on ensuring that he, and his men, follow orders; and there are close to a dozen more minor characters, all burdened by their own narratives, their own ideas, and their own ways of coping with the brutality of mechanized modern warfare. This multi-character perspective is linked by the elliptical voiceovers which, oddly for such a sprawling film, almost never provide narrative information and instead take the form of disjointed poetic ruminations. Indeed, these voiceovers are the source of much of the film's perceived pretentiousness. Based loosely on the novel of the same name by American Guadalcanal veteran and neo-transcendentalist James Jones, Malick's film follows Charlie Company through the final stages of the World War II battle for Guadalcanal, its successful assault on a highly fortified Japanese position at the top of a series of hills, its one week R&R 'off the line', and—in one of many departures from Jones' book—a climax where Pvt. Witt sacrifices himself to distract a battalion of Japanese soldiers away from his stranded Company, and the Company's final withdrawal from the island.

When I first saw the film I thought it lacked a resonant final image. It lacked a final thought. Ideas piled upon ideas, but the ideas seemed superficial: they appeared mostly in the form of questions and it was hard to construct any line of argumentation.

Perhaps ideas moved in parallel. Perhaps in three dimensions. The last line of the baroque and at times baffling voiceover, “Oh my soul, let me be in you now, look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made, all things shining” followed, eventually, by the last shot—a newly sprouted tropical plant on a beach—seemed either pat, ambiguous to the point of irrelevance, or simply nonsensical. This was not helped by the fact that the final image is very hard to ‘read’—it seems more zoological than symbolic. What *is* it?—never mind what it *means*. Like the muffled and meandering voiceover, this image presents a technical problem of ‘reading’. General consensus is that it is of a new coconut tree sprouted from a coconut, perilously washed ashore (an image which, unlike the vast majority of poetic images in the film, actually appears in the third draft screenplay).¹² The film had gotten away from Terrence Malick.

My first viewing of *The Thin Red Line* was dominated by anticipation of revelation. There is so much going on in the film to distract from the ostensible story, I have tended to forget how much of the film’s narrative momentum is based upon very deliberate question and answer structures. Noel Carroll would call this form of storytelling “erotetic,” but for Carroll this technique is conventionally used to create, by the end of a film, a feeling of clarity and satisfaction.¹³ At the level of theme, *The Thin Red Line* is dominated by its urgent philosophical questions, questions which seem unanswered. At the level of plot, the film enacts a storytelling style which propels us into the narrative through a sense mystery which in the end it abandons, laying bare the affect and raw experience of our intellectual roles as narrative and thematic detectives. “What are they doing out here?” Pvt. Hoke asks Witt. We’re not entirely sure. “Why would the

¹² Terrence Malick, *The Thin Red Line*, third draft screenplay, 191.

¹³ Noël Carroll, “The Power of Movies,” *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 89.

Japs put an airfield there?” We don’t know. “I guess we don’t know the bigger picture, do we?” No we don’t, and we won’t. “If they didn’t know this beach was deserted, what else don’t they know?” We never find out. “Why did they turn back?” We don’t know. The entire assault upon the Japanese position is structured as a mystery, and yet, as Bersani and Dutoit note, once we discover the Japanese—starving, emaciated, desperate, and clear reflections of the American soldiers—the mystery deliquesces.¹⁴ This brings us only to the middle point of the film. The deterioration of our erotetic engagement with the plot leaves us in a highly unusual state of spectatorship. Without a sustaining sense of mystery, the characters we have followed so far fully collapse into each other: motivations become vague, meaning seems distant. We are entirely unarmed for what we later learn is the film’s most important narrative mystery, one centered on the experience of a specific character: why does Pvt. Witt, in the end, choose a suicidal counterattack rather than surrender?

In the eight years since *The Thin Red Line*’s release there has been a boom in Malick scholarship. *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, edited by Hannah Patterson, is perhaps the most significant contribution. Patterson, in her introduction, and where she posits a sort of meta-thesis of the collection—the idea of Malick as a ‘poetic’ filmmaker—remarks that, “some commentators have suggested that the paucity of critical writings on [Malick’s] films is due to the difficulty of defining them. It is an attempt to redress this balance, to articulate the concerns behind his films, that this collection seeks to bring some specificity to his work, probing each facet to

¹⁴ Leo Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 161.

illuminate our perception of the whole.”¹⁵ Standout articles include Jon Orr’s contextualizing of Malick within the American cinema of the 60s and 70s, James Wierzbici’s close look at sound design, a trio of essays on *The Thin Red Line*’s reception and adaptation, and a very convincing exploration of the Heideggerian themes of *The Thin Red Line*, by Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy.

Patterson’s anthology shares much in common with the very first book-length study on Malick’s cinema, *The Films of Terrence Malick* by James Morrison and Thomas Schur, including a central interest in illuminating specificities. Though it covers all three films, the most fully developed theses are reserved for *Days of Heaven* and *Badlands*. *The Thin Red Line* analysis is basically limited to a reprint of Morrison’s original *Film Quarterly* review. As a review it is an excellent and evocative take on a first experience of the film; however, in the context of an academic study, especially next to more rigorous reasoning about the other two films, it feels rushed, highly impressionistic, and unpersuasive. Morrison and Schur don’t really develop an overall thesis for their book, though the authors suggest, writing before the release of *The New World*, that the first three films present an uncannily well planned trilogy, mostly visible through shared iconography and stylistic traits. The book’s third chapter, which makes up almost two thirds of the book’s length, is a collection of “Reflections on Malick’s Films.” While highly engaging and excellent, it is content to catalogue the oddities of Malick’s filmmaking, creating some hypotheses, but all the time seeming reluctant to go much further. While this glancing approach may stem from book’s status as the first comprehensive study on Malick published—and thus the authors’ desire to cover as much

¹⁵ Hannah Patterson, introduction to *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, ed. Hannah Patterson (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 2.

ground as possible—the overall feel is of impressionism. Morisson and Schur touch on everything from the American gothic, to sound theory, to male beauty, to credit sequences. In many ways, this approach feels consistent with the way we discover the films, and is not entirely unsatisfying. Both collections make it clear how much work there is left to do on Malick's films.

Michel Chion, in his BFI Modern Film Classics short book-length study of *The Thin Red Line*, describes a very self-reflexive approach to the film. He keys in closely on his own experience, even relating in detail his experience with the French language DVD that he used for his analysis and the problems of translating that back into English.¹⁶ Chion “explores the details” (8) of the film in an almost random manner; as if illustrating and expanding on thoughts as they come to him while he watches. He talks about the importance of loneliness in this film and Malick's previous films, a realization he claims to have discovered only on reviewing *Badlands* “in light of the films that came after it” (25). He talks about the problem of forming real bonds (30), on the haunting beauty of nature (40), and on the importance of ‘play’ in Malick's films (45). This scattershot and highly personal approach follows closely the way Chion opens the book, first giving an evocative one page interpretation of the film, and then turning to autobiography: “In writing [the one page interpretation], I was gradually overcome by the embarrassing sense of having nothing more to say, of having already encompassed all the thoughts inspired in me by this sublime film, which I could happily sit and admire in childlike silence” (8).

¹⁶ Michel Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, trans. Trista Selous (London: BFI Publishing, 2004). Page numbers hereafter cited in the text.

Jacob Leigh opens his discussion of *The Thin Red Line* with the following quote by V.F. Perkins:

Films are unlikely to replace speech or writing as the medium for examining and conveying ideas. Moral, political, philosophical and other concepts can attain in words an (at least apparent) clarity and precision which no other medium can rival. The movie's claim to significance lies in its embodiment of tensions, complexities and ambiguities. It has a built-in tendency to favour the communication of vision and experience as against programme.¹⁷

For Leigh the film is philosophic in its demeanour, if not its overall effect, and he notes some of the issues it broaches: “*The Thin Red Line* evokes questions as basic and profound as whether human actions can affect the world, whether there is an external force that exists beyond our apprehension of the physical world, whether civilization exists apart from the natural environment.”¹⁸ In Leigh's superbly detailed essay, Malick's film is shown to be carefully and artfully constructed—an argument aimed directly against critics like Tom Whalen who found the work to be sloppy and formally uninteresting—and far more complicated than initial viewings can reveal. Leigh amasses all sorts of evidence of the film's profundity, from formal daring, to impressive intertextual allusions. And, most importantly, he begins to tease out how the film stylistically complicates a one-to-one relationship between a character's ideas about the world (most often communicated through voiceover), and the film's. However, for such a remarkably insightful essay, it ends rather vaguely, returning to its central thesis that the Charles Ives composition *The Unanswered Question*, used to great effect at the middle of the film, “figures as an emblem thematically and stylistically...the film presents

¹⁷ Jacob Leigh, “Unanswered Questions: Vision and Experience in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*,” *Cineaction*, no. 62 (2003): 2.

¹⁸ Leigh, 9.

perspectives without resolving the relationship between them in favour of one or the other.”¹⁹ Leigh takes his Perkins epigraph seriously, and sees his critical task as one of unearthing ambiguity and unanswered questions. And while Leigh manages, to some extent, to reveal where the ambiguity is most concentrated—in the character of Pvt. Witt (Jim Caviezel), for example, who on his simple American country boy surface seems so *unambiguous*—in the end, Leigh’s conclusion is that the film is inconclusive.

When V.F. Perkins wrote the lines quoted above, he was in the middle of an analysis of the films of Alfred Hitchcock.²⁰ Perkins illustrates this quote by taking an example from Otto Preminger’s *Advise and Consent*, where a U.S. senator’s speech on constitutional freedom of speech is juxtaposed to the silencing of another. For Perkins, cinema best contributes to the making of significant meaning by complicating communication through aggressive exploitation of our desire to interpret. Images, sound, an actor’s physiognomy, *découpage*, and all permutations of juxtaposition make ideal cinematic communication an almost subjective experience. Indeed, being able to ‘read’ what goes on in a scene, at a brute level, requires us to be able to extract the pertinent details from a moving image which in its embarrassment of riches always signs ‘too much’—more than it has to. For Leigh, Malick’s style—which he has gone a long way in this article towards uncovering—ensures that Perkins’ description of “tension and ambiguities” are “fully embodied.”²¹ Leigh seems to be implying a category of evaluation for the significance of a film’s use of ‘ambiguity’: is the ambiguity fully “embodied” or not? Leigh doesn’t expand on this category but we can imagine here how

¹⁹ Leigh, 14.

²⁰ V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), 155.

²¹ Leigh, 14.

ambiguity might be considered ‘satisfying’ if it somehow seems complete, or organically logical. But still, for all its elegance and full-roundedness, what does this ambiguity *mean*? Clearly we don’t need Terrence Malick to tell us that the world isn’t always black and white.

Malick’s films are seen by many commentators as exhibiting intricate patterns of textual complication rather than any real insight. It is this insistent patterning that encourages us to see the work as ‘poetic’. Patterson, borrowing from film scholar John Madden, describes a poetic cinema as demonstrating certain traits: “Open forms, ambiguity, expressionism, non-linearity, psychology, digression, subjectivity, revision of a genre.”²² Malick’s films, with their off-puttingly intimate narrators, couch profundity in a sort of simplicity. The films are hypnotic, and if we feel this hypnotism as being ‘poetic’, we are likely to study them for meaningful complication, rather than working to reveal meaning. If we want to expose the content of the work, we enter into unpleasant catch-all themes like “transcendence” (Silberman) or “genre revision” (Power)²³ or “collectivism” (Bersani and Dutoit). Or we do it inter-textually: like Jimmie E. Cain’s highly important essay on *The Thin Red Line* which traces the complex influence of James Jones’ transcendentalist themes on Malick’s film,²⁴ or like Hubert Cohen, who in detail explores *Days of Heaven*’s biblical foundational text.²⁵

Though Chion’s approach to the film is decidedly impressionistic and purposefully rambling, and probably, overall, the least illuminating, he nonetheless ends

²² Patterson, 2. Madden’s book is called *The Poetry of Cinema* (Kidderminster: Crescent Moon Publishing), 1994.

²³ Silberman’s and Power’s articles both appear in the Patterson collection. C.f. the bibliography for the complete citation.

²⁴ Jimmie E. Cain “‘Writing in his musical key’: Terrence Malick’s Vision of *The Thin Red Line*,” *Film Criticism* 25, no. 1 (2000): 2-24.

²⁵ Hubert Cohen, “The Genesis of *Days of Heaven*,” *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 4 (summer 2003): 46-62.

his book unwilling to give up on the importance of interpreting Malick's film: "For the film does not use images and sounds, history, the suffering of flesh and spirit, sensations and colours, cries and silences as a pretext to run away from words or to dilute their meaning in some great ambiguous mush."²⁶ For Chion, the film—despite his own wish to "sit quietly in awe" of it—is about the power of language, the power of questioning, and the words of that questioning. This status of words (interpretations) as inspired by beautiful images (impressionistic effects) is, I'd argue, at the very center of Malick's cinema, and is what invariably rescues it from the exalted but inaccessible realm of meaningful non-meaning. When we look to interpret Malick's cinema, we are dealing with a confrontation between words and images, between ideas and emotions. This confrontation exists just as much in the film as it does in the phenomenon that is our interpretation.

Interpretation can be risky. When we interpret a film we risk killing it off completely. And not just by a bad interpretation. We might worry, dramatically, overly dramatically, about the 'violence' we could do to a text. Our interpretation may be perfectly congenial, but interpretation, but solving a film completely, can have serious consequences. All images of perfection sign eventual loss: the imperceptible but devastating loss of perfection. Our wish to find, in the artworks we study, signs of ideas like the 'eternal', is a desire to find precedence for the sustaining of our best emotions: those emotions when the artwork was new, and urgent, and had endless potential. It was these emotions that inspired the interpretation in the first place, that now, through our interpretation, we risk damaging. The sustainability of our interpretation answers, regrettably, not just to logic and reasoned argument, but to our experience of the

²⁶ Chion, 72.

sensation of interpretation, and our anxiety about its place in the cycles of fad, and in the neutralizing waters of public discourse. How can we put lofty feelings into common words, how can communities share them? This is a problem that all critics face, and one which those confronted with Malick's cinematic poetry are especially conscious. Why do our most heartfelt ideas die on the page? Nietzsche, from *Twilight of the Idols*: "That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking."²⁷ Or Walter Benjamin, "The written work is the deathmask of its conception."²⁸ I agree with Chion: there is a powerful urge *not* to interpret these films. And yet they seem so familiar with language, so eager.

2.

What we talk about when we talk about philosophy

When I first saw *The Thin Red Line*, its highly ambiguous final image seemed to present the possibility that there was a message being communicated that I was unable to understand; that there was a final philosophy delivered that I was unable to read. Throughout the film we see 'morally-neutral' images of natural violence: one of the film's major, and surprising, areas of investigation is into "This war in the heart of nature." Is war natural? This idea, established at the beginning of the film, prepares us for an answer by the end. There *is*, in fact, an obvious answer, delivered by voiceover just before the last patterning of shots, and in a way it has the ring of philosophy: "Darkness and light, strife and love. Are these the workings of the same mind? Features of the same face?" This is echoed, not too distantly, by the character of Linda's (Linda Manz) insight

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 196.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 81.

at the end of *Days of Heaven*—an insight presented with shocking blitheness, and without the distancing of interrogative sentence construction: “there never was a perfect person. You just got half angel and half devil in you.” As philosophic theories go these were intriguing, but indeed, they were hardly profound. What could be gained by communicating these banalities with such earnest authenticity?

What strikes me the most about *The Thin Red Line*—and what makes the film’s stunning imagery indelible in a way that mere visual beauty is so often not—is my response to what can only be called the film’s rhythm. There is something awkward about this rhythm—an awkwardness that some critics found to be symptomatic of heavy editing, artistic self-indulgence, or even poor craftsmanship—and, perhaps, even more importantly, an awkwardness to the way the pace of my thinking glances against it. This is an awkwardness which seems clearly present in *Days of Heaven* as well as in *Badlands*—it seems to me a deliberate and major component of the aesthetic. It is a sort of aesthetic disquiet. It is so pronounced in *The Thin Red Line*, that it strikes me as not just original, but perhaps profoundly so. The off-putting beats come in many forms: many critics pointed to the odd and distracting cameos: John Travolta as General Quintard and George Clooney as Captain Bosche in particular (though, as future reviewing of the film reveals, the shock of celebrity doesn’t last). For many, particularly those expecting an honest historical depiction of America’s involvement in the Pacific War, the philosophical/poetic ruminations of the film’s voiceover track are laughably out of place. Another disruption. It seems ridiculous to abstract from such a physical experience such a metaphysical film. *The Thin Red Line*, at times, does not allow us in; it keeps its characters at a distance, and it parcels out narrative too carefully—and yet the

film is, overall, so hypnotic. The sudden force of an image so symbolic—a vine engulfing a tree, locked in a millennial combat—that it even overwhelms those in the narrative who witness it, makes the film’s elegant knife-edge balance between cliché and beauty all the more impressive. There is a glorious energy of representation, a shapely tracing of lines of thought, when the film collides suddenly with an image as compulsively sentimental—even as *silly*—as that of an infant bird fallen from its nest struggling to stand in the middle of a desperate and terrifying military campaign. What do Malick’s films gain from such risky expressive tools?

We feel separated from Malick’s characters not because of their disaffection or alienation (as some experience *Badlands*) or their romanticized simplicity (how some feel about *Days of Heaven*) but because we are witnessing the image of someone thinking. In *The Thin Red Line*, where characters tend to blend into one another, it is almost as if an entire community moves in thought (although, there are very significant interruptions in this buzz of thinking). To watch a Malick film is to be in the presence of characters who are in their own heads, much of the time, and come up against the world awkwardly. It is the thinker’s ‘coming up against the world’ which we witness. They are in their thoughts, we are in ours, and the film is between us. What I found oddly affecting the first time I watched the film when confronted with the most awkward beats—those moments when the film would teeter most towards cliché—was the sudden presence of *my* voice. Of the internal monologue running in parallel to the film which, suddenly switched on, brought language up flush against an image it might be no match to express (because of banality of symbolism, or because of sublimity of form). It was the sudden clarity, in a film full of offscreen voices, of my own voice which made these beautiful

images suddenly very close at hand. For me, these were neither moments of audience distanciation nor audience inclusion. It was more like *déjà vu*. I wasn't suddenly more aware of myself as a spectator. I was more aware of myself as a thinker.

The idea that this was a philosophical film—that it was involved in thinking—was interesting to me: did I get this from my sense of the film or from the filmmaker? It is still hard to find a review of the film that does not mention its philosophicalness. Simon Critchley calls this a “hermeneutic banana peel,” our eager desire to jump to a philosophical reading of Malick’s film because of the filmmaker’s (or, sometimes, our own) background in philosophy.²⁹ Extracting a complex philosophical system from *The Thin Red Line* can seem an onerous task, and the film’s apparently banal and insistently clichéd undercutting of philosophic discourse prejudiced me against it—I began to suspect, when faced with such a deliberately mysterious film, that there was no there there. And yet I was willing to believe that I was wrong: I found the rush of clichés oddly affecting, and the odd rush of those clichés in relief against the gorgeous images of nature insistently memorable. I felt that I was mis-reading the film and this sensation made the images linger; my memory was hooked. Could the film be about this strange (yet simultaneously familiar) feeling of misreading and of mislooking? I emphasize the word *feeling* here—many films thematize questions of perception, belief, and the relative nature of truth, but Malick’s film appears unique if it has built this sensation into the centre of its aesthetic. Expecting a coherent philosophical statement from the film may be wrong headed. However, a filmmaking style alive to the elegant experiential phenomenon of ‘reading the world’ may have a great deal to say *about* philosophy.

²⁹ Simon Critchley, “Calm – On Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*”, *Film-Philosophy* 6, no. 38 (2002). <http://www.film-philsoophy/vol6-2002/n48critchley>. This essay will also soon be available in an anthology called *Film as Philosophy*, edited by Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough.

If ‘philosophical’ means anything, it means ‘worthwhile’, as in “no, you’re wrong, this is a great film, it’s not boring or pretentious, it’s ‘philosophical.’” That ‘philosophical’ might mean ‘worthwhile’—because it certainly doesn’t mean much else—is a reflection of a cultural value, though not a dearly held one, and one delivered with some amount of irony. To call something ‘philosophical’ is indeed to nearly call it boring, and it also means to call it ‘inaccessible’, and it also means to suggest that it answers to a particular specialized discourse. In this case, it speaks to our image and idea of whatever it is that ‘philosophers’ do. And, of course, to a member of this culture, to any given citizen, it also means much more, and by much more, I mean it opens upon a vast and vague world of associations—some aesthetic, some practically linguistic, some just plain wrong—more than large enough to accommodate a sense of largeness, of grandness, but not enough else.

What I am trying to avoid is giving a definition of ‘philosophy’. This is a problem because I still want to use ‘philosophical’ as a category of evaluation, analysis, and description. I believe *The Thin Red Line* is a philosophical film in a way that most films are not. In a way that the 1967 original was not.³⁰ And in a way that the original novel is not, though the original novel is more philosophical than the original film. Again, am I speaking still of *value*?—that I deign one object more valuable than another? Thus if I consider ‘philosophical’ a positive label then it would serve my interests to bestow it upon my favourite, and use it against those I consider lesser. Clearly I have to say what I mean. And while I can try to turn to other thinkers about the nature of the phenomenon of philosophy—and in the course of this essay, I attempt just that—the only

³⁰ The 1964 film version of *The Thin Red Line* was directed by Andrew Marton and starred Keir Dullea as Pvt. Doll (Dash Mihok’s character in Malick’s version) and Jack Warden as Sgt. Welsh (played in ‘98 by Sean Penn). Only 99 minutes long, the film focuses on the relationship between Doll and Welsh.

authority to which I may ultimately appeal to is this vantage of mine on that vast and vague world of associations of which I am summoned to the edge whenever I use in passing or in earnest the word ‘philosophical’, or ‘philosophy’, or ‘philosopher’. Can we talk about an aesthetics of philosophy? An aesthetics of thinking deeply? What is the representational life of philosophy? Is that representational life an essential philosophic problem?

Cinema has pillaged the iconography of religion for its costume epics and bible stories, for its horror films and existential dramas. And it has even helped redefine that iconography. Entire film genres—horror and science fiction—are built on the images of science: the mad wild-haired scientist, the bubbling vials, the grinning Tesla coils, and interminable close-ups of computer screens and ticking time bombs. And cinema favours no images over images of itself, over images of the artist, and the drama and grand gestures of creation. We have sequences like these in films like *Rocky* (1976) or *Pollock* (2000)—inspiring scenes of self-creation. War is very cinematic, too.

Philosophy, that better world, has not been photographed nearly so many times. Light. Grace. How would we film philosophy? What of philosophy is there in the fine edges and voids of film noir?—really, what does the feel of white light after pitch black do to remind us of philosophy? The Western strikes me as a philosophic genre. The wide horizons. The image of man in nature. Civilization versus the individual. What does the Western teach us about philosophy? How close is our image of philosophy to the image of the Western? I tend to think there is more of the philosophic in the slow pan across a horizon than the sound of old boots on a new church floor, but I could be wrong. Thomas Wartenberg, in an anthology on philosophy and film, describes some

of philosophy's iconography: "Thales' water that showed the essence of the universe, Descartes' wax that failed to reveal any essence except that of extended matter, Hume's billiard balls that created fundamental doubts about causation, Marx's table that encapsulated commodity fetishism, etcetera."³¹ We can add to this Plato's pilot, the hunter, the lover, the forest, Nietzsche's fisherman, sun, water, dynamite, Peirce's diamonds and weathercocks, Heidegger's blossoming trees, the cave. If we can't define philosophy, what is its aesthetic character? What does philosophy feel like? Is philosophy cool and rational, noble and untroubled by passions, as medieval portraits of Aristotle suggest?

What about the philosophical canon of cinema, if such a thing exists? What does Malick's film share with the existential road movies of Wim Wenders, the mythic social drama of Kenji Mizoguchi, the arch media and narrative self-reflexivity of Jean Luc Godard, the incisive phenomenological noodling of Michael Snow, the philosophically intoxicated vision and revision of Stan Brakhage, the against-the-grain re-reading of Douglas Sirk, the surrealist social critiques of Luis Buñuel, the gorgeous aquarium poetry of Hou Hsiao-Hsien, the grace of Jean Renoir's thoughtful questing camera, the profound religious-modernist chamber dramas of Carl Theodor Dreyer, the solipsism of Werner Herzog, the what-fools-these-mortals-be of Chaplin, the microcosmic physics of Keaton, Agnès Varda's *flânerie*, the obscure angular conceptual experiences of Sergei Eisenstein, the lost and found geographical/ anthropological insight-as-physical-perspective of Abbas Kiarostami, the moral snuff films of Bruno Dumont, the feminist will to power of Jane Campion, Kubrick's cool composition and relentless camera, the exhausting

³¹ Thomas Wartenberg, *Philosophy and Film*, ed. Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas Wartenberg, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.

concentration of Andrei Tarkovksy, the junk and found objects of Arthur Lipsett's transcendence, the opera and realism of Roberto Rossellini, the post-modern flesh and machine mash ups of David Cronenberg, the transcendence and anti-transcendence of Robert Bresson, Paul Schrader's various Passions. To name just a few. What is it that separates these cinemas from the rest, from other great cinema? Philosophy has traditionally found its public expression in the written word (Platonic dialogues, Aristotelian treatises, Augustinian aphorisms, Hobbesian short chapters, Kantian prolegomenas, Nietzschean mythical novels); it has not, traditionally, been expressed through film. Which is to say, no major philosopher working since the invention of film has used film to express his or her philosophic system; or, perhaps, we aren't yet equipped to recognize a 'cinema' as philosophy the same way we can recognize 'literature' as philosophy. And while there have been artists of vast and complex ideas—Eisenstein, Godard, Marker, Brakhage—they are still indeed artists, they are still confronted by a medium, first and foremost, rather than truth and its opposites. Thus we are left with speculation: what would a philosophy communicated through cinema be like? What problems does cinema present, and what does that tell us about cinema? What does that tell us about philosophy?

Stanley Cavell's epigraph to *Contesting Tears* speaks to how seriously the Harvard philosophy and film professor takes philosophy's responsibility to cinema:

To my way of thinking the creation of film was as if meant for philosophy—meant to reorient everything philosophy has said about reality and its representation, about art and imitation, about greatness and conventionality, about judgement and pleasure, about scepticism and transcendence, about language and expression.³²

³² Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), epigraph.

3. Second Thought

The discussion of Malick as a philosophical filmmaker begins—and in many ways ends—with Stanley Cavell’s introduction to the expanded edition of *The World Viewed*.³³ In two highly charged paragraphs of analysis Cavell argues that in the 1978 film *Days of Heaven*, Malick has succeeded in translating for the cinema Martin Heidegger’s philosophical lecture *What is Called Thinking?* Cavell doesn’t go into much detail, except to say that to do this properly takes a highly developed cinematic style. Cavell’s read of *Days of Heaven* is quite profound. He suggests that the film seems to diminish the importance of human beings (which it does narratively as well as formally) because those human beings refuse to acknowledge a phenomenological fact about the world which Malick has recognized as fundamental to the cinema: “objects participate in the photographic presence of themselves...they are essential in the making of appearance.” The human characters of Malick’s film are “reduced in significance,” because “in trying to take dominion over the world, or in aestheticizing it, *they are refusing their participation with it.*”³⁴ This charge against active human aestheticization of the real world, so ironic in a film as incredibly beautiful as *Days of Heaven*, is of course directed also to the audience. Confronted so forcefully by this aestheticization of the world—in the object of a film, which we have accepted as aestheticized—we too have refused participation. This speaks to one of the prevailing experiences of the film: a sense of stasis, of waiting, and watching; of recognizing that the characters aren’t just

³³ Michel Chion and Morrison/Schur both point out that Cavell would’ve been teaching at Harvard the same time Malick attended. Simon Critchley goes even further, and suggests that he has confirmation that Cavell was Malick’s Master’s Thesis supervisor—a thesis that Malick famously never completed. According to the website Wikipedia, Malick’s thesis supervisor was natural language philosopher Gilbert Ryle, with whom Malick had a disagreement with over his proposed this topic: a study of the concept of the ‘world’ in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terrence_Malick

³⁴ Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Expanded Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), xvi.

represented through beauty, but are themselves in a world of beauty, a world they at times interpret *as* beautiful. The beauty is not just on the film's surface, but is in the diegesis. We thus become sensible of the existence of the pro-filmic world—the *real* world—and what it might really look like.

The philosophical pedigree of *The Thin Red Line* has been investigated by a number of recent articles. Furstenau and MacAvoy, in an important article from the Patterson collection, suggest that Malick embodies what Heidegger called a “poet in destitute times.”³⁵ For the authors, Malick's films allow us to see and experience the Heideggerian concept of “Being,” and their argument for why the War genre provides an excellent frame for such concepts is very persuasive. For Heidegger, the experience of Being can be only granted to us through a poetry which counters the grim “instrumentalization” of the world (and language) epitomized by the technological monster that is modern warfare. Language, as we know it, has been voided of truth—poetry might return the power of real insight to language. The difficult connection to make, however, is between Malick as a visual filmmaker, and Heidegger's sense of philosophy's resolutely linguistic base. What becomes clear for Furstenau and MacAvoy, like what Cavell argues about *Days of Heaven*, is that the first step is to suggest that the film finds cinematic means to express philosophic ideas, and then suggest what sort of experience this translation creates. It is at this point, once we start to speak of translation, that words and categories begin to fail us. Furstenau and MacAvoy's conclusion is remarkably similar to Jacob Leigh's: “The film, thus, does not answer for the viewer the questions that it poses. The answer to the question of Being or ground around which the film swirls remains ambiguous, and this is necessary for the film to

³⁵ Furstenau and MacAvoy, 174.

remind us of our humanity and the question of Being” (184). As evocative as this statement is, the article ends before suggestions can be offered about how we might recognize a reminder of our humanity or a question of Being if we should pass it by. The authors lay the groundwork so we can wonder why such ambiguity is “necessary” and how it might function.

Simon Critchley concludes his article, in a way which echoes both Leigh’s and Furstenau/MacAvoy’s (Critchley’s article is in fact an inspiration for Leigh). Describing the single coconut shoot at the end of the film as an image of a thing that “simply persists regardless of the makings of ‘human meaning’,”³⁶ Critchley joins the chorus of critics arguing that the film is, ultimately, about non-meaning. Bersani and Dutoit, as one more example, suggest that the film’s insistence on questions is not in the service of formulating questions that the film might answer, but instead “that the film’s response will be non-discursive. Language raises questions which, Malick’s film suggests, language may be inherently unable to answer.”³⁷ Critchley raises a number of central themes—including love, truth, and loyalty—and, like all these critics, applies interesting analysis, teasing out hints of their vast complication. Critchley sees the film as a bit more dialectical than other critics, and yet, while he suggests that there are even “winners and losers” in these metaphysical conversations, he sees them as questions forever receding, swallowed up by multiple frames of meaning.

Critchley’s idea of “hermeneutic banana peels” is an interesting one, and relevant to my sense of how *The Thin Red Line* circulates very conventional interpretative ideas, which we may slip-up on if we are unwilling to be self-reflexive or too eager to attribute

³⁶ All Critchley quotations are taken from his online article cited at note 29.

³⁷ Bersani and Dutoit, 134.

them to the film's basket of offered meaning. Critchley, however, is referring more specifically to an attitude he recognizes in philosophic exegesis of cinematic texts that fails to engage with the film as a film. As he writes, "to read from cinematic language to some philosophical metalanguage is both to miss what is specific to the medium of film and usually to engage in some sort of cod-philosophy deliberately designed to intimidate the uninitiated." Critchley is criticizing a sort of direct translation between narrative and philosophic themes, an approach which treats a film's narrative as a straightforward allegory for a favoured philosophy, and echoes a sort of 'reading for ideology', where, in this case, 'ideology' is instead 'a philosophy', and the presence of it in a particular film stands somehow as proof of its cultural applicability and relevance.³⁸ Critchley, instead, goes on to suggest that "it seems to me that a consideration of Malick's art demands that we take seriously the idea that film is less an illustration of philosophical ideas and theories...and more a form of philosophising, of reflection, reasoning, and argument."

Kaja Silverman goes even further: "*The Thin Red Line* is more than a philosophically oriented film. It *does* philosophy, every bit as much as text like Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* might be said to do. Like the Heidegger of this disclosive text, moreover, Malick is not content to speak about Being; he also shows it to

³⁸ This tendency to read films in terms of a philosophic theory, as if we were reading them for ideology, is arguably the most dominant contemporary trend in the overt meeting of film studies and philosophy, c.f. the work of William Irwin (*The Simpsons and Philosophy*), Mary M. Litch, or Andrew Light. All three critics seem to see the role of film as a pedagogical tool to make philosophy more interesting. For a perspective more Film Studies based, Thomas Wartenberg, the reigning proponent of the meeting of film and philosophy and a very thoughtful contributor, sees the relationship as much more complex. He sees philosophy as a potential meta-discipline for Film Studies, one that would help bridge gaps between Film Studies as culture studies and Film Studies as art appreciation. 'Theorists' could find a place for their work in the traditional aims of philosophical investigation (after all, film theory began with the work of philosophers like Rudolph Arnheim and Hugo Munsterberg), while 'formalists' could enjoy a far more depoliticized body of theoretical concepts from which to draw from. If this position is at all tenable, remains to be seen. c.f. Thomas Wartenberg, "Philosophy of Film," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (fall 2004). <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2004/entries/film/>>. For a different view of film philosophy see the work of Richard Gilmore and Irving Singer.

us.”³⁹ Silverman’s analysis regrettably repeats the problem outlined by Critchley. If we subtract all the passages where she suggests that Malick’s skill is in making us really *feel* some philosophic truth, we are left with an article that suggests that to unlock Malick’s text all we need is Heidegger’s. This sensation that these general Heideggerian ideas are not really connected to the film in any profound way is not helped by the fact that Silverman’s description of Malick’s film is riddled with baffling factual errors.⁴⁰

Silverman claims that “to be present at a screening of Malick’s third film is to be permeated to one’s psychic core by an almost unbearable negativity.”⁴¹ This is a fascinating position for her to take—many commentators find the film’s transcendent spirit far more hopeful—and one that I agree with, and yet Silverman offers little evidence for her claim. Instead she presents to us Heidegger, “the greatest philosopher of mortality,”⁴² and suggests, in essence, how Heidegger might explain the plot of the film. We are left to wonder: if it is a feeling of negativity that is necessary to make Heidegger’s abstract philosophy present to our emotions—and thus to our intellect—why do we need Malick’s film at all? Wouldn’t reading Heidegger and watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for its own version of “overwhelming negativity,” create the same pedagogical effect? Is Silverman implying that Heidegger’s vision of mortality requires a particular *kind* of bleakness, one that grisly fare like, again for example, the *Texas*

³⁹ Kaja Silverman, “All Things Shining,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 324

⁴⁰ Besides misspelling the names of characters—‘Wit’ instead of ‘Witt’, ‘Walsh’ instead of ‘Welsh’—Silverman claims that Charlie Dale collects medals (he collects the teeth of dead Japanese), she confuses Sean Penn’s clipped Californian delivery with an Appalachian twanged voiceover, she suggests Witt gives water to a Japanese prisoner (when he offers gum, possibly cigarettes), she attributes lines spoken by John C. Reilly to Sean Penn and designates them as spoken in voiceover when they are clearly part of a dialogue, and uses this misattribution in a significant misread of Welsh’s character. And yet, all of her transcription of dialogue is perfectly accurate. Bersani and Dutoit, in their chapter on *The Thin Red Line*, inherit some of these same errors, most notably the mistaken attribution of lines of voiceover to Witt, the character upon which their entire interpretation rests.

⁴¹ Silverman, 324.

⁴² Silverman, 325.

Chainsaw Massacre can't deliver?—if so, is that then the role of Malick's critic: to help enable our sensitivity to a Malickian vision of negativity which is only graspable in the context of Heidegger's monumental stakes? Is Heidegger a means to discover Malick's vision, or vice versa? Or is it both simultaneously?

Silverman is never clear about how *The Thin Red Line* does philosophy. Her approach is basically to interpret the film's story and draw comparisons between it and Heidegger's themes. She leaves it to us to consider if we *feel* as she does, for example, Witt's "being-towards-death," the theme she hammers away on throughout her piece. Unfortunately, I simply have no way to be able to judge if Silverman's interpretation of the text in any way corresponds to my emotional experience. How do I *feel* "being-towards-death"? Is this a new emotion? Is it like an old emotion? How much Heidegger must I read before this emotion makes sense? Silverman is convincing about the usefulness of the concept to connect the disparate directions of the film, but is it more convincing than other interpretations, other philosophies? Furstenau and MacAvoy introduce, to my mind, a better set of Heideggerian themes—at the very least, their terms seem more evocative of all the movie's various storylines. The problem is: I feel disarmed when I try to connect what I think the film is doing with what Silverman thinks the film is saying. Silverman talks about immortality—to paraphrase Pvt. Witt—but I ain't seen it. I don't feel it. These critics suggest that these philosophic themes, because they are embedded in this artwork, are themes that I should be able to do more with than just parrot. If I watch the film correctly I will *experience* them, I will experience philosophy. By occupying this stance, we are revisiting a utopian vision of cinema's potential to communicate ideas directly, without mediation: we might think of

Eisenstein's experiments with dialectical montage, and his hopes for how, almost mechanically, it would reliably liberate the thinking of all who experienced it. But, regardless, is to experience philosophy the same as doing philosophy?

Consistent in all the criticism I've dealt with is the idea that *The Thin Red Line* is attempting to make us feel something unusual. I couldn't agree more, and I suppose it was my sense of this world of unusual emotions that made it so attractive to me as something to be interpreted—as if only through interpretation, through some rational muscle, could I get closer to understanding these emotions. So often when we talk about a valid (a satisfying?) interpretation of a film, we want to talk about how that interpretation is faithful to the *film*. Not the screenplay, not the story, not the cultural atmosphere—but the film itself. When we talk this way we're talking about *experience*, and as Perkins suggests, the cinematic experience is inherently over-laden with ambiguity. Cinema shares this with music: how, in our analysis, can we be sure that our interpretation coheres with a text that is never the same way twice, which is based on the unrepeatable contingencies of experience? It is precisely our deference to the power of that experience which frustrates the extraction of the kind of claims to truth with which we feel so much more at ease when confronted with in written works, a power which, if redirected for only a moment, would begin to make cinema's philosophical potential realizable. What is fascinating about cinema's closeness with emotional experience is our belief that these emotions are authentic: that even if we don't like them, we must face them as being true. While I would not gainsay our emotions—I think they are essential to philosophy—I do think that they, to use a visual metaphor, are subject to clarification.

I find that Malick's film sheds the weight of oppressive ambiguity if instead of strip-mining it for philosophical code we entertain the idea that the characters of *The Thin Red Line*, like the characters of *Days of Heaven* entwined in beauty, are themselves entwined by philosophy. In the context of a dehumanizing war juxtaposed brutally to an indifferent and beautiful natural world, these characters find themselves struggling with an experience that seems compulsively philosophic. This is to say, that I think *The Thin Red Line* is *about* philosophy more than it could be said to be *doing* philosophy. This is not an interpretative cop-out. As I hope to tease out over the course of this thesis, the question of what *is* philosophy is, in fact, the very first step in doing philosophy. And the question of what is philosophy is one that is answered by paying close attention to its affect as well as its promise (and the affect of 'promise'): we need to consider not just the way we think about thinking, but the way we feel when we think. As Cavell points out in *Contesting Tears*, philosophy re-oriented by cinema has, as of yet, not been made to account for itself. My contribution to defining this physiognomy of a cinematic and modern philosophy is to concentrate on the ideas, tensions, and ambiguities of philosophic experience at play in Terrence Malick's remarkable film.

4. The Experience of Insight

The Thin Red Line is about nature, beauty, death, God, community, and it's most certainly about love. And I think the film is also about America. Many commentators remark on the film's lack of geographical and moral specificity. Malick's approach here is arguably more mythic than historical—a history of mythic thought, a psychologizing of a particular philosophic consciousness. America, in legend, is a nation born from the

philosophy of the 18th century (in Malick's latest film *The New World*, this philosophic heritage is traced back as far as 1607 and the founding of Jamestown). In the crucible of the Second World War America came of age and stepped fully onto the world stage. That Malick presents his American soldiers as 20th century Emersons and Thoreaus is a telling hint of what Malick thinks about the philosophic evolution of this awkwardly philosophic nation. Representing America reborn, as it were, in an Edenic paradise, on the verge of a dangerous imperialist legacy, touched by the scattered weak philosophy of the mad, lonely, and saintly, posits a philosophic heritage of this new America which seems both pathetic and desperately noble. It is at this stage of analysis that we can start extending Malick's reach as an original cinematic poet, and start talking about Malick as an original thinker.

While an analysis of Malick's critique of America (and Malick is certainly not all critical) is perhaps the most interesting unexplored area in Malick scholarship—and with Malick's burgeoning filmography there will finally be a substantial body of texts to begin such an investigation—I feel it is one that cannot commence until we've made more progress coming to terms with Malick's unique approach to cinematic epistemology. My main interest in this thesis will be the elucidation of this unusual emotional dimension which critics have so far identified so closely with the profundity of philosophic themes they see at play in his work, and yet have left exceedingly vague. The critical conceit when dealing with a philosophic film like Malick's is the belief that we already know how we feel and that what we need is exposition of themes (and philosophic themes are good ones) to give dimension, or even legitimacy, to that experience. I'd argue that when we watch *The Thin Red Line* we *don't* know how we feel—our feelings are undone. Or,

perhaps, we feel at a vague distance but feel distance intimately. A film like Malick's embraces the ambiguity and mystery of cinematic experience not for the purposes of making us think about cinema, but to make us think about experience, and how we think through experience. Cinema's emphasis on the primacy of experience can be used against itself: troubling our belief in the authenticity of our emotions, it can force us not to simply question our opinions about ideas, but our opinions about the way we feel.

Through thinking about the film carefully, reading scholarship, rewatching obsessively, and trying a number of different interpretative approaches, I feel as though I've sussed out a workable sense of the contours of this emotional matrix which Malick seems to so effortlessly evocate, and yet which seems so concrete. And yes, my sympathy to this idea that the film is ambiguous is always in conflict with the profound stability of Malick's aesthetic: not that the emotions generated by my experience of the film are not always shifting, aren't always in flux. But they are also substantial, and they are always sensible. And they were the closest at hand, the most present, when I thought about Malick's film in terms of a particular phenomenon of experience, an experience intimate with a category of experience I'm calling philosophic experience. There is, it strikes me, a familiarity between Malick's unique cinematic world and the phenomenology of insight. It is this phenomenon of insight—experienced, in degrees, and at some time, by all of us—which I hope will ultimately help to describe these odd and overwhelming feelings, and their perilous and reciprocal relation to the ideas so very present in Malick's film.

Part 1 examines the stylistic idiosyncrasies of *The Thin Red Line*, and suggests how these innovations create an unusual interpretative space which blurs the boundaries

between the figurative and the literal. Picking up this idea, I will turn to look at philosophy's relationship with poetic language, and look in some detail at Plato's the *Phaedrus*, a philosophic text which endeavours to represent philosophy to itself. *The Thin Red Line* shares several imagistic and thematic similarities with Plato's text, and these are discussed in my analysis of the film's use of metaphor and literalization. By examining the figurative dimension of Malick's film through the literal dimension of its images, and vice versa, I will begin to tease out an analysis of the phenomenon of insight, the experience of which is essential to philosophy's representation and *The Thin Red Line's* thematic concern. Part 2 looks more closely at Malick's use of figurative tropes, particularly at the way metaphor, allegory, and symbol interact to represent the life of ideas which follow the experience of insight. Through a close analysis of the film, I will demonstrate how the narrative arc of Witt, his insight, and his insight's decay, traces the problematics of philosophic representation and the profound and vital challenge of exploring the psychology of the philosophic thinker. In a speculative conclusion, I suggest ways that Malick's cinema is concerned with the sustaining of insight.

PART 1: Before the Revelation

1. The Expressiveness of *The Thin Red Line*

The Thin Red Line is a Galapagos of figurative tropes. We can readily identify on its fringes and in its thickets familiar examples of metonymy, metaphor, symbol, and allegory—but it will be the survivors, it will be what remains of these once familiar literary creatures, which will both map a genealogy of affect and present a network of philosophic concepts. The making of meaning in *The Thin Red Line* is accomplished by subtle quakes, by formal innovations which provoke shifts in stable meaning not registered until moments much later, until far future viewings. Sometimes these ruptures of meaning are anything but subtle, and the agitated circling figurations can easily distract from the source of the disturbance, leaving us to feel that the work is meandering,

that interpretation is inconsequential. There are at least four key formal techniques which make Malick's cinema so uniquely expressive, and which create the environment wherein these figurations function: moving background objects to the foreground; a documentary approach to re-editing; narrative deferment; and an emphasis on point of view.

We hear a voiceover well before we meet a character. "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself?" Because the voiceover seems small, fragile, questioning, and is intoned in the drawl of the American South, we may not consider that it has the authority to be the narrator of the film. As we wait to associate it with a character, we see, through a series of dissolves, images of nature which seem to illustrate the point of the words we are hearing. But the violence, the "war," in these images—a vine snaking around a tree—is unexpectedly still, and majestic, and seemingly eternal. It may pressure our idea of violence, especially as we prepare ourselves for what we expect to be a generic war film. Like the crocodile slipping effortlessly under the surface of murky water, algae swirling to close and cover its passage beneath, violence here seems submerged, even invisible. What do we know of these images? Do we recognize these images as beautiful? Do we locate this beauty in nature, or in their presentation? Both? What is the narratological status of these shots? Who is doing the questioning? Who is doing the answering? Who motivates this camera which seems separate from the 'narrator' and yet also complicit? The interrogative form of narration couldn't be more perfectly suited to this odd and mysterious opening. Watch the scene without the voiceover and look for a question/answer structure in the patterning of images.

From the jungle we dissolve to an ocean side village, and the dissolves are replaced by sharp cuts. In a series of 3 shots of children playing on the beach, we might notice that in the second and third someone looks directly at the camera.⁴³ This furtive glance happens, in both cases, almost immediately before the cut. At least two things are at work here: a glance has begun to define the rhythm of the film (by inciting montage); and we might get the idea, even subliminally, that montage in this film does not cut to elide unnecessary information, but to reveal hidden meaning. The cuts come as winks and winces.

The first POV (point of view) shot of the film is figurative, and it takes the form of what Edward Branigan calls “retrospective POV.”⁴⁴ In Branigan’s schema, POV structures include a “point/glance” shot (the shot of someone looking) and a “point/object” shot (the thing being looked at).⁴⁵ If the point/object follows the point/glance, it is a classic “prospective POV.”⁴⁶ Retrospective POV shots, on the other hand, are POV pairs that begin not with the subject looking (the point/glance) but with the thing being looked at (the point/object). In this case from *The Thin Red Line* we first have a shot of Melanesian boys swimming underwater, filmed with an underwater camera. We might consider this shot as one existing only for us. Its status in the narrative seems only denotative. In the next shot, however, we cut to the surface of the water and then a quick pan to the face of Pvt. Witt, in a boat, staring down into the water and smiling. Here is the point/glance that completes the POV pair, and forces us, in memory, to recategorize the previous shot as one inflected (in some way) by the trace of

⁴³ In the first shot of the series, the boy in the foreground, out of focus, *nearly* turns to the camera before the cut comes. Arguably, the motion of his head back incites the cut.

⁴⁴ Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 111.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

a diegetic character witnessing. If we had begun the shot with Witt looking down at the water (the point/glance), and then cut to the shot of the boys underwater (point/object), the pair would be an example of a prospective POV shot. By starting with a thing seen, and then introducing us to someone looking, we are granted an odd associative insight into that character. We know an object of their thought before we know them: as a consciousness in the narrative, they are an insight into an image.

This example is more complicated, however, and it illustrates Malick's idiosyncratic usage of POV. Obviously, as emphasized by the hypothetical reverse formulation I mentioned above, it is a bit of a logical stretch to suggest that Witt is actually seeing the boys underwater (the point/object), especially because our view of the boys was so privileged. Branigan, in his schema, chooses "point/object" and "point/glance," rather than 'viewer' and 'viewed', because it makes it clear that what we are talking about are points in space (which can be filmed in any way and at any angle) and not, in fact, a literal representation of what that character actually sees. Literal POV shots—where what we see is 'exactly' what the character sees, as if they were filming the scene—are rarer than basic POV pairs. But even accepting this almost figurative nature of POV shots, Malick has complicated things by introducing a dissolve between the shot of the boys underwater, and the point/glance shot of Witt looking down and smiling. We generally consider a dissolve to indicate a passage of time, but without any sense of a character's subjectivity through which we can mark that time and make its passage relevant, does this 'read' hold up here? Is Malick indicating a passage of space? Certainly the dissolves which open the film seemed to be traversing space. Is the dissolve in question indicating a firm separation between Witt and the boys, or is this

rather a sort of blurring, a softening of representational physics? Is the point/object something Witt *has* seen—is looking at the water a reminder? Regardless, Malick has chosen to introduce us to this character—the first character we meet in the film—while this character was in the middle of looking into crystal clear water. We don't know what he sees for sure, but surely a connection has been made between the world underwater we've just seen and Witt on the surface. Though it mimics a system of concrete and familiar meaning creation, this pair of shots, in the end, creates meaning figuratively—they are poetic, and the meaning is really only traceable through Witt's private smile.

Malick follows this up immediately with yet another complicated pairing. Witt, continuing to paddle, turns to screen right and looks offscreen. The next shot is of a boy walking, left to right, carrying a fishing pole over his shoulder. The boy glances at the camera, smiles, and then turns back for a moment. This strikes us as a conventional POV shot: Witt is looking at the boy fishing...although, we may be somewhat confused by the setting: it seemed in the point/glance that Witt was in deeper water. Where's the shore? Where's the boy in relation to Witt? In the next shot, Witt is still looking to the right, presumably to the boy. Witt smiles as if in response to the boy's smile. Then a boat drifts in from the right, piloted by two men. Witt follows their passing, nods and smiles, and they nod and smile back. What has just drifted into the frame was, in fact, what Witt was looking at in the second to last shot: not the boy. This makes more sense. But what of the boy? Where was he? Even if the shot of the boy is meant only to be decorative, why insert it confusingly into a chain of glances?

Something else odd: in the point/glance shot of Witt in the boat we may have noticed another boat in the background. In this cut back to Witt—after the shot of the

boy with the fishing pole—there is no boat in the background. The boat, in fact, is still there, just far in the distance and now to the far right of the screen. Indeed, a substantial time elapse has occurred between cuts. Even though Witt's body position and demeanour seem contiguous across shots, the figures in the background have reshuffled. When the third boat—the one with the two fisherman who Witt seems friendly with—drifts into the frame, it is almost as if that boat in the background, distorted by cuts, has figuratively stepped into the foreground. Regardless of the actual production history, what is at work here is a Malickesque moment of an object just on the edge of our attention suddenly becoming dominant in the frame, a very frequent technique, and a device I will return to in detail later.

In these four shots we have experienced at least three interesting aesthetic devices. One is the confusion around POV. Two is the experience of an object originally seen in the background suddenly coming forward in the shot. And third, an experience of missing time. A jump cut. Is this small error of the boat a continuity error? We may also notice that while the boat passes, Witt is moving his mouth as if speaking, though we hear nothing but Gabriel Faure's *In Paradisum*. I watched this scene half a dozen times before I noticed it. This technique is in fact very common in Malick's films after *Badlands*. It is a product of what has become Malick's working method; a method of production, I would argue, which is the basis for the style of his increasingly ambitious philosophic cinema. The effect of these conscious continuity 'errors' is of a subtle dislocation: a sense of the construction of the scene through editing. The film, through these methods, very swiftly and subtly creates a sense of disorientation—of reshuffled hierarchies of visual importance—that immediately inflect our viewing, and are likely to

make us feel uncomfortable. These are techniques we would be more likely to expect, and accept, in a documentary.

Malick's working method, and how that working method influences the finished film, very well may be unique in American cinema. Consider a long take scene from *Days of Heaven* set at dusk: a wide shot of Linda roasting a peacock over a fire, and Bill (Richard Gere) is sitting across from her. They are chatting. Studying it carefully, it is clear that their moving lips do not match what we hear them saying on the soundtrack. The screenplay describes this scene in detail and it appears that the screenplay is what has been shot here.⁴⁷ However, the lines we hear—"I saved your life today." "Yeah?..."—are in fact from a different scene that didn't make it into the final film. Malick has taken the dialogue from one scene and used it to replace the dialogue from another. This technique is used at least three times in *The Thin Red Line*. Often, shot reverse shot scenes will end with a reaction shot taken from a portion of the conversation unused in the final cut. We are looking over the shoulder of the interlocutor, whose lips are still moving. Music rushes in to replace the voice. The effect? We see a character—the one facing the camera—not when they are reacting, but when they are listening, when they should be listening, but their mind has wandered.

The example from *Days of Heaven* demonstrates Malick's faith in the power of editing. This type of re-engineering of dialogue scenes happens all the time in *Days of Heaven*, but most often is presented in complex shot-reverse-shot structures, which provide more leeway in scene construction. This long shot of Bill and Linda matched to words they are not saying only works because of the way our eyes are naturally drawn to the speaking subject. If we continue to watch Bill while Linda is speaking, and resist the

⁴⁷ Terrence Malick, *Days of Heaven*, unpublished screenplay, 1976, 20.

urge to look at her when she begins to ‘speak’, we can see that Bill’s lips continue moving long after we stopped hearing what he was saying. Malick puts his faith in this very simple cinematic device—our ears and expectation will lead us towards a perceived sound source before our eyes will be drawn by movement—and demonstrates a playfulness with conventional cinematic verisimilitude. These techniques were not, of course, invented by Malick. In fiction filmmaking we can note at least two parallels: low budget filmmaking where any patchwork solution will carry the day; and the dream world of silent film, where there is already the fundamental technical imperfection of watching lips moving without voices. What is ultimately represented in this scene from *Days of Heaven*—and it should be noted that this scene contains absolutely no narrative importance and easily could have just been cut—is cinema’s closeness to illusion. That the dialogue from one scene manages to match so well with this other scene is a sort of miracle: a revelation of the latent potential of the footage collected. This is the impression Malick presents: that this film was not created out of infinite resources of imagination, but out of a finite set of resources collected over a concrete period of time. This admission is not an effort to emphasize the film’s constructedness. Instead, a scene like this emphasizes how the film’s essence is in reality but its communication is in imagination.

Morrison and Schur, quoting Nick Nolte, report on how Malick would shoot multiple takes with variations on action, sometimes improvising, sometimes observing silence, and sometimes reciting lines shouted by the director from behind the camera.⁴⁸ A long quote from Nick Nolte, given to *Time Out* is worth considering:

⁴⁸ Morrison and Schur, 128.

Terrence Malick is oblique. As I got into that role, Terry would come to me and show me a few pages he'd written, and I'd read this wonderful poem. I'd say: "That's great, Terry, but it's six pages." He said: "Yes, take those six pages and edit it down to what you would say." So I would edit it down, show it to Terry and he'd say "It's a bit long..." I'd end up with one or two lines out of six pages.

[...]

So I watched Terry. He would start shooting the scene, but watch the sky. And about six, when the sky was just right, he'd say, "That's enough of this scene; let's revisit the scene we shot the other day. Nothing will match, but that's fine." He was finishing the scenes in golden light. He couldn't tell the studio he was only going to shoot in golden light, they would have freaked, so he would hold these scenes off. The actor didn't get to do what he wanted to do, [cinematographer] John Toll didn't get to photograph it the way he wanted to, and Terry didn't get to shoot it as he'd written it. All those elements were thrown out, and the only new element was this light; that's what it was about.⁴⁹

Both *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line*, despite highly idiosyncratic and seemingly disorganized approaches, and despite *Days of Heaven*'s beleaguered shoot, both came in on budget, and both were shot on schedule. It was the lengthy post-production stage, the editing, and least expensive part of the production process, which dragged out the production schedule. It seems clear that Malick's exploratory and experimental editing is a working method; not a desperate gesture at damage control.⁵⁰ Malick writes a conventional though highly accomplished screenplay full of wonderful dialogue and surprising details, teases out ideas in successive drafts, then sets out to shoot a fully developed script. The conventionality of his screenplays helps ground his metaphysical films in the realm of colloquial American genre, a sort of nod to the raw materials out of

⁴⁹ *Time Out*, London, 19 January 2003.

⁵⁰ Peter Biskind, in his book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* has a far less generous read of the production history of *Days of Heaven*, an account ably criticized by Morrison and Schur.

which workable philosophy can spring, as well as making it easier to secure funding.⁵¹ However, Malick writes detailed screenplays which really only act as notes for creation, and, of course, guides for his actors. Malick's reliance, in his scripts, on cliché and an almost naïve literary style of transparent psychological motivation seems to suggest that he sees an actor's performance first emerging out of cliché. His script acts as an ambassador for all the cultural baggage, shorthand, and preconceptions an actor might bring to their understanding of human motivation, and he insists his actors perform that cliché. By so doing, he and his actors construct a careful and hypnotic balance of naiveté and self-consciousness. His actors occupy a space between habitual gestures and expected responses. Malick's actors 'make strange'—but not alienating—the habits of thought of the everyday by performing them so earnestly. The actual shoot is a combination of gathering as much scripted material as possible, and staying alive to the contingency of their surroundings. Malick then takes all of the footage, thinks about

⁵¹ In *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image*, a bizarrely written but sometimes useful 700 page catalogue of which American war films received Pentagon approval and assistance and which did not, military historian Lawrence H. Suid briefly describes *The Thin Red Line* producer John Roberdeau's encounter with the Department of Defense. While Suid's account of the correspondence is muddled at best, it seems Roberdeau had originally received positive comments about the screenplay from Pentagon/film industry liaison Phil Strub. Later, Lt. Col Al Lott, another employee of the Los Angeles Army Office, told Strub that Malick's screenplay "does not portray soldiers in an authentic manner. There are numerous instances of cowardice by the soldiers, cowardice by the leadership, callous leadership, alcohol abuse on the battle field, war crimes including murder and total lack of esprit de Corps" (638). Lott goes on to say too that American World War II soldiers "fought honourably. This screenplay depicts them as selfish cowards who only care about staying alive" (638). Clearly, with obstacles like these, any garnered support from the American military—technical advisors, equipment, etcetera—requires tact and diplomacy. This correspondence, which began on October 29th, 1996, most likely deals with Malick's second draft screenplay (dated October 3rd, 1996). This screenplay draft describes a surprisingly conventional Hollywood film: a very faithful adaptation of James Jones' (thematically) unconventional war novel. But this only makes sense. Arguably, Malick writes screenplays that, having suffered the vicissitudes and favouritism of the Hollywood studio system, are designed to secure financing. To get made. While I would be ungenerous to question Malick's authenticity and motivations, the screenplay's dedication to "The Memory of James Jones And Those Who Served With Him. They Live With Us" surely served a political initiative. The implication here is that Malick writes screenplays to secure funding, then reworks the script during shooting and editing, to make the film that he actually had in mind. A deciding factor in the production of *The New World* (2005), a project Malick had started envisioning 20 years ago, surely had a great deal to do with the 400 year anniversary of the Jamestown landing, and the state of Virginia's willingness to accommodate artists advertising that fact.

what's been shot, and then edits the film based on his viewing of the material, based on memory, based on the act of watching and rewatching footage, thereby turning the act of editing into a performance.⁵²

The ellipses in Malick's narratives replace three dots on a page with chains of profilmic spaces...narrative isn't so much excised, as it is deferred. In a scene from *Days of Heaven*, Bill rubs Abby's (Brooke Adams) hands after a long day of work. Her hands are cut or somehow injured—or so we assume; we haven't actually seen her get hurt or been told as much—and Bill says, “I saw a doctor come by. I'll try to get you something for that.” We then begin a montage of farm workers relaxing after work: people swimming, Linda playing, a man and his dog. 24 seconds of establishing shots before we pick up Bill again, after we finally spot the Farmer's house in the distance, and after a music cue, and a cut to a close up of Bill rummaging in a drawer we've never seen before and pulling out a small bottle. We may have forgotten that he was getting the ointment. This division between a narrative setup (“I'll try to get you something for that”) and the payoff (Bill getting the ointment) is substantial enough, and each shot in the transitional montage functioning so hermetically as an establishing shot, that our ability to anticipate the following shot, based on our sense of the narrative, is substantially undermined. This is Malick upsetting the erotic momentum of the film: or, rather, this is Malick suggesting that narrative questions are not the most important questions the film is

⁵² While a study of the contribution of Malick's editors would be fascinating, it would be hard to tease out any editor's specific contribution to Malick's aesthetic. Robert Estrin, Malick's editor on *Badlands*, was replaced by novice feature film editor Billy Weber on *Days of Heaven*, who was joined by Leslie Jones and Saar Klein for *The Thin Red Line*. On *The New World*, TTRL alumni Saar Klein is joined by Richard Chew and Hank Corwin. With so many editors, one can imagine that the final shape of the film is indeed a highly collaborative process, requiring the talents of many editors labouring over—in the case of each of the last two films—more than a million feet of film. The editing of *The New World* took over a year. See the film's official website for an intriguing conversation with *The New World*'s editors: <http://www.thenewworldmovie.com>

asking. Rather, it emphasizes the *presence* of questions; it points to how the ellipses can represent thought. Reading the film requires us to become sensitive to a constellation of proximate ideas scattered across a night sky arching over a steadily moving narrative. These connections don't resist the narrative, but we find ourselves forcing to account for relativity, when from their haphazard and distant perspective we wish to take note of the passing of narrative. And indeed, it is still the narrative that is moving the fastest; it is the narrative we are inevitably following in spite of the scenery, in spite of the digressions.

At the beginning of *The Thin Red Line* Pvt. Doll (Dash Mihok) steals a pistol—it's a fairly elaborate scene, and taken directly from the novel. This setup, and I remember distinctly my sense when I first saw the film of its implied importance, prepared me for some sort of elaborate narrative payoff. It never comes. In Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, narrative importance is similarly placed upon a Hitler youth knife discovered at the beginning of the film and presented as an ironic gift to an American Jewish soldier. This character is later stabbed to death by this same knife. While there is no such ironic narrative payoff in Malick's film, the object that is given such implied importance doesn't simply disappear. Doll uses the pistol often in the film—in both the attack on the bunker, and the attack on the Japanese bivouac. But he uses it to no discernible effect: in fact, we may never notice the object again, simply because it remains only a pistol, and is never attributed narrative importance, and is never commented on again. The pistol takes its place among Malick's collection of objects indifferent to narrative. This narrative interruptus finds its parallel in the film's complex use of POV shots: we can never anticipate for sure what a POV will reveal. Just like we hesitate to attribute consecutive shots as directly following the narrative line, POV

networks don't always connect in a logical way. A POV may simply, as in a long shot of Captain Staros squinting into the distance, remain unsatisfied, unanswered. We don't always get the point/object shot, and once we learn this we stop anticipating it, and we start watching the face of the person inhabiting the point/glance.

So what does all this *mean*? A cinematic style as odd as Malick's invites us to make sense of its distortions and deviances from conventional modes of representation by understanding them figuratively, which is to say that at some level we understand that they are 'on purpose' and serve to communicate at a poetic level. We could argue, for example, that Malick's complex structures of POV are metaphorical for the act of thinking, jump-cuts are a metaphor for feeling outside the world, and an emphasis on shots of streaming shafts of light might be symbolic of the experience of enlightenment. We might understand the disjunction between image and soundtrack during the scene of Linda and Bill roasting the peacock as a technique of representing memory. The way an object—be it a painting, an image from a film, or a personal keepsake of sentimental value—acquires figurative meaning is something of a mystery. The idea that we can 'see' a figurative dimension lurking in an object suggests that this dimension is somehow bound to that object, as if the object is encased in resin or framed elaborately. To 'see' *enlightenment* in *sunlight* is to project thought into the world, to enact a melding of perception and interpretation. As we shall see in more detail at the end of this section and in the next, Malick's unique filmmaking style emphasizes the temporality of figurative meaning, assuring that our experience of an object and our experience of its meaning constitute a peculiar but pertinent history in which the awe and anxiety inherent to the phenomenon of philosophy is sensible.

We deal in figurative tropes everyday. Our capacity to circulate and decode technically nonsensical metaphors like *it makes my skin crawl* is an astonishing phenomenon ably exploited by literary poets. The cinematic poet works in a medium which offers different challenges to figurative (and literal) communication. Malick seems intent not on simply replicating a poetic form in images nor deconstructing figurative signs for our delectation, but nurturing them, coddling them into a state of expressiveness as experience. This expressiveness comes, first and foremost, from the recognition of this odd—at times magical—presence of figurative experience in the age of cinema, an experience which is both an emerging feeling of wonder, and an insistent compulsion to interpretation. Figurative tropes in cinema are, of course, not new—though their definition and taxonomy, as we shall see, is controversial—but Malick’s unique filmmaking style, which seems based around a sensitivity to these poetic forms, profoundly transforms the presence and possibility of the cinematic figurative. Specifically, these unusual figures become intimately tied with what in Malick’s films appears ‘philosophic’: an ease of union which helps answer a question these films and their reception raise: Malick’s films have been called ‘poetic’ and ‘philosophic’—how can they be both?

2. Poetry and Philosophy

They are the “two activities of human intellect that are both the closest and the most impenetrable to each other,”⁵³ and for that reason philosophy has always had a lot to say about the uses and disadvantages of poetic and literary language. Poetry, through

⁵³ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 103.

its epistemological instability, through its closeness to doubt and wonder, through the way it recategorizes and reconfigures experience, presents a challenge to habitual thought that can appear very philosophic. It is precisely poetry's facility with *appearance* disconnected from actual content which philosophy critiques.

If we place philosophy contra poetry we get an unruly opposition between reason and emotions. The former becomes the bastion of intellectualism, rationality, precision, cool objectivity, and hard knowledge; the latter is a realm of emotion, irrationality, subjectivity, and intuition. The first uses precise language; the second uses decorative and ambiguous language. The first is the realm of the literal. The second, the figurative. While this opposition makes a certain amount of intuitive sense, in practice it produces more tension than methodological definition: especially since philosophy—as demonstrated in the written work of philosophers like Plato, Augustine, Montaigne, Rousseau, and Nietzsche—so often makes use of poetic language and techniques in an effort, at the very least, to bring vague concepts and sensible experiences into reasoned discourse. Paul de Man identifies this strategy as one, which while expedient, is not considered ideal: the prevailing opinion within philosophy is that housekeeping is in order, that philosophy “has to give up its own constitutive claim to rigor in order to come to terms with the figurality of its language or it has to free itself from figuration altogether.”⁵⁴ And if that doesn't work, philosophy must confine figurative language and limit its use to specific goals before said language does “epistemological damage.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Paul de Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” in *Aesthetics of Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 34.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Thomas Hobbes, in his 1651 political treatise *Leviathan*, rejects the use of figurative tropes (particularly metaphor) completely, even in cases where it is necessary to use one's imagination or "fancy" to come to some understanding:

In Demonstration, in Councell, and all rigourous search of Truth, Judgement does all; except sometimes the understanding have need to be opened by some apt similitude; and then there is so much use of Fancy. But for Metaphors, they are in this case utterly excluded. For seeing they openly professe deceipt; to admit them into Councell, or Reasoning, were manifest folly.⁵⁶

Still, Hobbes does seem to think that "Metaphor and other Tropes of Speech", at least in the way they "professe their inconstancy" are less dangerous than those concepts of "inconstant meaning", like "wisdom," "feare," "cruelty," or "justice."⁵⁷ In *Leviathan*, Hobbes endeavours to remove the ambiguity of these concepts, replacing a commonwealth rife with ignorance with a commonwealth based on science. Here, Hobbes is identifying philosophy's abiding interest in representation—in the lifespan of the concepts so familiar and so fundamental that we accept them without knowing what they mean. Hobbes' claim for the uses of tropes of speech, his enlightenment version of human knowledge and linguistic discipline, is arguably the version of philosophic/scientific rigour which persists today, even as a broad stereotype, though one which also, in its clear mindedness about the workings and power of language, anticipates the science of semiotics. It is worth noting, of course, that Hobbes' work itself is based on the creation of a new metaphor, the 'leviathan' of the title, to help explain and organize human interaction. It seems that while philosophy, and de Man traces similar ambiguities in the work of Kant and Locke, provides the will towards truth, poetry provides the means; philosophy is a place, and poetry is a way, and thus, following

⁵⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin, 1988), 136-137.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

the metaphor, impenetrable to each other. Philosophy, nonetheless, invariably turns its attention back towards poetry. Does poetry have anything to say about philosophy?

The most famous rejection of the ‘poetic’, and the type of opinions created by its interpretation and enjoyment, comes, of course, from Plato’s *Republic*.⁵⁸ The experience of figurative tropes, our reading and interpretation of them, can be linked historically to far more ancient activities of reading and interpretation: divination, astrology, fortune telling, myth making, and, later, biblical exegesis—all activities we might consider antithetical to philosophy. In the *Republic*’s creation of the ideal city of imagination, Socrates’ banishment of poetry serves a political initiative; it is an attempt to bring moderation to the unruly passions of the populace and some clarity to thought and discourse.⁵⁹ Plato’s intervention into the debate around the adverse effects of music and the (il)legitimacy of poetic knowledge in the *Republic* is extremely complex, and it is a theme that Plato returns to in other dialogues, often recognizing obliquely the irony of decrying the poets while doing so in an inimitable poetic style.⁶⁰ The *Phaedrus*, a later dialogue dedicated to topics as seemingly diverse as ‘love’ and ‘rhetoric’, might be Plato’s most concerted attempt at coming to terms with the nature of philosophic thought and expression. The meeting of truth and thought, and thought to expression is a rich inspiration to Plato’s most visual dialogue—nowhere else is the philosopher so interested in scenery—and Plato’s analytic and poetic solutions to the problem of understanding this phenomenon make a strong case for the essential dialectic of poetry and philosophy. Most importantly, for our purposes, it offers valuable insights into how cinema might extend this discourse to better cover what has been revealed by the question.

⁵⁸ Plato puts it this way: “there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry.” (*Rep.* 607b)

⁵⁹ *Republic*, 377b-382c.

⁶⁰ c.f. also the *Ion*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Apology*.

Plato's *Phaedrus* makes clear not just the use of figurative tropes in philosophic communication, but the figurative nature of understanding the self—as well as philosophy in general. I'm not interested here in replacing a Heideggerian read of Malick's film with a Platonic. Rather, I want to get closer to the prime movers of philosophic representation through one of its seminal texts, and try to understand how its key concerns influence Malick's representational choices.

The dialogue goes something like this: Phaedrus is a well known and well liked Athenian noble man of middle age⁶¹ with a passion for rhetoric, for speeches, and bold arguments. He has spent the morning listening informally to a new speech by Lysias, one of the city's foremost speech-makers, and just as he is leaving the city to ponder what he has heard, he runs into Socrates, an eager audience for a retelling of Lysias' oration. The two friends venture into the beautiful countryside outside the city's walls, chatting about the old myths associated with this landscape and the new fashion of rational debunking, before finally stopping beside the river Ilissus. Once they are settled, it is revealed that Phaedrus, in fact, has a written copy of Lysias' speech with him, and Socrates asks him to read it aloud. Socrates listens intently but pronounces Lysias' speech a failure and proceeds to make the same argument in a more logical manner.⁶² Phaedrus enjoys Socrates' speech, though clearly not any more so than he enjoyed Lysias' and seems to

⁶¹ Some scholars debate this point, insisting that Phaedrus is in fact himself a young man. While this introduces an interesting dimension to the dialogue, it does not seem likely. C.f. Alexander Nehamas, introduction to *Plato's Phaedrus*, by Plato, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), xxi.

⁶² While Socrates' speech is more logically formed, content-wise it is hardly more rational. While Lysias' speech was dominated by a persona which, in its cool detachment, one could almost describe as hip, Socrates' speech is nearly puritanical in its criticism of the harm which the lover can inflict. For Ferrari, just as the first speech is an effective parody of cutting edge rhetoricians like Lysias, the second is an effective parody of the popular conception of Socratic arguments. It also functions as a parody of the way modern readers tend to view Platonic moralism and self denial. C.f. G.R.F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 99.

feel that Socrates has stopped short. Socrates seems both bored with the speech and uneasy about the effects of the poetic turn of his rhetoric, and the two get ready to leave.

Lysias' speech, which Phaedrus begins the dialogue in love with, is a clever argument in praise of the non-lover over the lover—a speech designed for the covert lover to use to seduce a reluctant and unwitting beloved. Essentially, Lysias argues that the lover's passion should be shunned by the object of his desire: the lover's passion is changeable, sure to degenerate, possessive to the point of sadistic, and inevitably incites public displays of love which are shameful for all involved. A non-lover, on the other hand, has the presence of mind, the rationality, and the objectivity about sexual desire to avoid the sorts of indecencies, indiscretions, and embarrassments that a lover is prone to. What is established here is a binary between cool rationality and erotic madness which Plato will endeavour to complicate.

When Phaedrus finishes reading the speech the first time, Socrates is enraptured. Not by the content of the speech, but with its style (235a),⁶³ and with the style of Phaedrus' delivery—"I looked at you while you were reading...I followed your lead, and following you I shared your Bacchic frenzy" (234d). Here Socrates has made a separation between style and content, a separation which, Nehamas notes, is "probably new in the history of rhetoric."⁶⁴ Socrates also, it is worth noting, marks a difference between the style of the speech (as it is written) and the style of its presentation in time (as Phaedrus reads it). Phaedrus is a salon figure in Athens, a devotee of intellectual argument, and the host of many friendly debates (it is at his house that the *Symposium* is

⁶³ I will be using Stephanus numbers to quote Platonic text, a numbering scheme which is consistent across all translations. The translation I am using is by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. I will also be citing Nehamas' introductory essay.

⁶⁴ Nehamas, 12n6.

set). As earnest as Phaedrus is in his love for fine speeches, Socrates recognizes that this love is superficial, that Phaedrus, like many of Athens' intellectual elite (the *hoi sophoi*), complacently accepts an intellectual atmosphere where the great topics of philosophy—'wisdom', 'fear', 'love', 'justice'—are not provocative questions but accepted dogma, where prevailing opinion about abstract concepts are widely shared, and that the pleasure of great speeches is only an appreciation of the clever rejuvenation of the passé, of repetition and variation. It is up to Socrates to reclaim erotic madness, the kind that has created this superficial love in Phaedrus, from Lysias' glib dismissal, from the eternal return of desire, and remind Phaedrus about what is at stake in the unplumbed depths of his love, in the tremor of his reaction to the fine speeches with which he surrounds himself. G.R.F Ferrari, in his booklength study of the *Phaedrus*, separates the mere lover of speeches from the philosopher like so: "the one content with the effect of fine words, the other seeking the life which gives those words importance."⁶⁵

Rather than leave the riverbank, Socrates decides to make an intervention, and launches into one of the most admired speeches of antiquity, his so-called Great Speech: a palinode or 'taking-back' speech: a public retraction and subsequent complete reworking of the argument he has already made. For this speech, and in distinction to his last effort, Socrates employs an arsenal of myth, allegory, and poetic language to make his point, describing what happens when we fall in love at first sight and comparing this experience with another mythic experience: our access to the Transcendental Forms. Plato's well known theory of how we perceive concepts on earth (like 'justice' or 'beauty' or even 'bigness' or 'smallness') based upon an imperfect memory of the perfect Form of the concept—and thus perceive on earth only a degraded manifestation—proves

⁶⁵ Ferrari, 212.

to be an experience particularly accessible to the lover, and, for Socrates, more than a good enough reason to rescue love from the slander they've just heard.

When Socrates is finished with his palinode, Phaedrus is very impressed and admits that Lysias could not possibly have crafted a better speech in such a style, and that surely for sake of his public reputation he would not try. Socrates' interest is piqued in this idea of a speech-writer's public reputation—he makes the point that if a politician's speech is successful “he leaves the stage a poet” (258b), if not, he is a mere speech-writer—and wonders if there is anything inherently shameful in the crafting of speeches, in devices designed to persuade. The two then begin a discussion of rhetoric, and this ostensibly arbitrary shift from the passionately poetic opening to the almost technical conclusion has been a source of mystery for commentators.⁶⁶ This second discussion culminates with an investigation into the value of the written word, into the actual merits of putting pen to paper to transcribe a speech. The dialogue as a whole ends with the agreement that “philosopher” is the proper name for those who 1) compose speeches “with a knowledge of the truth,” 2) can defend the speech if challenged, and, surprisingly, in the end 3) “make the argument that [their] writing is of little worth.” (278c) Alternately, Socrates suggests that the author who has “nothing more valuable than what he has composed or written, spending long hours twisting it around, pasting parts together and taking them apart—wouldn't you be right to call him [instead] a ‘poet’ or a ‘speech writer’ or an ‘author of laws’?” Phaedrus answers, “Of course.” (278e)

⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Plato's Pharmacy” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 67. For Derrida, the *Phaedrus*, “affirms itself and effaces itself at once, with suppleness, irony, and discretion,” and lends itself to deconstruction: “we had to wait 2500 years before we could challenge the idea that it was a badly composed dialogue” Derrida's rhetorical flourish here, as one would expect, is not precisely accurate. Nehamas points out that Friedrich Schleiermacher, as early as 1836, was writing perceptively about Plato's purpose in structuring the dialogue so strangely (xxvii). For Schleiermacher, the dialogue was not about love but about philosophy itself.

This contrast between the mere text-play of the poets and the true knowledge of the philosopher would be a straightforward critique of elevating style over content—a critique of putting poetic beauty before philosophic truth—if not for the dialogue’s many challenging complications. Socrates’ claim that a philosopher writes “with a knowledge of the truth” provokes the unfortunate question ‘what is truth?’—a question answered, in this dialogue, only through a split-representation: the mythic allegory presented in the first part, and the rational systems of dialectics presented in the second. Alexander Nehamas argues that the *Phaedrus* has little to say on this question, that this is an important but ultimately transitional dialogue, and that it demonstrates Plato’s evolution beyond the theory of the Forms (a theory central to Socrates’ Great Speech).⁶⁷ For Nehamas, the evocative beauty of the first part is to attract people—like Phaedrus—to philosophy, but this beauty will produce conviction, not knowledge, and though Plato elaborates here on the way the Forms helps in “firing the imagination,”⁶⁸ he means to replace it with the theory of dialectics presented in the second part.⁶⁹ Thus, for Nehamas, the question of truth is deferred until Plato can win our allegiance to philosophy. But is the poetic language and earnest appeals to love presented in the *Phaedrus* really only an attempt to decorate plain philosophy for dubious consumers? These myths, and their beauty, cannot be so easily displaced or eradicated—they persist, and so do the ghosts of the emotions which follow them. It is through the tenacity of the myth of the Forms that Ferrari finds in the *Phaedrus* a far more profound articulation of philosophy—and the truth it seeks and envisions—than can be represented by a mere progression to a new form of rhetoric, a new form of persuasion. This question of philosophy’s persuasive

⁶⁷ Nehamas, xxvi.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, xlv.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xlvii.

power—or lack thereof—pierces to the very center of the argument between speech makers and philosophers: is there any objective truth of the sort philosophers seek, or is ‘truth’ simply that which is most convincing, that which can be successfully argued for by the rhetorician?

The question of the nature of truth is made explicit at the beginning of Socrates’ Great Speech, and then made central in the second half of the dialogue and Socrates’ critique of those contemporary rhetoricians Phaedrus so admires. While dominant wisdom of the age—as reported by Phaedrus (260a)—suggests that truth is only incidental to the crafting of a persuasive speech, Socrates argues that true knowledge is, on the contrary, invaluable. Socrates derives a method for acquiring true knowledge that he calls ‘dialectics’, and which involves a process of collecting the disparate into common types and then dividing these types into natural sub-groups. This process of knowledge organization and insight seems particularly suited to the kind of knowledge Socrates argues a rhetorician needs—knowledge of how to divert from the truth in the smallest degree in order to seem truthful, and knowledge about one’s audience so as to craft the most suitable speech possible. Obviously, Socrates’ argument for dialectics is not by itself an argument for the importance of truth in any moral sense—he is merely suggesting that a superior technique be added to the rhetorician’s toolbox. The goal is still persuasion at any cost. But dialectics may yet function, for Socrates, as a Trojan horse—if rhetoric can be replaced by dialectics, and Phaedrus seems quite impressed with its possibilities, at least the search for truth will have a foothold within rhetoric. This brings general discourse that much closer to philosophy.

Which, of course, provokes the question: why philosophy?

What must be emphasized here is that philosophy, for Plato, and for many philosophers before and after, is a way of living. It is not merely a thought experiment, a way to pass the time, a critique, a theory, or a methodology to create conviction, opinion, or even scientific knowledge. The goal of Platonic philosophy is not true knowledge, but true happiness—for the individual soul, and for its community. That truth and happiness go hand in hand is one of the foundations of Plato's philosophy, and it is a controversial yet gorgeously optimistic claim. Even if we reject the general tenor of Plato's philosophy—and there is much in Plato's elitist vision of human relations which should give us pause—it is impossible to gainsay the sheer wonder of this phenomenon Plato has identified and helped clarify, the immensity of this variegated discursive realm Plato has opened up by taking the ethical turn, by making thought an agent in the manifesting of the Good Life. As a student of an art form, my interest is in the representational fallout generated by such a grand vision of the meeting of words and reality, ideality and practicality, and what scattered pieces have been gathered and reconfigured and what dim meanings they still carry.

The *Phaedrus* is an appealing case study for our purposes because the ethical turn of the philosophical argument corresponds to the sudden use of figurative tropes. Socrates is completely upfront about this rhetorical shift: near the beginning of his Great Speech he feels it necessary to explain the structure of the human soul and he does so by creating an allegory: “to describe what the soul actually is would require a very long account, altogether a task for a god...but to say what it is *like* is humanly possible and takes less time” (262a, italics mine). The most straightforward way to understand the use of poetic devices in philosophic argument is as a device to fill in gaps in more literal

language, and this seems to be the way Socrates is using it here. Once the philosopher has brought some vague concept or sensible experience into discourse through the magic of figurative devices, the next task, if they want to be rigorous, is to strip away the poetic scaffolding. Socrates does not do this, and as Ferrari argues, his use of allegory is hardly merely instrumental.⁷⁰ Again, what is at stake here is the crafting of a refutation to those who create arguments that act as mere devices, who create meaning without a sense of consequence. For Socrates, to counter this with simply another rhetorical argument, no matter how subtle, no matter how much use it makes of the poetic, would be to risk falling into the rhetorician's delusion. Socrates' mythic allegory can't simply create a space of evocative ambiguity around the question. Nor can it be designed as a mere rebus waiting for a specific interpretation to solve. The convincingness of the 'poetic' argument cannot rest merely on its attractiveness, and no faith can be placed on the poetic to act as a vessel for philosophy, as a direct transmitter to the unconscious, to the surface of the soul.

A critique of our tendency to want to understand communication as a one-to-one relationship, one that aims and hits directly at the target of our communication, is built in to the *Phaedrus*. First of all, as Ferrari notes, the character of Phaedrus presents a cautionary example of exactly this sort of opinion about communication. Phaedrus treats Lysias' written text as a sort of talisman. As Derrida points out, this written text is compared metaphorically, and explicitly, to a *pharmakon*—the Greek word meaning both medicine and poison.⁷¹ The argument at the end of the dialogue against the written word is the culmination of the critique of Phaedrus' faith in the transmission of meaning: what

⁷⁰ Ferrari, 122.

⁷¹ Derrida, 121.

is argued here is that no medium philosophizes by itself; there is no device which simply creates philosophy. This utopian wish, of course, is one that accompanies all technological innovations, and one that was certainly essential to the early days of cinema's utopian potential. The 'device', the technology, is metaphorical for rhetoric itself. Philosophy can never be made rote, never systematized into the textbooks on rhetoric so widely distributed and read during Plato's time by men like Phaedrus who wish to instantly recreate the affect of the initial insight experienced the first time the speech was heard. Seth Benardete explains it this way: "The peculiarity of Plato's art consists in his showing the nature of philosophy in general while showing the impossibility of deducing from its nature the nature of philosophic argument in particular. There is a structure to philosophy but no method of philosophy. Philosophy has a *logos* but no algorithm."⁷²

Let's turn to a brief look at Socrates' Great Speech from the perspective of the critique of rhetoric present in the second half of the dialogue, and see how this mythic hymn creates the moral, aesthetic, and epistemological context that makes this privileged perspective possible. As Ferrari argues, this is achieved through not only the use of figurative tropes, but through their thematization⁷³—the *use* of allegory in the Great Speech is not only appropriate to the content of the speech; in many ways, the use of allegory fulfills the speech's meaning.

The Great Speech goes like this: Socrates wants to argue against the first two speeches (Lysias' and his) and their shabby treatment of love by suggesting that the madness of the lover is not *necessarily* a bad thing, and that, in fact, a lover's madness is

⁷² Seth Benardete, *The rhetoric of morality and philosophy : Plato's Gorgias and Phaedrus* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 2.

⁷³ Ferrari, 111.

a thing granted by the gods and thus must be a benefit. Here Socrates has immediately used the gods to claim ground for a moral argument, and it is a choice that provides him space for allegorical argumentation—speaking about the gods is the very essence of myth, and so Socrates’ mythic allegory becomes appropriate. After pointing out some other forms of useful god given madness—prophecy, the cleansing of historical sins, and poetry (which “glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations” [245a])—Socrates finds it necessary to argue for the immortality of the soul. The soul is, arguably, already a figurative construction—which is to say, we know what we’d like it to be, not what it is, and its existence is in some question—and hence requires a subtle form of discussion: one which traditional rhetoric is ill equipped to emulate. The soul is a figure of the self—of the essence of self—and Socrates has already broached this topic at the beginning of the dialogue.

When Socrates and Phaedrus are discussing the countryside, Phaedrus comments that the water is so beautiful that it seems nearly mythic, that he can almost see nymphs playing in the water: he wonders if this is where the god Boreas took the form of the wind and raped the princess Oreithuia (229b). Socrates says no, that was further down stream, and that he finds the actual truth of the matter less interesting than the myth, and he slights clever rhetoricians who look for rational explanations to myths, those who not only find mere conjecture (no matter how truth-like) in its place, but find that the pleasure of such deconstruction is a distraction. And no matter how pleasurable such deconstruction is, it is no substitute for knowledge about one’s self—the task which Socrates sees as his highest calling (230a). Socrates finds mythical creatures to be useful metaphors for what goes on in his own heart—he wonders if he is a beast like the multi-

headed Typho or a simpler and more divine-like animal, and in so doing prefigures the allegory he'll construct in his Great Speech. Sophists use poetry to create the appearance of truth, while the philosopher reveals in truth the appearance of poetry—for good and for ill, for deconstruction and for enlightenment.

Once Socrates has established the immortality of the soul (through some very dodgy logic), he turns to its structure, and feels that it is necessary to do so through allegory. The soul is compared to a chariot driven by a charioteer and pulled by two winged horses: one good and obedient, the other obstinate and evil. The consequence of this asymmetry is that the drivers of human souls have a very difficult time keeping up with the souls of the gods—whose chariots are driven by two good horses—and who soar through the heavens on their cosmic circuits, watching over and caring for all that does not have a soul. The real driving force of this stampede is not an altruistic concern for the world below, but is in fact the urge to successfully climb the long ascent to the very rim of heaven where the gods enjoy looking out at the Transcendental Forms, pure Reality, that which we perceive in only a degraded form on earth, that realm which “none of our earthly poets” have ever praised, or ever could praise, enough (247c).

Human souls, because of their mismatched horses, struggle on this journey, and the wings of their steeds are badly injured in the effort. Even when a soul does make it to the top of heaven, their glimpse of the Forms is only very brief, only partial. Many are unlucky in the journey, and their wings are so battered through the effort, that on subsequent circuits to the rim of heaven the soul topples and sinks to earth where it takes on a body and becomes mortal. Those souls who have seen the most of the Forms will be born on earth with a tendency to philosophy, those who have seen the least, will be

tyrants. Once on earth, a ten thousand year reincarnation cycle begins where human beings are given the chance, depending on their actions and the opportunities for philosophy they've had, to move up in the hierarchy of good lives. This is all in anticipation of the ten thousandth year when our wings have grown back and we can once again rejoin the gods, and this time, with any luck, stay close to the protection of one or the other, and not risk again the battering of the stampede and the fall to earth. The philosophic life, however, if pursued for a mere three reincarnations, grants the souls an early escape from the constraints of mortal life.

The remainder of the Great Speech details the meeting of a philosophically minded human being with an image of beauty in the form of another human being and the resulting experience of love. This experience serves as a metaphor for our experience of the Forms, but it is also a legitimate, though degraded, experience *of* the Forms. Socrates compares the experience of falling in love to a feeling akin to the re-sprouting of the wings we lose during our descent to earth (our original fall), and Socrates lets none of the metaphorically erotic potential pass by. The experience is a mixed-pleasure—the sight of the beloved is powerful and desirable, but this desire waters the roots of the broken wings causing pinfeathers to sprout that sting the cracked flesh all around. As Ferrari points out, while Freud identifies an unpleasant tension within sexual desire generated by the need to feed the desire with more and more pleasure, Socrates' model focuses on the pain of growth incited by feelings of desire which finds relief only by being in the presence of the beloved.⁷⁴ This madness created by the growth of the lover's wings may, in the beloved's presence, find momentary relief of the orgasmic type, but each moment of relief establishes a new and unusual stage of growth. The metaphor of the growing wings

⁷⁴ Ferrari, 156.

is, of course, meant to indicate the potential of returning to a heavenly state, and the right sort of love with the right sort of person speeds the philosopher on their way.

Once this pattern of pleasure in love's presence and pain in its absence is established, Socrates returns to allegory to explain the moment of first sight, the revelation before love, and why this revelation is shared by the beloved. The beauty of the beloved does not only incite sexual desire but philosophic insight as well. Socrates suggests that the beauty of the beloved acts, for the philosophic type, as a reminder of the Forms, and it is this experience of the transcendent within the experience of the bodily which truly drives the madness of the lover. Thus, not only is love a metaphor for the central philosophic experience, but, according to the myth, it is also a literal reminder of the experience, a powerful imitation of that experience. In the lover's eyes, glistening with philosophic longing, appears an image of the beloved seen by the beloved—an attractive image to the beloved, a philosophic image, and upon this mutual attraction the two build a lifelong friendship and philosophic partnership that will serve both of them well in the afterlife. In this way, Socrates is able to reclaim erotic madness for philosophy.

There are several points of intersection between *The Thin Red Line* and the *Phaedrus*—emphasis on beauty, movement from background to foreground, and the use of bird imagery, to name only three—but for right now, and returning to the more general topic of the use of the figurative in philosophy, I want to tease out one important detail from Socrates' epic tale of love and its sustaining. Specifically, it is worth noting how significant a role dumb luck plays in the travails of the soul. At nearly every stage, Socrates qualifies the effectiveness of the soul's rational choice by deferring to the

circumstances of that decision. Why do the souls fall from heaven to earth? Because even though they desire the truth, they were unlucky in the stampede and had their wings crushed—the soul “if by some accident takes on a burden of forgetfulness and wrongdoing, then [the soul]...sheds its wings and falls to earth” (248c). And it is certainly not inevitable that the philosophic lovers come together. As Socrates points out, depending upon which god the soul happened to be following, the results of their earthly love could be wildly different (252c). This emphasis on chance succeeds in halting the tendency of this myth towards dogmatic propositions about successful soul-care (and thus avoids the risk of recreating a speech maker style truth claim in the form of a nearly religious dogma), but it also leaves a bitter anxiety beneath the surface of the myth, at the heart of the experience. Is the redemptive power of love, the escape to a better world, only ever, at base, the workings of chance?

The contingencies of the soul’s progress could not be better represented than through the theme of love. As Ferrari points out, love—if it is self conscious—is always subject to the whispered debate: am I *meant* for this person?⁷⁵ Would I love this person if I had met them sooner, or much later, or never at all? Was it only chance that brought us together? Do I love them truly; do they seem truthful? Do I love them for who they are, or are they only as I see them? Has lust masqueraded as love? Is this love without content? This is why Socrates describes the sight of the beautiful as desire mixed with fear—indeed, there is a longing for truth, but there is also a longing to return to a state before we were so unlucky as to suffer such longing. The epistemological instability of the interpretative task vis-à-vis a sense of personal destiny is in sharp contrast to the roar of emotions which accompany love and which, because they are so powerful, we feel to

⁷⁵ Ferrari, 122.

share in the authentic. Love is an articulation of the good life accessible, to some degree, to everyone—indeed, to associate it with philosophy is to make philosophy attractive, and by making love philosophical it embroils desire with morality—and yet, it is also to invite a special form of doubt inherent in expressions of wish: the slow slide to disappointment which Lysias made into the center of his argument against love in the first place. Built into Socrates’ myth is a solution to the problem—or rather, not a solution, but the background from which a contingent solution might step forward.

The purpose of Socrates’ myth is not cosmic explanation, but psychological analysis of a particular type—analysis of the lover of wisdom who has consciously turned to face the cosmic, the psychology of someone so unlucky as to imagine the good life. In the myth, the good life is life amongst the heavens, and we are held there aloft by wings which are nourished by the sight of pure reality, the sight of the Forms. The perception of the Forms is our rational goal, and as such it is the goal of the charioteer only—the part of our soul which encourages the long journey in an effort to sustain the entire soul, including the horses, the beasts who never raise their heads above the heavens yet charge forever on. Socrates claims that “all soul cares for that which does not have soul,” and in the case of the gods, this means a concern for the workings of the cosmos; human souls, on the other hand, find themselves within a horizon of care which includes the cosmos only when perfect—more often than not, this concern is limited to the body at the center of their horizon. Ferrari suggests that Socrates’ image of the gods as chariot drivers pulled by two horses is not simply an attempt to create symmetry with human souls, but is meant to indicate at the divine level the problem of *contingency*—for Ferrari, the gods’

ability to adequately cope with this problem marks them as divine.⁷⁶ It is through the tension between our embodied state and our transcendent wish, between the best laid plans and the contingent, that this curious psychological type of the philosophic lover is given dimension.

‘Contingency’ is a complex philosophic concept used by logicians to define an event which *can* happen but does not *necessarily* have to happen. A ‘contingency plan,’ in colloquial usage, is a plan put into action in case the contingent happens: hence the word’s more common cause and effect definition: *B is contingent on the occurrence of A*. The contingent is thus not equivalent to pure chance, but like chance it is an event over which we have no control and thus it tends to fall outside of a moral purview: which is to say, how can we be held morally responsible for something which isn’t our fault? Christian morality, of course, turns on this very question: what do we inherit of original sin? The consequence of such an inheritance is a tenuous sense of responsibility, but a very strong sense of this fallen state as completely naturalized, as the way *this* world works. Ferrari draws an interesting distinction between the moral universes of Plato and the more modern ethical systems described by Kant and utilitarianism. The latter is an “act-centered” morality which investigates the moral worth of particular acts and then defines the good person as one who asks “what ought I to do?” and then carries out the morally correct action; “while ‘agent-centered’ theories, reverse this order, beginning with the question ‘what sort of person am I to be?’ and assessing particular acts according to their notion of what a good person would do.”⁷⁷ It’s a subtle difference, but one can see how an act-centered morality might, unfortunately, tend towards the kind of

⁷⁶ Ferrari, 128.

⁷⁷ Ferrari, 136.

which Socrates critiques, while agent-centered might tend towards the relativistic. What's important for our purposes, and as Ferrari points out, is that the agent-centered approach is much more inclusive of the problem of contingency. While neither moral theory would place moral blame on those acts "performed involuntarily or unintentionally (at least where negligence is not involved)"⁷⁸ Plato, and Aristotle, would nonetheless, speaking from the perspective of an individual's entire life, judge the life full of such unintentional iniquities as morally less successful: they might even deem it immoral—an impossible judgment from within a morality which focuses simply on moral or immoral acts. The importance, however, is not on making such a judgment, but on placing emphasis on the nature of moral attainment and the conditions of such attainment.⁷⁹ Thus, for Ferrari, the question of contingency is inextricable from Plato's expression of philosophic virtue—and philosophy in general.

The topic of Malickian morality and virtue vis-à-vis the question of agent or act centered morality, Christian values and philosophic virtue, is sadly far beyond the scope of this thesis, but the issues at stake in the question of the contingent, I feel, are central to understanding Malick's aesthetic choices. The tension between a sense of our fallen state and the articulation of the Good Life is where we can locate the shaping forces of Malick's representation of the philosophic and the contemplative. This representation is

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ This offers an interesting insight into the nature of Plato's elitist philosophy. In articulating the Good Life, Plato never shies away from making bold claims for perfection, though this is usually tempered by an explanation of a 'second-best' state. The figurative always seems to sign perfection in spite of its contingency, and the representational fallout of such a desire drives *The Thin Red Line*. Plato's psychological analysis in the *Phaedrus* is of a very specific type: the philosophic lover; the individual lucky enough to see greatest majority of the Forms. While Socrates, in his myth, makes it clear that the philosophic lover is a rare type, Socrates never divines a method for identifying them. Indeed, because Socrates is using the experience of love—which is available, to some degree, to everyone—it rests solely upon the individual to gauge if their experience of beauty, and desire, is of the philosophic type or not. This demands, however, a developed sensitivity to the type.

no small obstacle; in its glory and balefulness, calm and regret, there are intimate reminders of the urgent, the long history of what is at stake. The techniques of this representation are charged precisely by the philosophic problems at play here. In the *Phaedrus*, as in *The Thin Red Line*, this representation centers on the use of destabilizing figurative tropes in the context of a transcendent wish for clarity.

The goal here is, ultimately, to account for the role of erotics in the philosophic life—its representational power, its ability to both inspire thought and to undermine it. For Plato, philosophy is a pursuit where the self is forever, radically, at stake. The realm of philosophical epistemology is a give-and-take between the personal view and the impersonal view, the individual perspective and the cosmic perspective. To recognize such an entanglement—which seems to be at the heart of the *Phaedrus*—is to accept how the self is inextricable from philosophic investigation. The danger, for philosophers, is the forever receding frame: for any given phenomenon it is the philosopher's desire to take the cosmic perspective, but once they feel they have achieved this objectivity they then must strive to achieve objectivity about objectivity. And so forth and so on. Plato's method is not an infinite regress but a delicate oscillation between two perspectives: the personal and the impersonal. The possibility and potential sustainability of occupying such an odd epistemological position is emblemized by the love relationship. The lover sees their beloved impersonally, as an abstract embodiment of love, but also recognizes that the beloved loves back. Socrates “wants to stress the subjective effects of the investigation on the investigators, as well as its objective results. And he does so by analyzing, not the philosopher's examination of himself, but how he both teaches and

learns from his second self, his beloved.”⁸⁰ As such, advocating the impersonal view of such phenomenon is not adequate; as well, Socrates must introduce into the impersonal view a sense of what the taking of the impersonal view does to the philosopher’s soul (the personal view). To represent the impersonal view to oneself—so one can take it—thus requires a sense of how that impersonal view, and its representation, will be read at the level of the personal view. What is being articulated here is a way of seeing.

Allegory is the perfect tool—as Ferrari says, “it is a way...not the only way, perhaps, but an excellent way”⁸¹—to represent this doubleness of vision. By ‘doubleness’, I am referring to the experience of seeing something simultaneously for what it represents and for what it is: seeing the allegory as allegory and as what it signifies. In Socrates’ myth, the beloved is both an image of Beauty, and a beautiful person. The allegory, at the literal level, is a story about a charioteer pulled by two horses; but, at the allegorical level, it communicates to us the human soul (by itself, a complex philosophical construction). That these objects achieve this doubleness is a quality not inherent to the objects: this doubleness is contingent upon an observer: the lover requires a beloved, the allegory an interpreter. For the observer to witness this doubleness—the thing and what the thing represents—the observer must mirror that doubleness by assuming an objective or *cosmic* view. Following the myth, the cosmic view is precisely the one which reveals to us the contingency of our attempt to gain the cosmic view.⁸² This doesn’t make the cosmic view a dream-image or an impossibility—it is not that our access to the cosmic view is limited (like our access to the Forms), rather it means that our best access to the cosmic view is through the personal view.

⁸⁰ Ferrari, 122.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 129.

This is a classic Platonic strategy—in the *Republic*, Socrates attempts to find justice in the city by first finding justice in the human soul, and then comparing the structures of the two. This is a controversial metaphor, but it is not one that hinges on the validity of the analogy. It is a pragmatic metaphor which reforms both the city and the soul—the forms of their idealization, categorization, and identity—by bringing them into figurative proximity through philosophic investigation. The metaphor changes the terms on which we are to understand both city and soul; this creates an ethical turn for both. The dubiousness of the comparison does not lie in an asymmetry of the terms: we can't argue persuasively that the soul is less complicated than the city and thus an inadequate paradigm. The analogy points to the figurative construction of both. What is at stake in Plato's method is precisely the issue of the representation of city and soul. Not that the analogy does not create substantial insights, but the experience of such a thought experiment is the reinvention of both terms of the analogy. What is ultimately articulated is the life of the philosopher who sees in such complex terms; and in the articulation of this life, and its education, we can begin to understand the relationship between the cosmic and the soul, the city and the individual.

Allegory functions through *recognition*: we realize one thing means something else; something that seemed foreign, or strange, now makes sense and seems familiar. Metaphor works by recognizing the poetic logic of a connection between two disparate things. The experience of the philosophic lover can be expressed by looking at the figurative because it too is determined by a moment of recognition: the moment when the philosophic lover, who has taken the impersonal view, recognizes themselves within this objectivity. Recognizing one's self within the cosmic view requires coming to terms with

what the figures we use to achieve these perspectives communicate, what figures like allegory represents *as* figures. In the *Phaedrus*, “Socrates regards the need for myth as unfortunate, a result of the sad contingency of our embodied state. The mythical tale he tells—like the idealisations that lovers construct of one another—is a way of expressing and coping with the fact of contingency.”⁸³ Allegories signify their inadequacy, their limitations, and a history of epistemological damage inherent in the contingency of our embodied state. This too is, ultimately, what the lovers communicate *as* lovers: the threat of change, and the power to change. In this recognition, the lovers begin to articulate philosophy, and in this articulation they change the relationship. In changing the relationship, the lovers change themselves. By changing themselves, the lovers exemplify philosophy. Thus to articulate philosophy is one way to do philosophy—it is a unique phenomenon: a telling which is also a showing, a thinking which is a way of living.

Again we are inching towards formulating a long wished for knock-down argument, an uncontestable logical proof of the ethical imperative of the Good Life. It would be easy to see Socrates’ Great Speech as simply positing the metaphor of a loving relationship as a model for what human beings should aspire towards in all areas of life. Not an inconsiderable or even untrue claim, but hardly revolutionary, even in ancient Athens. Love is a constitutive topic of philosophy—the definition of philosophy is, after all, the ‘love of wisdom’—but to raise love to a philosophic pinnacle is to enact a very selfish love. As Ferrari notes, there is a danger that if we aren’t careful, we may consider beauty as not merely the most powerful reminder of the Forms, but also our most direct access to them, and thus place beauty at the very center of philosophy. While *Phaedrus*’

⁸³ Ferrari, 123.

fascination with the speeches of his day was a fascination with fads and fashion, with repetition and variation, the piquing of his passion has been successfully redirected by Socrates so as to consider the sustainable argument, the generative philosophy, and thus take the moral turn. A lifelong loving relationship epitomizes the practical manifestation of such a goal, and indeed, offers a compelling standard to which we can compare human endeavours, and an imaginative construct to help articulate them.⁸⁴

But what must be emphasized is that Socrates' Great Speech does not offer a coherent philosophy or even a solution to a philosophic problem. And, clearly, allegory and myth are not here being elevated to a state of infallible rhetorical method ready for codification: I'm not saying that philosophy can *only* be done through figurative tropes. But figurative tropes both represent the philosophic wish which underpins the philosophic enterprise, and re-enact the philosopher's encounter with contingency: philosophic works like the *Phaedrus* beautifully articulate the meeting of philosophic wish with bodily passion. It is the background to the entire philosophic enterprise—not the founding myth of philosophy, but the often overlooked context. This is the ground upon which Plato crafts his late philosophy, and it is, as we have seen, a shifting ground of beauty, compulsion, and promise; but also indefinite meaning, anxiety, and potential loss—this is a background which is always intruding upon the foreground. The generative and sustainable potential of Plato's philosophy is found in the whole of his

⁸⁴ The love relationship discussed in the *Phaedrus* is a very specific pederastic type practiced amongst Athenian noblemen of Plato's day. The lover in the *Phaedrus* is a mature Athenian man of some degree of social standing, while his beloved is a teenaged boy. This relationship was based around the idea that the boy would receive mentorship from the older man, while the man would receive some degree of sexual satisfaction. This asymmetrical relationship creates important resonances in the *Phaedrus*, particularly because it emphasizes a pedagogic dimension and thus more fully explores the idea of philosophic transmission. The theme of love's usefulness, for Plato, is not limited to this type of relationship, however. In the *Symposium*, the discussion of the generative power of a loving relationship includes gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships, the latter demonstrating a literal generative power in the biological creation of offspring.

philosophy—a conception of which is found on a micro scale in the *Phaedrus*—and is an ideal which finds literal expression in the desire to create a sustainable political regime (see the *Laws* and the *Republic*). But the background to this potentiality, and this wish, is always the chaos of these signs, the practical limitations of language, and what these limitations emblemize. This is what attends the will towards an ideal and this is what the ideal must ultimately reflect; just as taking the cosmic view reveals the self on the edge of a profound change, of self rearticulation. Because the art of philosophy is one learned by learning about it, the question of its own self expression is key. This buzz of indeterminate and overdetermined meaning isn't merely the background noise which philosophy hopes to pierce. This world of contingency is philosophy's media.

The goal is the formulation of some sort of true body of knowledge; a body which emerges intact from this realm of damaged epistemology. Working through this complex dialogue and attempting a summary here is an effort to get closer to the beauty of Plato's philosophy—a philosophy so influential that to be useful it must, at some level, be overturned—and understand the imaginative and creative realm it inhabits as a solution to a series of problems which underpin all philosophy, *and* as a simultaneous emblemization of those problems. These problems are the source of philosophy and the companion to the endeavour: they are the erotics of a better life, the biography of philosophic thought.

Going back to a text like Plato's *Phaedrus* makes very clear the history of a moral imperative pushing at the very surface of the figurative. The use of the figurative, in any context, is always, if only dimly, a moral argument—if for no other reason than because Plato so fully colonized the figurative for his idealistic philosophy. Plato connects

epistemological uncertainty to aesthetic experience, and in doing so forms a figural network the result of which is that any chain of signification, without much effort, seems to lead us to this background Plato has painted, these themes: the impersonal, the personal, the objective, the subjective, recognition, imitation, generation, repetition, desire. Figures, by their form, and our experience, demonstrate repeatedly a portion of this non-propositional argument aimed against those who would take the nature of truth too lightly. The articulation of perfection is always figurative. In every figure there is a weak philosophy.

3. Metaphors of Insight

The relationship between philosophy and cinema is first and foremost figurative. Not only does Plato's allegory of the cave, from Book VII of the *Republic*, prefigure the cinema almost uncannily—and thus turn the cinema itself into an allegory—but as evidenced by the *Phaedrus*, metaphors of vision, space, and juxtaposition have had a prominent place in philosophic expression. When thinking about the way we think, the idea of 'image' is a powerful tool; when we consider truth and truthfulness, we are drawn to the photographic record. How profoundly have our ideas about 'objectivity' been formed by the surveillance camera, by satellite imagery, by images of the earth from space? There is something absurdly literal about the handheld camera standing in for a subjective point of view. Aristophanes, the famed Athenian playwright roughly contemporary to Plato, satirizes Socrates by literalizing the metaphors of philosophic objectivity: his play depicts a filthy and ridiculous old man sitting in a basket suspended

from the ceiling so that he might better gaze on things below and aloft.⁸⁵ Cinema's literalization of philosophic tropes puts philosophic language on the rack, it makes it very visible—but does it also make it ridiculous?

Malick makes very deliberate use of literalization. In the middle of *The Thin Red Line*, during the attack on the Japanese Bivouac, the voiceover intones, “this great evil, how did it steal into the world?” Onscreen, Pvt. Doll (Dash Mihok) in a half-mad panic, rifles through the furnishings of a Japanese soldier and stuffs some papers into his shirt. He is *literally* stealing. *Evil steals into the world* is a complex figurative construction which is intended to literally communicate something along the lines of *why do people do evil things, and why do we let it happen?* but instead, because of the image the phrase is matched to, our attention is drawn forcefully to the use of the word ‘steal’. Onscreen, Doll is enacting a transitive form of the verb, while the verb in the voiceover is intransitive—using ‘steal into the world’ in place of ‘coming into existence’ is a poetic liberty. If we were to visualize this phrase *Evil steals into the world* we’d conjure an absurdity, a different form of representation: an image of Evil (say, the Devil) tiptoeing surreptitiously into someplace called ‘The World’.⁸⁶ This would be the literal image described by the literal phrase. Doll’s theft points to the figurative nature of the voiceover’s concept, and enacts something of an aesthetic shock by bringing what was expressed by language accidentally into the world of the cinema image.⁸⁷ It is a shock

⁸⁵ Aristophanes, “The Clouds,” in *Four Texts on Socrates*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Cornell University Press, 1998), 124.

⁸⁶ In Part 2 we will go into more detail why it is significant that Malick’s literalization of metaphor often produces a clearly allegorical image.

⁸⁷ Notably, in *The New World* this moment is recreated almost exactly: John Smith intones during a moment of revelry about his ideal new world, “None shall eat up carelessly what his friends got worthily, or steal away that which virtue has stored up,” while onscreen a man stuffs some meat, drying in a Native camp they have invaded, into his satchel. While this moment is clearly working as a subtle contradiction of

because a flow has come to a halt, the image has outstripped thought and language, and we are witness to a very bizarre accident of communication. To my mind, literalization is among Malick's most formally radical stylistic techniques. But what is the use of this technique attempting to express? How is it working?

Another example: When Pvt. Witt says "I heard people talk about immortality, but I ain't seen it," he turns to look deliberately to the right. A very obvious point/glance of children playing in the village follows. Witt is thus *literally* looking for immortality. When we ask someone *do you see what I mean?* we don't literally believe they can *see* a concept floating before them. And yet Malick punctuates Witt's figurative statement with precisely a call for such an event. Indeed, as the point/object proves, Witt can't see immortality—unless, when we see the image of children playfully flitting through the village, we believe the answer is, "immortality is in children," a gloriously banal statement and one which does not seem to resonate with Witt. Regardless of the answer to Witt's investigation, in this moment Malick, through visual literalization, is making it very clear that Witt is using a linguistic metaphor. This matching both deconstructs the metaphor of vision but also emphasizes a capacity in the world to be metaphoric. I want to understand this odd moment fully because, narratively, it stands at the threshold of what I consider to be the heart of Malick's film. This moment of literalization marks the end of a series of scenes depicting Witt struggling to articulate his philosophic question: *what is immortality?* We next witness a flashback/fantasy sequence depicting the death of Witt's mother, and then, in a scene on a beach, a remarkable moment when Witt articulates an *insight*. Malick's filmmaking style and themes begin to make more sense

Smith's ideals, I would argue, considering other thematic issues present in the film, it is also functioning to point to what is figurative in Smith's inchoate philosophy.

once we appreciate this phenomenon, and consider carefully how it can be represented.

To understand the phenomenon of insight, metaphors are key.

Trevor Whittock, in *Metaphor and Film*, defines metaphor, “as the presentation of one idea in terms of another, belonging to a different category, so that either our understanding of the first idea is transformed, or so that from the fusion of the two ideas a new one is created.”⁸⁸ In the vocabulary introduced by I.A. Richards, and adopted by Whittock and widely since its publication in 1936, the “original idea” is referred to as the *tenor*, and “the second idea” which transforms or modifies the first is called the *vehicle*.⁸⁹ It is this transformation which distinguishes the metaphor—if no transformation obtains, then we have only analogy, or simple juxtaposition. The most famous example of metaphor in cinema may be from Chaplin’s *Modern Times*: to express the metaphor *man is sheep* we see a flock of sheep (the vehicle) which dissolves into a shot of city dwellers crowding into a subway station (the tenor).⁹⁰ This juxtaposition creates a semantic impertinence, a destabilization in meaning which we attempt to stabilize. The degree to which I have to work at a metaphor to uncover the richness of a connection between tenor and vehicle is called the metaphor’s *tension*. The more tension in a metaphor, the more evocative it is, the more vividly it summons imagery. The experience of recognizing a metaphor, stabilizing its meaning, and appreciating its richness is an experience of

⁸⁸ Trevor Whittock, *Metaphor and Film*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5.

⁸⁹ I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 96.

⁹⁰ The dissolve present in the Chaplin example prompted linguist Roman Jakobson to suggest that the dissolve in cinema is itself a metaphor for the activity of metaphor. C.f. Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” in *Selected Writings* (New York: Mouton, 1962), 256. Chaplin uses the dissolve to demarcate a figurative non-diegetic space (the sheep) from a literal diegetic space (the city of his film). Malick, uses the dissolve in a similar way to demarcate the beginning of Witt’s thought sequences (though, notably, not Bell’s), and also to enact changes in space. This is a technique which is absent from *The New World*, a film no less concerned with the subjective, suggesting, perhaps, that Malick means to use the technique to demarcate different *kinds* of subjectivity.

insight: what was once unclear is suddenly, forcefully, clear. Paul Ricoeur describes the metaphor as an “insight into likeness [that] is both a thinking and a seeing.”⁹¹

Nietzsche: “there is no ‘real’ expression and no real knowing apart from metaphor...*knowing* is nothing but working with the favourite metaphors, an imitating which is no longer felt to be an imitation.”⁹² For Whittock, “*thought* is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison and metaphors of language derive thereon.”⁹³ Metaphors are what we use to create new ideas and new concepts: metaphors are what children reach for when they can’t explain their world through vocabulary, and as adults it is through metaphor that we can reach beyond the confines of habitual thinking. Dudley Andrew puts the emotional power of figurative language at the centre of some of our most important experiences, “in politics we call such condensation ‘revolution’, in psychoanalysis ‘transferral’, and in artistic and religious experience ‘insight’.”⁹⁴

The philosopher lives for insights. It is the experience of insight which will bring the world close, will spark the vertigo of foreground bursting from background, background rushing to meet it. As Whittock argues, “Metaphor dissolves our fixed notions in order to produce fresh insights ... [however] metaphor’s wrenching of language and assault on categories means it can never be employed without an accompanying emotional charge.”⁹⁵ It is this enormous emotional charge of insight which makes the question of an erotics of philosophy necessary. Insight requires strong

⁹¹ Paul Ricoeur, “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 427.

⁹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosopher and Truth: Selectons from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the early 1870s*, trans. and ed. D. Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), 50-1, qtd. in Paul Cantor, “Friedrich Nietzsche: The Use and Abuse of Metaphor,” in *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. David S. Miall (Sussex: Harvester Press; New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1982), 72.

⁹³ Whittock, 25.

⁹⁴ Dudley Andrew, “The Primacy of Figure in Cinematic Signification,” in *Cinema and Language*, ed. Stephen Heath and Patricia Mellencamp (AFI University Publications, 1983), 140.

⁹⁵ Whittock, 8.

metaphors to give it expression, to capture was it at stake for a psychology which has been redefined by such an event. Plato: the soul is struck by the beloved's face "as if by a bolt of lightning" (254b); Nietzsche: "the concept of revelation—in the sense that suddenly, with indescribable certainty and subtlety, something becomes *visible*, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down—that merely describes the facts...like lightning, a thought flashes up with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form"⁹⁶; Benjamin: "in the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes."⁹⁷

Film phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack, in an effort to express the kind of vision a philosophical seeing strives for quotes Stan Brakhage, "Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word.'"⁹⁸ This is the dream of communication without the sully of language: the communication of the purity of the moment when proposition is united with intuition. Nietzsche describes the experience of insight in *Ecce Homo* using very similar language, admitting to the complex aesthetics which accompany insight. The following describes the moment of inspiration when the doctrine of eternal recurrence—the key component of Nietzsche's later philosophy—overtook him, while on a walk in the woods around the lake of Silvaplana, when he suffered the most profound insight of his philosophic career:

A rapture whose tremendous tension occasionally discharges itself in a flood of tears—now the pace quickens involuntarily, now it becomes

⁹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1989), 300.

⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP, 1999), 456. Convolute [N1,1].

⁹⁸ Qtd in. Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 91. Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Film Culture, 1963), 1.

slow; one is altogether beside oneself, with the distinct consciousness of subtle shudders and one's skin creeping down to one's toes; a depth of happiness in which even what is most painful and gloomy does not seem something opposite but rather conditioned, provoked, a *necessary* color in such a superabundance of light; an instinct for rhythmic relationships that arches over wide spaces of forms—length, the need for a rhythm with wide arches, is almost the measure of the force of inspiration, a kind of compensation for its pressure and tension.⁹⁹

Insights are rarely where we expect them to be. They are weak in our lives, in artworks, in texts. Many insights come when our effort's been relaxed. We can think about insights as reformulations, retranslations: there is the curious facet of the insight where it seems always to refer to what we've already known; an insight is simultaneously new and wildly familiar. The insight brings something very close to us, and the path that thing drawn near leaves behind, once we peak past in the flush of new excitement, is a new perspective into what was formerly obscure, and an emphasis on that which was close to this new insight but remains far away. Ricoeur describes metaphor as a "proximity" which preserves within it a sense of "remoteness."¹⁰⁰ An insight leads back as much as it goes forward. We count on insights to renew old problems, that solved once, seem now unsolved, at a distance or dim. The shoring up of a weak insight with poetic persuasiveness, for Socrates, is sophistic. The poetic persuasiveness of weak insights, expressed poetically by the philosopher, is an invitation to new insights, and insights about insights. It is an invitation to wisdom. There is nostalgia for the good feelings of insights. But the emotion of insight, its play on the weakness of our sentimentality, invites also a powerful degree of commitment that we are rarely able to keep, which faith is rarely able to sustain, but which can create life-changing compulsion. When we have a

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, 300.

¹⁰⁰ Ricoeur, 426.

great idea, suddenly we are invited to take sides, to see lines drawn and suddenly distant shores.

Nietzsche describes insight's aftermath: "The involuntariness of image and metaphor is strangest of all; one no longer has any notion of what is an image or a metaphor: everything offers itself as the nearest, most obvious, simplest expression. It actually seems...as if the things themselves approached and offered themselves as metaphors."¹⁰¹ What Nietzsche is referring to here is an insight so profound that every object suddenly presents itself as a potential vehicle for the insight: every object illuminates the insight differently, a cascade of multidimensional understanding follows, a sensation of overwhelming closeness to the world is the result, and the ruins of metaphor swirl in its passing. These scattered metaphors are thus metonymic for insight, for the passing of grand understanding, and there is something apocalyptic in their excess of meaning. It is in insight that the literal and figurative meet definitively—if only for a moment. One way to think of this moment is as a reflection of the desire latent in the figurative, the desire which comes with semantic impertinence, the desire to change. As Samuel R. Levin suggests, perhaps when we try to unite the tenor and vehicle of a metaphor we don't simply adjust the terms of our understanding to fit the world. Perhaps, instead, we recreate the world to fit the metaphor. "In consequence what emerges as metaphoric is not the language which the poem expressed, but the world that language has used to project. We have projected ourselves into a metaphoric world."¹⁰²

Vivian Sobchack writes, "We find it utterly strange when figures of speech and writing suddenly take material form, yet, at the same time, we find this strangeness

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, 301.

¹⁰² Samuel R. Levin, "Language, concepts, and worlds: three domains of metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought*, Second Edition, ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 121.

utterly familiar, because we wished such existential substantiation through the transubstantiations of thought and language.”¹⁰³ Returning to our original examples of literalization, I want to emphasize this experience of strangeness and familiarity. When Witt ‘looks for immortality’ and we actually see an image of him ‘looking’ there is a sort of short-circuiting of interpretative energy. The language is made strange and remote, but the image appears familiar. The image presents itself as a reminder, as a pointer to language on the verge of manifesting in the world, as a pointer towards wish. In one sense, the literalization under investigation here shocks the image out of the continuity of the fiction. But as close as we may feel to the real in these moments, I would argue that the documentary images in Malick’s film are presented without rupturing the fictional space.¹⁰⁴ As responsive as *The Thin Red Line* is to these documentary moments, the film maintains a powerful sense of fiction in tension with the ‘truthfulness’ and ‘literalness’ of the documentary image—a tension appropriate to the phenomenon of insight as described by Nietzsche. The ethical spectatorship that usually accompanies the viewing of documentary images is thus preserved in the experience of a figure which is in danger of manifesting in the real world. The film’s world is always on the verge of exploding into insight.

Malick’s unique filmmaking style achieves a philosophic perspective on documentary reality, on literal images: which is to say it is both demonstrates indexicality, reality, and the contingencies of recording the pro-filmic, and it is also about those things. My theory is that Malick’s interest in POV, background and foreground,

¹⁰³ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 223.

¹⁰⁴ Sobchack has a very interesting discussion of this dimension of Malick’s work in *Carnal Thoughts*, 280-285.

jumpcuts, and narrative deferment create a representational space where it can be very hard, if not impossible, to adequately separate the literal and figurative; though very easy to identify both functioning exquisitely simultaneously, in tandem, giving expression to a way of looking not far from the type of literalization under discussion. Just when an image seems metaphoric, we become aware of its indexical status: Malick's frequent cuts to nature shots, which seemed so over-loaded with figurative potential, instead communicate 'more' of their documentary than figurative reality. And when an image seems literal—shot reverse shot pairs, for example—the patterning of point of view can make it seem figurative. Malick's film is full of almost glowing vehicles of figuration, but the tenor is often hard to establish: most often the tenor of a scene would be the narrative events and the vehicle would be the mode of its expression: Malick's disinterest in narrative and motivation, and emphasis on bizarre figurative events, forces us into figurative spaces to read for the literal. As such, the emotions we suspect we should be having in response to any documentary moment, any sudden flash of the indexical, appear to us as already those we'd expect to have when faced with the figurative.

The 2004 film *The Ister*, made by professed Malick fans David Barison and Daniel Ross¹⁰⁵ is a self-conscious experiment in philosophical cinema, and borrows a lot from Malick's stylistic repertoire. The film's philosophic goal is an exploration of Heidegger's ideas about technology, humankind, and nature, and which it presents mostly through talking-head style interviews; its cinematic goal is a documentary record of a journey up the Danube River.¹⁰⁶ A great deal of the success of the film comes from the

¹⁰⁵ Lawrie Zion, "Along the Danube and into the deep end," *The Australian*, 4 August 2004.
http://www.theister.com/reviews/review_timeoutes.html

¹⁰⁶ The use of the river in *The Ister* is also a very Malickian gesture: not only do all four of his films feature rivers prominently, but John Toll, *TTRL* DP, remarked that Malick wanted the entire film to feel like a

juxtaposing of a seemingly meandering conversation with a strictly defined journey, creating a sort of memory space in which the ideas of the conversation can find order. These two spaces of documentary are linked by an important intertext—the title of the film refers to the Friedrich Hölderlin poem of the same name analyzed in a 1942 lecture by Heidegger—and the cutting between the two spaces often follows a more poetic than argumentative logic. For example, a seemingly superfluous shot of a tombstone will be cut suddenly into a talking-head discussion of Heidegger—the image is out of context, the meaning ambiguous, and we grapple with potential poetic explanations. The temptation is to read the image of the tombstone as an abstracted figure—we read it as ‘tombstone’ and not ‘a tombstone’. However, later, as the film progresses and we move up river, we discover the context for that tombstone: it no longer becomes mere poetic illustration, nor is it any longer merely metaphorical. The abstract tombstone has been concretized as a specific tombstone. In addition, that image of the tombstone suddenly reminds us of the Heidegger conversation we heard earlier, creating a linkage between background context and foreground content. Barison and Ross use this concretization of what appeared figurative as an experience akin to a flash of insight. The difference is their film is a documentary, while Malick’s is a fiction: as intriguing as the device is, it lacks the fundamental tension which exists between figures appearing within a coherent narrative and figures appearing in the actual world. The tombstone is ultimately simply a lost and found object first denied context and then granted history. Malick’s figures, on the other hand, achieve another level of self-reflexivity.

flowing river. Stephen Pizello, “The War Within,” *American Cinematographer* 80, no. 2 (February 1999): 42.

We can see Malick's interest in the background and its contextualization during the scene in which Witt begins to discuss his mother. From the shots of Witt paddling his boat we dissolve to a shot of children bathed in a shallow lagoon. The shot is revealed to be the point/object of Witt, standing in long shot, looking left: we cut to the mothers in the water, closer this time (medium long shot), we return to Witt, closer this time (medium shot), and return to the mothers, further back (long shot), and then the camera pans to the left as they walk to the ocean, the spatial relationship between Witt and the mothers established when Witt is revealed in the background of the pan, Witt revealed in the background of his own POV shot. Long shots and medium long shots are designed to situate characters in their background—indeed, the threshold a tracking back camera crosses when the center of its attention slips from foreground into its background is one of the magic moments of cinema—and this complicated editing structure of Malick's does exactly that. It should also be noted that there is a jump cut here. In the medium shot we see four children playing in the background while in the longshot there are only two and they are no longer playing. A detail perhaps not worth reading too much into, but one which points to how oddly staged this scene is. Witt's companion Hoke can also be seen in the background, on the opposite side from Witt and closer to us than the children, and his positioning is similarly affected by jump cuts. What a curious way to introduce a character, and what a curious way to represent a scene which is very deliberately about Witt and what is *in front* of him. What's important here is that the documentary distortions in the fiction don't disrupt the fiction but anticipate the distortion's figuration: these figures in the background will become meaningful. The children will return to Witt's horizon of concern near the end of the scene detailing Witt's

insight into the death of his mother, and Hoke is, as it turns out, the interlocutor for Witt's thoughts. The children and Hoke exist in the background of Witt's thinking; in the foreground, Witt is witnessing a generalized example of a 'mother' who serves to start him thinking about his own, particular mother.

Of course, it's impossible to say what attracts Malick to these types of odd framings, but given the context of his proto-philosophic cinema, it does superbly literalize a metaphor of seeing which Ferrari argues is central to the *Phaedrus*. Ferrari: "What is particularly striking about this dialogue is that the background will not stay where it belongs. It becomes a prominent topic of discussion and a direct cause of the conversational action rather than, as one would expect, at most an indirect influence on its course."¹⁰⁷ Ferrari is suggesting that the dialogue's close attention to the background of a scene is a metaphor for paying close attention to the background of thought. This is an important reworking of philosophic metaphors in two respects: first, because it is important to note that by 'background' we don't mean foundation, or base upon which all thought is structured; and secondly, because it replaces an objective 'viewpoint' with something more like a 'history' of mobile views. If we take the philosophic perch, as we move further and further back we hope to see things begin to come closer and closer together: we want to see the connections between things in their totality. If, on the other hand, to understand the connections between a thing and its world we attempt to 'step into the background' we discover the phenomenon whereby background becomes new foreground, and a new background is configured. Built into the metaphor is the idea that we can never actually 'step into the background', we can never inhabit that position as a position of philosophic credibility. For Ferrari, this recognition of moving but not

¹⁰⁷ Ferrari, 4.

arriving is essential to an undogmatic philosophic thought. To avoid, however, merely a panicked rushing forward into unstable thinking, we need to take the ethical turn and look back upon the foreground we once occupied. In this glance we recognize the distance traversed, and thus manage to integrate the philosopher—ourselves—into the moment of looking. The distant objective perspective is a fine dream-image of philosophic knowledge, but without the understanding of the self as a thing defined by and close to change—the experience very vivid to the philosophic lovers—it is impoverished, and unable to account for the impetus of this eternal and lonely retreat.

The Thin Red Line is a film that begins with a series of questions: “What’s this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea?” 4 minutes and 49 seconds later we have an answer—not an answer to the questions we’ve heard, those that have defined our now very quick ascent into the film, but we have *an* answer; we have the experience of an answer. We have Witt’s insight. Most narrative films begins with desire and end with knowledge. *The Thin Red Line* begins with knowledge.

4. Witt’s Insight

Before the revelation, Witt is on the beach watching the mothers of the village playing with their children. Witt, speaking to Hoke—who first appeared in the background of Witt’s earlier POV shot—wonders about his mother’s fearlessness when she lay dying. This leads him to think that it was her faith in immortality that gave her such strength. But Witt wonders where her faith could possibly come from, “People talk

about immortality, but I ain't seen it." Witt looks deliberately to his left; this shot is followed by a point/object of children playing in the village.

There is a dissolve from Witt's contemplative face to the white and dark gold of his mother's bedroom. What follows is entirely unlike what we were prepared for. Instead of a woman "all shrunk up and gray" we have a woman sitting up in bed (Penny Allen, listed in the credits as "Witt's Mother"), reaching towards a young girl (Marina Malota, listed in the credits simply as "Marina") dressed in white. Where is the death Witt saw in her? This is rare in cinema to have a scene that we have been so prepped to search carefully, to experience the feeling that we are searching these images just as the character is. As such, we are acutely aware of our distance: the conditions of film watching, our sense of genre, our sense of narrative, our sense of what we are prepared to accept from this encounter: all are in the way. Witt is a shadowy figure in the foreground of the shot, his back to us. Later, once we are introduced to the subjective flashbacks of Pvt. Bell, Malick will use a similar device: the originator of the subjective flashback will appear in the flashback, but, as it says in the third draft screenplay, "we never see him face on."¹⁰⁸ This technique of including the subject in the flashback, but on the periphery, makes the images far more active—more like a dream state, or more like a willed imagination rather than a purely subjective poetic reverie. These thoughts include those who think them, an important gesture towards a phenomenological understanding of consciousness as object, and this may remind us of the POV shots that end up including the subject viewing. Witt is on the outside of this image—his back is to us, he is in shadow, and as the scene progresses, he will be pushed out of the frame entirely. Witt is clearly (literally) on the outside of what is occurring. This is a fascinating use of a

¹⁰⁸ Malick, *The Thin Red Line*, third draft screenplay, 40.

subjective grammar: the character begins in his own flashback, but the flashback moves beyond him—it is almost as if his thinking is compelled, compulsive. Are we to read back upon the eyeline matches that went on before, and similarly wonder where Witt is in relation to them—at what point does the world exceed its existence as the product of a POV? That which begins from his eye, it seems, inevitably exceeds him.

1st shot: We dissolve from Witt's hand against his face to his(?) hand in his mother's(?). She is stroking it. **2nd shot:** Witt(?) is in the foreground, his back to us. To his right, his mother, dressed in a simple grey night gown, weariness on her face, but peace in her demeanor, reaches—through Witt—for her daughter(?) sitting on Witt's left. We, of course, don't know if the young girl is Witt's sister. Silverman assumes she is. Above them all, two birds are in a wicker cage. The camera pans left.

3rd shot: Before his mother reaches her daughter, and before the camera can complete its pan, we cut to a closeup of the birds in the cage. They seem agitated. Or are they simply playing? This is another example of Malick introducing an image in the background, and then cutting towards it. This insert shot, **the 4th**, lasts longer than it should. Based on the patterns established by the film, we might be tempted to understand this as a POV shot: Witt is looking at the birds. Or, it is the point/glance of a new chain: the birds are watching over the scene.

5th shot: The camera is just above a little girl dressed in white lace; almost the perspective of the bird cage. She is content. We tilt down until the camera is framing her chest. The sound of a heartbeat fills the soundtrack. **6th shot:** The little girl hugs her mother, who is now, suddenly, standing and facing right. We see the mother from the chin down, a wisp of blond hair. The little girl touches her mother's chest, and then puts

her ear to where her fingers trailed. The sound of the heartbeat fades out. The girl hears nothing(?)—we hear nothing—she smiles. The sound of the birds fade out. The sound of a clock enters the soundtrack. The girl glances right.

7th shot: We see the corner of the room, the bed frame to the left. While the ticking clock seems to indicate the presence of reality, the setting suddenly seems artificial. We see no one. The camera pans to the right, and then tilts up to the ceiling, which, we can now see, is open to blue sky—a bit of green tree pushing in from the left hand corner, lace in the opposite corner fluttering in the wind. A dissolve to blue water ends the scene. It is dreamlike: this fluidity between sharp memory and surrealism, this presence of a body that is me, but is other than me. A house open to sky, outdoors and indoors blend, objectivity and subjectivity blur, narrative relaxes into memory. It also could be a visual literalization of a soul ascending.

Perhaps the girl is an angel, perhaps she is angel like. What we see in the vision is Witt's mother dying—his *idea* of dying. To recap: Witt's mother is dying and we see her lean forward for the angelic girl. There is a cut. We see nature. We see birds—which, traditionally, conventionally, as in the *Phaedrus*, is an image of a human soul. *Two* birds. Two sides of the same soul? Cut back. The angel's heartbeat. Now the mother is standing. These jump cuts are divine. The angel listens to the heart until it stops. A glance. And we ascend from home, from time—the ticking clock—into blue. Into nature. We might think of the caged birds suddenly free. But is this the death that Witt saw in her: this small angel, this little angel, this calm and contentment, so separate from him? Or is it in the birds and their unwavering metaphoric potential—at once so private and individual, yet so timeless, and public. Is the calm in his mother? The scene

begins with his hand in his mother's. She is comforting him. But he is removed from her death. Her movement is toward the girl in white.

8th shot: a pan to the left—the same direction Witt's mother was reaching for her daughter—and we see Witt sitting on the shore, looking out into the water. A music cue has jump started a new set of voiceover narration.

Witt: "I wondered how it would be when I died? To know that this breath is the last one you was ever gonna draw?" Witt, still in long shot, turns his head to look towards a boat in the distance, pulled up on shore, firmly in the background. It has a background presence. In the **9th shot** we cut to the boat. Just as in the third shot of Witt's vision of his mother's death, we cut to a closeup of an object from the middle of a background revealed first by a slow pan. What could be the relationship of a wooden birdcage to a wooden boat? What affective universe do they both share?

A closeup of a lonely boat, big enough for only one or two. Witt: "I just hope I can meet it the same way she did. With the same calm." **10th shot:** cut back to a medium closeup of Witt—but, Witt, now, like his mother—is standing. A jump cut. Missing time. As he glances right we see three children on the beach behind him. Witt: "Because that's where it's hidden," as he glances almost towards the camera, "The immortality I hadn't seen." It is here that intuitive reasoning forges white hot with unusual language.

This is Witt's insight, and in its formal representation it is linked forcefully to the experience of death. His insight is strange, and personal—doubtful. The birdcage, the girl in white, the ceiling-less room: if these are Witt's inventions, they were invented to correspond to the ascent of his ideas about what transpired. **11th shot:** we cut, a point/object only dimly related to Witt's POV, of a boy holding small crabs in his hand.

As they struggle free(?) the boy shifts his hands and the small crabs fall back into his palms. This is an image of a tenuous balance. This is an image of caged animals. The sound of waves suddenly becomes prominent on the soundtrack. A heartbeat? What follows is the metaphorization of the world, the consequence of insight.

In the **12th shot**, we cut back to the children we had previously seen in the background shot of Witt. They are searching the ground. They are playing. The sound of rhythmically tapping shells becomes prominent in the soundtrack as the sound of waves diminishes. Do the tapping shells sound like a ticking clock? Nietzsche continues: after the “lightning strike” of insight, “everything happens involuntarily in the highest degree but as in a gale of feeling of freedom, of absoluteness, of power, of divinity.”¹⁰⁹ This expression of the fluidity of divinity is an idea expressed again and again by commentators on Malick’s work: the involuntary force of those insert shots of nature, our sense of what they might mean, what they *remind* us of. This tension between the involuntariness of fate creating the *feeling* of freedom is where the film locates a relationship to the divine. This mad freedom from responsibility will be juxtaposed later to soldiers in battle, in free fall, following orders.

13th shot: cut back to Witt in medium close up. He turns again. He looks to the left. Another POV shot, **shot 14:** two men are holding hands. Thus, we end the arc of Witt’s insight with held hands: just as Witt’s vision of his mother, carefully stroking his own hand, began.¹¹⁰ Again, an impossible eyeline match, but it seems likely Witt has

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 300-301.

¹¹⁰ Witt’s experience is not unlike what Vivian Sobchack describes: “When I turn my consciousness intentionally toward my own conscious gaze, the world as the content of my visual field merely serves as the ground for the figure of my gaze. My visual field becomes an idle and equivocal presence to me that is not seen as meaningful” (99). As an example, Sobchack describes a distracted driver, caught in her own thoughts, running a red light. “We’ve all done it, thinking about something not visibly present in our visual field, intending toward some other project than the act of seeing and the act of driving that have become

seen it—the private smile is close to the one he wore when we first met him. A music cue begins: a celebratory choir of Melanesian Christian songs: an incredible four part harmony. The calm lent Witt by his insight washes over his face. This is the moment when the world recedes.

There is clearly a lot going on in this segment, but what I think is perhaps most notable is the creation of the two realms of representation: Witt's nondiegetic myth of his mother dying, and the reminders of that myth present in the diegesis. Witt's insight is an insight into interpretation: he hasn't seen *immortality* but he knows where to look for it: in *calm*, and it is in this state of calm where Witt sees his other world. This stasis, in the face of a war in the heart of nature, is achieved through the artful balancing of figures between the two realms—the realms which meet at the tissue of Witt, on the beach, in the moment of his insight. Indeed, the state of calm he seeks is the one generated by this insight. "I wonder how'd it be when I died"—this sets Witt on a fundamentally moral path—"because that's where it's hidden." It is hidden in wonder, in Witt's wonder, but it is visible in the world. In Part 2 I will tease out the problems of this visibility.

Another cut, **shot 15**, and Witt is entering the village: it was in solitude that his insight came, it was followed by the rush of metaphor, and now he rejoins the community. The steadicam dollying from behind, Witt steps back into the village, the village which preceded his insight.

automatic in their correlation, we're suddenly caught up short, after the fact, and realize we've driven through a red light" (88). The background suddenly, coincidentally, bursts forth into the foreground and announces itself as that which has defined the content of the foreground, like a dreamer who integrates the waking world into her dream.

PART 2: After Insight

1. Private Insights, Public Figures

Holly (Sissy Spacek) suffers an insight near the middle of *Badlands*. In the forest hideout she shares with Kit (Martin Sheen), her thoughts turn to her love of nature: she tries to describe what she loves, but the more she describes, the more she anthropomorphizes until the experience of nature (and the experience of her love) is an experience of a lonesome world where “everyone is dead and gone,” where the leaves are like spirits “whispering about all the little things that bother them.” It is while looking at turn of the century travel photographs in her murdered father’s stereopticon that she is suddenly struck by the possibility that her world could’ve been different, she realizes its basic contingency, and that this different world—where the man she’s going to marry might “this very moment” be thinking of her—suddenly coincides with her potential

future. The potential of the future crashes into the reality of the present—a sense of destiny is revealed paradoxically through an insight into contingency—making both more abstract and more urgent. This insight is devastating. “For days afterwards I lived in dread. Sometimes I wished I could fall asleep and be taken off to some magical lands. This never happened.” These days of dread come just before she and Kit are discovered in their forest hideout, the end of their brief and grotesque domestic happiness, and the impetus for yet another flight from civilization. That the background to her insight was an indexical image presented through an apparatus which emphasizes both its status as illusion and our yearning to enter the image (step into the background) makes this moment emblematic of Malick’s relationship to thought and cinema. Cinema as toy is a metaphor I think Malick encourages: a thing we admire as a play thing, a thing we imagine with, a thing we break. In the stereopticon image is embedded both delusion and desire; these are the raw elements of insight, the fragments of, and the fumbling towards, truth.

After insight there is its representation; the thunder of beauty’s lightning strike, the moment, according to Plato’s allegory, when we recoil in fear, when we pull fiercely back on the reins, involuntarily (254b-c). Insight carries with it both its proposition—the language, its listener, and synopsis—and its figuration: its tenacious existence *as* insight. Insight is forged in the moment, within fleeting sensation and passing time, and like much in modernity marking increasingly rapid pace, its explosion into being is not without anxiety, nor without dread. There is in scientific innovations a fear of literal catastrophe; in philosophic insight, insight’s oppressive promise. In my conclusion I will

try to suggest ways *The Thin Red Line* imagines insight's sustaining. The following examines insight's decay. The debris of insight.

The authors of insight broker the détente between poetry and philosophy to articulate an individual's wish contra the community, a private insight given public representation. Such a relaxing of tensions recreates a political problem. The execution of Socrates by the city of Athens is modern philosophy's founding myth: an expression, like the crucifixion of Jesus, of the power and consequence of ideas in a public sphere that has turned against the individual. Plato's task is to make the city both safe for philosophy and the ideal topic of philosophy: overcome the city's fear of the individual, and the philosopher's tendency to solitude. That the two are inextricable is reflected in the media of philosophy: *language* comes about through the community, but the community (and language) is philosophy's greatest threat. This intimate connection between city and philosopher accounts for Plato's metaphoric linkage of soul and city in the *Republic*—it very deliberately creates the discursive plane where philosophic soul and embodied city can imagine the other. This is why the setting of the *Phaedrus* outside the city is so philosophically instructive, and why Socrates—far outside his usual urban haunts—seems to act so strangely, is so susceptible to inspiration. This inspiration is not easily integrated to the city, and to return to it with an insight in mind and ready in speech requires political tact: especially if this insight is into one's self via a controversial metaphorization of the city.

This stepping outside the foreground of the city into the background of nature to achieve an impersonal perspective on self (the city in the distance) is one recreated in *The Thin Red Line*. Witt's return to the community after insight brings him immediately face

to face with a representative of the source of his insight into peace and calm: a young mother, who laughs and demurs when Witt, in the full flush of his goodwill towards the potential of mankind, asserts that the children of the Melanesian village “never fight.” Nietzsche’s philosophic novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with the philosopher coming down from the mountains after a decade of self imposed exile, carrying with him the knowledge that “God is dead,” a message he relinquishes meticulously over the course of the novel, announcing it to himself (and us) only after the first person he meets on his return to civilization—a saint, the individual most potentially devastated, and most able to contradict him—passes on his way.¹¹¹ The immediate representation of the insight, in both Witt’s case and Zarathustra’s, takes first the form of an overdetermined and pithy fragment of language, perhaps only meaningful to the thinker (in Witt’s case it is the words, “Because that’s where it’s hidden, the immortality I hadn’t seen”). The stardust of language that accompanies the moment of insight—like “God is dead”—is essentially figurative. It stands in for all that came before and all that attended its shining moment of creation. It acts as reminder and secret key to insight’s realm of connections, affect, and future promise. The mystery of the unravelling of its linguistic embodiment—its public form—of its interpretation, by thinker and by audience, structures the experience which follows. Nietzsche describes the year after his insight, the four 10 day bursts of inspiration in which he crafted *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

“Except for these ten-day works, the years during and above all *after* my *Zarathustra* were marked by distress without equal. One pays dearly for immortality: one has to die several times while still alive. There is something I call the *racunae* [rancor] of what is great: everything great—a work, a deed—is no sooner accomplished than it turns *against* the man who did it. Then there is the gruesome silence one hears all around one.

¹¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 9-12.

Solitude has seven skins...one comes to me, one greets friends—more desolation, no eye offers a greeting.”¹¹²

The promise of immortality central to Socrates’ myth of the philosophic experience of love comes only after a lengthy consideration of the capacity of love to degenerate and its monuments to decay. Lysias’ argument against the lover is based precisely on the fickleness of feeling. Lysias asks the potential beloved, “Have you been alarmed by the thought that it is hard for friendships to last?” (232c) Lysias criticizes the lover, “It’s easy to see that the next time he falls in love he will care more for his new than for the old one, and it’s clear that he’ll treat the old shabbily whenever that will please the new” (231c). The lover simply falls out of love; or, more cynically, once satisfied, love is no longer a useful description for the feeling. This chimes with Socrates’ description of earthly knowledge, “which we consider real down here...the knowledge that is close to change” (247e). Love—and Zarathustra comes down from the mountain baring the message, the public message, “I love man”¹¹³—while immortality’s greatest inspiration, is also the perfect emblem of the fickleness of representation, the instability of truth over time.

The possessiveness of love, according to the first speeches, drives the lover to keep the beloved inferior, subservient, isolated from friends and family, lonely (239e). In an effort to sustain love, the lover becomes grasping, mean, neurotic. Love is an anti-social force; its public displays an embarrassment. The beloved is not just a complex private metaphor for the lover—an interpersonal figure—but a public allegory: the lovers are very directly represented in public by their beloved. This representation is one

¹¹² Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* 303.

¹¹³ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 11.

motivated by the greed of love, resulting in both slander when love cools, and excessive praise when it is at its peak. The language of love is always fallacious, if not figurative. For Socrates, the excess of emotion inherent in love creates a situation where once it cools the lover retreats, while the beloved—confused, hurt, indignant—now becomes, in spite of themselves, the pursuer, crying for justice, while the lover continues their withdrawal, afraid that in the lover’s eyes there will be a vivid reminder of the love-drunk fool they once were (241b). In love’s promise, immortality thus achieves an unlikely form; as a concept, as a theological/metaphysical concept, it becomes wedded to history and memory. Immortality is described by two realms: in nature, as a literally eternal being, a being that has achieved the timelessness of nature; in the city, immortality is achieved in legend, as myth.

The morphing signification visible in the progress of the lovers is echoed by Nietzsche in his theory of signs—a theory which borrows much from a Heraclitean (and late Platonic) vision of a cosmos eternally in flux. For Nietzsche, the tendency of the literal to become figurative, and the figurative to harden back into the literal, is a fact of human thought which means that a moral philosophy must be ready to accept the forever shifting categories of good and evil. According to Nietzsche, abstract concepts—like ‘purity’, for example—once had literal definitions; thus the figuration of a concept follows from, and acts to bridge, the separation of the material from the transcendent.¹¹⁴ Purity, which was once surely just a form of literal cleanliness, became to mean closeness to god. Of course, the re-literalization of a concept like purity, in a new context, can have very dangerous, very real, very political consequences.

¹¹⁴ Cantor, 72.

The political appears in Malick's films first and foremost through the theme of the individual contra the community—the ancient political philosophical problem—but also, at times more subtly, in the ironies and paradoxes of the film's use of language, literal and figurative, visual and verbal. One striking moment in *Days of Heaven* involves Abby, the reluctant surrogate mother, moralizing with Linda, the surrogate daughter, about pretending to love the terminally ill landowner (Sam Shepard) so as to inherit his money and escape a life of poverty. She tells Linda about how, when she was a girl, she used to wrap cigars until after dark and that her skin was as white as paper. “This is not so bad,” Abby says. Not two shots later, Bill is honestly trying to express his love—but in the context of convincing her to marry the Farmer for his money—and says to Abby quietly, “I remember the first time I ever saw you. I'd never seen hair so black. Or skin so pretty.” Here, Malick undercuts a seminal moment in the history of the lovers by suggesting that the moment was only possible through body-punishing economic disparity, that Abby's pretty skin was the product of long hours of manual labour. Here, the contingency of love—the encounter with beauty—is given a grotesque dimension, which while not an ineluctable refutation of love and its representation, is indeed an obstacle. The authenticity of thought and emotion (love) is thus made doubtful by the practicalities of living in a community (the public sphere, the social). For Bill, the experience of Abby-as-an-apparition-of-beauty, sight-of-Abby-as-insight, is immediately charged with fear and loss: “I was afraid I'd never see you again.” There fear is realized in the astonishing heartbreaking moment when Bill first realizes that perhaps Abby has fallen in love with the Farmer just as the misshapen surrogate family stands in the twilight watching Theodore Roosevelt's train pass by, as if this insight were hand

delivered from a more ordered world. It is in the sudden touching of the public sphere—a sphere in which Bill yearns to prove himself—upon their private Edenic revelry that Bill can turn back and witness this makeshift family that now excludes him. From the perspective of the public, from the perspective of the city, Bill—the lover and architect of his love’s representation—recognizes how the imitation of a family they have crafted to deal with the contingencies of the public sphere has now become truth. In this process of literalization, he and his love have been lost.

If love is too risky a metaphor of sustainability, perhaps nature will be more rewarding. When the characters in *The Thin Red Line* philosophize they turn both to nature and to figurative language. Heard by us through voiceover, these characters are speaking only to themselves, and yet they use a very public form of communication: a sacrifice is “like water poured on the ground”; Colonel Tall is dying “slow as a tree”; men are looking for salvation by themselves, “each like a coal, thrown from the fire”; Bell and his wife “flow together like water”; war turns men “into dogs.” It is worth noting that there is very little tension in these metaphors. They seem to slip by our imagination—they often don’t engage us as metaphors, as something to be visualized or paused over or interpreted. They are dead metaphors. They exist more as pleas to be understood than actual effective communication. But these pleas, in the way we easily overlook them, find their correspondence in the background objects of Malick’s mise-en-scene: overlooked, but not without ontology, not without significance.

The faux-poetic language of the voiceovers similarly creates an aesthetic disquiet. While many of the voiceovers are clearly beautiful, others are too naked, and create a sensation of being too close and needing to be pushed away. In their nakedness they

seem to present also an earnest authenticity which some critics, mistakenly, have confused with Malick's own voice, the author's point of view. But Malick's narrators are always stricken with some degree of self doubt, always tentative about their words.

Malick's characters aren't precisely unreliable narrators; they are, because of the limitations of expression and the contingencies of their experience, unreliable thinkers.

James Morrison in his review of *The Thin Red Line*, takes what I feel is the correct approach when he writes,

All the men, together or alone, even at the height of battle, and even if they are addressing God or one another or absent lovers, are really talking only to themselves. Their musings would have to be rejected as cliché only if we, as listeners insisted upon reverting them to a public form, and they claim a measure of their pathos from their forthright platitude, showing a hopeful perseverance of the private, even in the grip of the ultimate, when selves are lost. They are the shards of lost, fleeting voices that, even if we are somehow privy to them, can have no real hearer in the world.¹¹⁵

Malick says almost the same thing in an interview, given in 1975 to *Sight and Sound* after the release of *Badlands*, "When people express what is most important to them, it often comes out in clichés. That doesn't make them laughable; it's something tender about them. As though in struggling to reach what's most personal about them they could only come up with what's most public."¹¹⁶ Philosophy, which has always engaged the categories of private and public, is no longer a public occupation. Philosophy is for hobbyists, for the broken, for the opinionated, and as ill placed in politics as religion.

The metaphoric language of *The Thin Red Line*'s voiceovers reminds us not only that these are characters working from within a culture—where they are surrounded by 'figures of speech'—but they are also trapped within a particular theatre of experience:

¹¹⁵ James Morrison, review of *The Thin Red Line* (Fox Movie), *Film Quarterly* 53, no.1 (fall 1999): 38.

¹¹⁶ Beverly Walker, "Malick on *Badlands*," *Sight and Sound* 44, no. 2 (spring 1975): 82.

specifically, the midpoint of the American invasion of Guadalcanal (late 1942). In the beautiful yet treacherous jungle of this Pacific island, the physical surroundings provide the raw elements for characters' thought and expression. As such, images of nature figure large; even the very first lines of the film create this connection between thinking about war and the search for metaphors to explain it: "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does the land contend with the sea?" The characters in the film, trapped in the middle of war, very actively look to nature and find reflected in it overwhelming evidence for the commonness of their experience: indeed, war destroys men, but it also creates a sense of connection, of insight. Colonel Tall makes this explicit—one of the only times in the film when a character actually comments *directly* on nature—when he points out to Captain Staros: "see the way that vine twines around that tree, swallowing the jungle. Nature's cruel Staros." This visibility of nature is something they can all share. And while attributing a human phenomenon—cruelty—to nature may strike us as flawed reasoning, may seem like an inadequate literalization of an abstract concept, we can hardly gainsay this desire to turn to external nature for some insight into our own. After all, to suggest that nature isn't, in fact, cruel, that it is simply indifferent, is also to admit that nature is not kind. Complete indifference can still be an act of cruelty—and for soldiers looking for some sort of salvation, the idea of a meaningful nature, even a cruel one, is somehow comforting.

Witt's insight is preceded by two essential concepts: thoughts on fear and questions about immortality. The ability to recognize a concept like immortality in nature requires spectacularly complex interpretative skills. Jean-Jacques Rousseau—perhaps the one philosopher, after Heidegger, most often cited as an influence on

Malick—theorizes the birth of concepts out of nature, or ‘primitive man’, through a complex allegory.¹¹⁷ Basically, Rousseau argues that a man creates a concept by making a mistake of perception, inventing a word to describe that perception, realizing the mistake, and then literalizing that mistake by keeping the new word invented to describe this new idea generated by the mistake. In the allegory, primitive man (and Rousseau goes to lengths to make it clear that this primitive man is hypothetical) who first begins alone in a state of nature, encounters other men and feels afraid. He has learned to associate fear with size, so he imagines that these other men are far larger than they are and invents the word ‘giants’ to describe them (though, ‘giants’ really means “I am afraid”).¹¹⁸ He later discovers that they are not in fact larger than he; he recognizes, rather, the general equality of size between himself and other men, but he retains the concept as a “permanent hypothesis...that can never be proven or disproven by empirical or by analytical means.”¹¹⁹ De Man argues that what is demonstrated by this allegory is a moment when “inward feeling” is made to correspond with outward properties: this correspondence is fundamentally metaphoric.¹²⁰ “Fear is the result of a possible discrepancy between the outer and the inner properties of entities,” and this split between outer surface and inner meaning directly reflects the experience of the figure. De Man argues that Rousseau sees ‘fear’ “as the paradigmatic passion (or need) that leads to

¹¹⁷ This discussion of Rousseau centers around *Discourses on Inequality* and an odd supplemental text called “Essay on the Origin of Languages.” The *Discourses* is notably split between a hypothetical and nearly mythic description of early man, and a subsequent more conventionally reasoned analysis of political life. The *Discourses*, like the *Phaedrus*, is thus split between myth and conventional rhetoric.

¹¹⁸ Rousseau, “Essay on the Origin of Languages in Which Something is Said about Melody and Musical Imitation,” in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 253-254.

¹¹⁹ De Man, *Allegories*, 150.

¹²⁰ De Man, *Allegories*, 150.

figural language...it corresponds structurally to the rhetorical model of the metaphor.”¹²¹ Fear leads to figuration, which leads to concepts, which leads to civil society. The word “men” is the word which replaces “I am afraid.” Civil society is thus founded on this distrust, on this potential for epistemological damage. The experience of fear becomes, itself, “a figural state of suspended meaning”.¹²² In the moment of suspended meaning, fear is the precipice before insight, the void at the center of insight’s expression.

The entire philosophic debate between Witt and Welsh is founded on the question of our responsibility to others versus our responsibility to ourselves, a question which for Welsh hinges on ‘fear’, for Witt on ‘calm’. Welsh, in his very first conversation with Witt, makes the claim, “We’re living in a world that’s blowing itself to hell as fast as everyone can arrange it.” Here, we assume, he is referring to a human world, but such a distinction, for Welsh, may be irrelevant. For Welsh, the World, as a whole—including Nature—is destroying itself, and so he strives for indifference: “only one thing a man can do. Shut his eyes, let nothing touch him. Look out for himself.” The world has become very present to these characters, and their methods of self expression reflect this. But note the mixed metaphor in this anxious claim: a man has to “shut his eyes” and yet he also has to “look out for himself.” This unruly use of metaphor is itself a metaphor for conflict, and signifies “I am afraid.”

It is during moments of figurative instability that we can begin to see clearly what it is we want from figurative communication. A sense of wholeness. Unity. Perfection.

¹²¹ Ibid., 153n28.

¹²² Ibid., 151. Not to belabour the point, but even in the *Phaedrus* we can see this connection between violence, nature, and figuration. When Socrates and Phaedrus first walk into the countryside, Phaedrus is struck by the beauty of the landscape. It is so beautiful that Phaedrus suggests that it must be mythic, and wonders to Socrates if they’ve found the exact spot where the god Boreas raped the princess Oreithuia. Phaedrus is awed by beauty in nature, and immediately his mind leaps to a violent myth.

Transcendence of embodiment. Salvation from the fear of violent death. These are the sorts of concepts which surround desire and its fulfillment and which much of modern philosophy since Nietzsche (and literary criticism since French post-structuralism) have endeavoured to put into question. The experience of insight is a synthesizing moment that shares with the figurative the sudden unity of the incommensurable: it makes bold connections we didn't expect could be made, and in the process releases emotional energy not unlike that experienced through beauty, aesthetics, art. The experience of insight, like the figurative, is a moment of an anticipatory transcendence of fear. Art replicates the experience of insight to various degrees, but in artworks these consciousness altering connections are most often made in a safe environment, a bounded temporal whole prefigured by internal moments of semantic impertinence unified (on a micro scale) by a private insight into textual intention. The bounded temporal whole within which insights in the real world answers to is that of the life of the individual who has the insight. As such, it is not surprising that there is strong metaphoric linkage between the decay of insight, and the decay of truth, the decay of the body, and the decay of love. The methods used to represent an insight in which is embedded a fundamental anxiety of its decay, in some way must answer to that wish for, and impossibility of, immortality. Turning to nature for a metaphor of sustainability—as the characters in Malick's film do—has a long precedent, most notably in the work of the Romantic poets. Paul De Man analyses the representational gains revealed by the methods and difficulties of these European literary artists of the 18th and 19th century; artists who actively theorized, even in their own poetry, the use of symbol and allegory to help articulate a

relationship between man and nature. Malick revisits these techniques in ways suited to the age of cinema, a new nature, and new metaphors of desire and insight.

2. Dead Metaphors, Eternal Symbols, Life of Allegory

In the *Phaedrus*, philosophy is described as a way of philosophic looking which achieves an impersonal or objective view while maintaining an awareness of what that implies for the subject (the origin, advocate, and beneficiary/victim of the objective view). To overcome an infinite regress, an endless attaining of objectivity about objectivity, Plato reveals the figurative nature of ‘objectivity’ and articulates a philosophic turn of mind which manages rational gains through split perspectives that appear metaphoric. The perfect (and perfectly complex) metaphor for this process, and the ultimate manifestation of the moral imperative which drives it, is the experience of love. This metaphor splits the subject in two: a lover who renounces subjecthood through desire for an other (a beloved), but reforms this sundering through an intense experience of unity that achieves objectivity through a privileged relationship to another subjectivity (the beloved). The lovers achieve a privileged objectivity through the mutual imagining of the beloved’s subjectivity—a process whereby, through the nature of love and its horizon of care and concern, a change of the other is a change of the self—and for Plato the parlaying of this perspective into a life of literal philosophic investigation is the ideal manifestation of the Good Life.

The Romantic Poets of the 18th and 19th Century crafted their own vision of the Good Life, and their own methods of achieving a perspective on self and world. The prejudices about self, nature, secular and religious thought which these poets and thinkers

introduced into Western culture as an aesthetic revolt against the cool rationalization of the Enlightenment still resonate powerfully. Romantic theories of symbols, transcendence, and the task of art, have had a profound influence on filmmaking and film criticism, traceable directly in the silent films of Griffith and Murnau, the poetic Realism of Renoir, and in the ontological criticism of André Bazin. However, as Paul De Man argues in his essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” much of what we understand to be fundamental to a Romantic perspective on the world is subject to internal incoherencies and anxieties that force us to reconsider exactly what the Romantics’ highly self-aware use of figurative tropes is communicating. Malick has fully inherited the challenge of representing philosophic objectivity, and his ‘poetic’ approach to this problem—through the figurative experiences of metaphor, allegory, symbol, and their dialectical energy—owes much to the Romantics, if for no other reason than Malick seems to appreciate the evocative tenacity of the Romantic vision of man, nature, city, and thought. The line of voiceover in *The Thin Red Line* that most critics seize upon as the film’s central philosophy—“darkness and light, strife and love, are these the workings of one mind, the features of the same face?”—is, as Jacob Leigh points out, an allusion to William Wordsworth’s seminal Romantic poem *The Prelude*.¹²³

Metaphor, as we’ve seen, is based on similarity and tension: a tenor is represented through a vehicle which resembles that tenor in some key though unusual ways and which encourages us to re-imagine both terms; the tension inherent in this reimagining, and in the connection created between the two terms, creates the rich metaphoric

¹²³ Leigh, 14. The poem, begun in 1799, includes the following lines: “Tumult and peace, the darkness and light—/ Were all like workings of one mind, the features/ Of the same face, blossoms one tree;/ Characters of the great Apocalypse,/ The types and symbols of Eternity,/ Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.” In my introduction I point out how this vision of the duality of man—good and evil—is the philosophy expressed by the 12 year old narrator of *Days of Heaven*.

perspective on the tenor. In the symbol, as Whittock points out, the vehicle is given greater emphasis than what is experienced with metaphor, while the tenor remains almost entirely elusive.¹²⁴ One of the best known symbols in film studies is Charles Foster Kane's childhood sled "Rosebud"—it is a very evocative vehicle, so overdetermined that its meaning is always in doubt. Which is to say, that the symbol resists paraphrase: the better the symbol the more evocative it is, the more paraphrase is unsatisfactory. Allegory, on the other hand, is pure paraphrase. The allegorist communicates an abstract concept, usually a moral lesson, by using characters to personify certain virtues or vices, and then placing them in a narrative to show, for example, that Idleness is friends with Evil. There is thus a direct substitution at work in the allegory, and the allegory points directly at a specific interpretation. Using Whittock's preferred language: allegory emphasizes tenor at the expense of the vehicle; there is almost no tension, save for the drama of the substitution, a quick opening of the curtains. Though this can bring a great deal of clarity to a concept, in allegory's general lack of interest in psychological realism and subtlety it is thought to be un-artistic. What is established here, in placing symbol over allegory, is the elevation of 'showing' over 'telling'—a familiar dictum of professional screenwriters, which while generally welcomed when it is borne out, reflects certain assumptions about the type of meaning we wish to create and receive from art. De Man identifies the same prejudice in Romantic art which elevates the symbol above the allegory, a hierarchization with profound implications for truth and its representation; a prejudice which brutally recreates the quarrel between philosophy and poetry: "Allegory appears as dryly rational and dogmatic in its reference to a meaning that it does

¹²⁴ Whittock, 13.

not constitute, whereas the symbol is founded on an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory totality that the image suggests.”¹²⁵

For Goethe, in his famous passage from *Maxims and Reflections*, allegory is linked to ‘concept’ while symbol is linked to ‘idea’. The allegorical image entirely subsumes the concept; in his words “the concept always remains bounded by the image, and is entirely to be kept and held in it.”¹²⁶ The concept has no life in this allegorical image, this icon; we feel we can hold the concept entirely; it exists only as a thing. For Goethe, this distinguishes the allegory as a lower form of expression. The symbol on the other hand, “transforms the phenomenon into idea, the idea into an image, and in such a way the idea remains always infinitely active and unapproachable in the image, and even if expressed in all languages, still would remain inexpressible.” Images are fast, loose, and living. Coleridge, speaking of symbols, and in accord with Goethe, sees the symbol as a thing that represents but also “abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is representative.” Allegories, on the other hand, “are but empty echoes which the fancy [imagination] arbitrarily associates with apparitions of matter.”¹²⁷ Allegories are dead things—or, rather, mechanical things—while a symbol will never be pinned by an interpretation. Symbols seem to exist even without interpretation—they have a natural presence—even though they are only truly articulated as pivot points of individual lives.

De Man quotes Hans-Georg Gadamer, who sees this valorization as coinciding “with the growth of an aesthetics that refuses to distinguish between experience and the

¹²⁵ Paul De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 200. For the remainder of this section, citations for this article will appear in the body of the text unless otherwise footnoted.

¹²⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, trans. Elisabeth Stopp (London: Penguin Books, 1998), nos. 279, 1112, 1113.

¹²⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual*, ed. W.G.T. Shedd (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1975), 437.

representation of experience” (200)—a division absolutely essential to the progress of insight. The symbol, in its inapproachability and self-containment, doesn’t just indicate an experience, it recreates it. The experience of the symbol is synechdochic: the symbol, because it references a totality, is itself always part of that totality. Reconciling this part with the totality is the literal experience of unity which the symbol represents in the abstract. Kane’s sled is a particularly good emblem of a symbol: we discover it amongst a nearly unimaginable mass of objects, the horde of Kane’s life (and the theme of a puzzle piece, a part of a whole, is explicit in the film). As such, the experience of the symbol is a contiguous space: a thing kept at a spatial distance, a thing part of a background too broad to be fully understood. Allegory, in contrast, degrades the object so that it can easily be substituted with a concept, which while easily named, is far from easy to understand: “it is an immaterial shape that represents a sheer phantom devoid of shape and substance” (201). An allegorical image is something which we see through; the pleasure of which is the mystery of the substitution, the sign of the occult body shape through which we peer into something which has no shape of its own.

As de Man points out, what is perhaps most notable in this Coleridgean view of symbol and allegory is that, despite what we might think, it does not represent an elevation of the material over the immaterial. The symbol, despite its opaqueness as a sign, demonstrates, according to Coleridge, “translucence of the eternal and in the temporal” (qtd on 202). The materiality of the symbol, which so distinguished it from the allegory, is ultimately ignored. Thus, as De Man puts it, in this conception of the symbol, “the material substantiality dissolves and becomes a mere reflection of a more original unity that does not exist in the material world.” (202) De Man’s point is that, taking this

“translucence” into account, it is nearly impossible to differentiate between the epistemology of the two tropes: both derive from and signify a transcendental source. Both, in their way, signify an escape from the world. Because the Romantics looked towards nature to find and articulate these symbols, De Man finds the Romantic metaphor for perfection of an organic totality highly suspect. As such, he believes that allegory is more important to the Romantics than generally believed.

De Man finds examples of allegorization in “all European literature between 1760 and 1800...They appear as the most original and profound moments in the works, when an authentic voice becomes audible” (208). De Man’s main argument is that allegory is the more “authentic” mode of representation. Because of the impossibility of reconciling the allegorical representation with its meaning, allegory demonstrates a historical consciousness: the necessity of an anterior meaning which the visible sign, the sign in the present, points to directly. For De Man this is an “authentically temporal destiny” (209), something which the symbol hopes to elide in favour of a sensation of eternity. De Man sees the predominance of the symbol as an example of self-mystification, and the allegory as a force which never lets the symbol “exist in serenity” (210). In the symbol, the appearance of time is mere contingency, while in the allegory, the contingency of time is the “originary constitutive category,” (210) an aspect of allegorical experience we’ve already seen as central to the Platonic allegory of the soul. For De Man, the allegory—as allegory—is a figure of mortality.

De Man is deeply influenced in this theory by Walter Benjamin, whose entire philosophic project can be traced back to his early study of German Baroque allegorists. As explained by Susan Buck-Morss, modern allegory has its origin in scholarly attempts

to understand ancient sign systems as ‘natural images’ crafted by God: “Not only Egyptian hieroglyphs, but also Greek myths and Christian symbols were looked to for deciphering the divine meaning of the material world.”¹²⁸ As this project progressed, unfortunately, it was discovered that all natural symbols were so over determined and laden with meaning that the quest for divine knowledge was overcome by semiotic arbitrariness. Vice and virtue could be represented by the same object. As we have seen, this is indeed what distinguishes the allegory: the lack of specificity of the vehicle. In response, allegorists created dramas which resolved this problem theologically: the multiplicity of signs (and nature itself) were seen as Satanic, and allegorists presented that knowledge of evil as stemming from self delusion. The multiplicity of meaning inherent in allegory itself became an allegory for the sort of self delusion which leads to evil and the Devil. This representation of the world allowed the allegorist to turn the fact of contradiction between signs into a sign for its opposite: “the eternity of the one, true Spirit.”¹²⁹ And, thus, natural death was seen as something transitory, and transitoriness itself became an allegory for the Resurrection.

Benjamin sees this position as philosophic precisely because of its admission of the forsakenness of nature. The allegorists created a drama of melancholy, and for Benjamin, “the steadfastness which expresses itself in the intention of mourning is born out of a loyalty to the world of things.”¹³⁰ And yet, the allegorist, as all true idealists do, abandons the world—their disappointment, so painful to them, is solved by understanding pain as an allegory for its opposite: as a sign of redemption and

¹²⁸ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 172.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 174

resurrection. For Benjamin, the allegorists identified the problem with propositional truth—in its many forms—and their solution is a cautionary tale. Benjamin’s project is to redeem the material world from this unrestrained semiosis, from paralyzing melancholia, from a mythic understanding of progress, and from blindness to itself.

Susan Buck-Morss sums it up this way: symbols can be understood as communicating “fleeting eternity” while allegories are “eternal fleetingness”.¹³¹ Meaning that symbols, in the concreteness of their vehicles and the obscurity of their tenor, offer only glimpses of eternity. Allegory, on the other hand, represents the eternity of flux, the eternity of change, decay. Benjamin’s most famous articulation of the allegory comes in the form of an analogy (though one metaphorically loaded): “allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things.”¹³² Allegory cannot be simply elevated over symbolism as a superior rhetorical technology for the expression of insights. But it brings with it certain qualities of representation which can help bring back to earth the sort of idealism, the wish, inherent in the symbol. And as “ruins,” they carry with them a unique opportunity to find perspective on the convergence of the natural and the human.

For De Man, allegory does not merely provide a temporality of decay: it also denies the symbol’s purported union with the world, marking it as an “illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as non-self” (210). De Man does not elaborate upon what remains of the self after coming face to face with the “painful knowledge” of this impossibility, though in this *pain*, for De Man, there is something of the *authentic* (in this essay, De Man’s most valued state). However, one must be suspicious of such a masochistic end to representation. De Man’s

¹³¹ Ibid., 165.

¹³² Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London:New Left Books, 1977), 178.

purpose in this essay is ultimately a contribution to deconstructionism (he uses the word “demystification”), and he has zeroed in on some of the most fundamental *aporia* at the heart of some of the most important texts of modern Western culture. The deconstructionist efforts to come to terms with the anxiety at the centre of insight take the form of an allegorical revealing of the neurotically guarded gaps in verbal understanding. But it is precisely “pain” which Plato describes as determinant of the lover’s experience after insight, once fear has passed, once love cracks the flesh—pain is hardly a limit case, and De Man, in his later discussions of irony, indeed perceives in it a spur to sustainable philosophic objectivity. For Plato, it is in the metaphor of love that the state of pain is revealed as more than mere knowledge, as more than what is necessary for knowledge. The tension between figures which De Man sees as so essential to the meaning making of the pre and early Romantics is a tension recreated in Malick’s films: metaphor, allegory, and symbol do not always coexist peacefully, and the result is clarity and pain and the urgency of wish and will.

In discussing Rousseau’s novel *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* De Man points to a tension between two modes of representing nature: the first is a symbolic landscape where a lover finds reflected his own tormented soul; and the other is a garden, cultivated by the object of the lover’s affection—Julie, a married woman—a landscape full of allusions to medieval texts. The first is “emblematic of error”; the second, of “the virtue associated with the figure of Julie” (206). This being a novel by Rousseau, Julie’s philosophic virtue is by no means the long-suffering virtue of a repressed Christian wife—as De Man argues “it is certainly not to be equated with a puritanical denial of the world of the senses” (207). De Man is arguing that Rousseau, one of the most important

pre-Romantics, is in fact choosing allegory over symbolism: “the conflict is ultimately resolved in the triumph of a controlled and lucid renunciation of the values associated with a cult of the moment, and this renunciation establishes the priority of an allegorical over a symbolic diction” (208). Despite this stated priority, the meaning of the work is communicated through a dialectic of the two—it is dependent on both forms of expression. This use of allegory prompts De Man to make a claim for Rousseau that is also, to a degree, true of Malick, who is so often called Rousseauian: “one begins to realize how false the image of Rousseau as a primitivist or a naturalist actually is” (208).

Walter Benjamin, in his study of German Tragic Drama, quotes Friedrich Creuzer, who ascribes to the symbol: “the momentary, the total, the inscrutability of its origin, the necessary.” For Creuzer, the symbol is revealed as a “flash of lightning.”¹³³ This Romantic “cult of the moment” so central to the literary symbol, has an important modern equivalent in the form of cinema, the art form born in an age of distraction, sensation, and an ever quickening pace. Leo Charney sees in the work of Walter Pater, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and film theorist Jean Epstein a desire to “fix an instant of feeling...to rescue the possibility of sensual experience in the face of modernity’s ephemerality.”¹³⁴ This project resulted in each thinker, in their own way, demarcating a “split between sensation, which feels the moment in the moment, and cognition, which recognizes the moment only after the moment”. It was “in this symbiosis between the possibility of a sensual moment and the equally potent

¹³³ Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (Leipzig: Darmstadt, 1819), 119, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 161.

¹³⁴ Leo Charney, “In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity,” *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 279.

evanescence of the moment [that] film became the defining art form of the temporal experience of modernity.”¹³⁵

Charney finds Jean Epstein’s conception of *photogénie* particularly relevant to this modern anxiety over the fixation of too rapidly passing moments. *Photogénie*, which I will discuss more in my conclusion, endeavours to describe an experience that its proponents hope is unique to cinema: the stylization of the real (the indexical), which does not occlude reality but reveals even more; stylization “which does not alter the plain truth.”¹³⁶ This sudden glimpse of the real is, as one would expect, momentary and subjective. Charney quotes Epstein’s attempts to define the phenomenon: “One racks one’s brains in wanting to define [*photogénie*]. Face of beauty, it’s a taste of things. I recognize it like a musical phrase.”¹³⁷ In fact, for French film theorists of the 20s and 30s, the term’s undefinability is precisely what would come to define it. Epstein describes exhausting encounters with friends attempting to put *photogénie* into words, “There are twelve good words for each thing, and at least twelve things for each word...on the line of communication the static of unexpected feelings interrupts us.”¹³⁸ This demonstrates not only a tendency to skew cinema away from the linguistic, but also towards the power of the momentary experience: this union of representation of experience with experience. Through cinema’s extreme fragmentation of the world, there is created an energy to the whole which is powerfully symbolic—a potential limit upon the dimensions of insight that the cinematic image can communicate.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 285.

¹³⁶ Louis Delluc, quoted in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism Volume 1: 1907-1929*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 110.

¹³⁷ Charney, 286.

¹³⁸ Charney, 287.

No other artist has done more to explore the figurative life of nature in the age of cinema than Terrence Malick. There are thematic consistencies in Malick's four films (death, community, loneliness), and there are familiar characters (the idealist, the father, the survivor), but perhaps his so-far tetralogy of films is best understood as the story of a set of long circulating, ancient signs and what they now mean and what meanings they resist. Birds, wind, fire, water, rivers, trees, grass, cages, dogs, insects, books, mirrors, moon, sunlight, houses, and fish appear and return in all his films—and returning to *Badlands* thirty years later it is astonishing to see how consistent these objects appear in their variation, affect, and resistance. These circulating signs make up the basic figurative ground of Malick's aesthetic world. In any given film we can add more—boats, for instance, are extremely important, and appear in every film but *Badlands* (except briefly in a stereopticon picture)—but those listed above are present in all four films and carry with them, I'd argue, the most significance. These are objects which are indifferent to narrative, but which still, nonetheless, offer themselves up to be read. Because they are consistent across the works they are easy to point to in the abstract (as, for example *birds*, instead of *this* bird). This abstraction, as well as their status as traditional 'poetic' objects, allows them to fulfill the criteria of symbol. They are signs which seem to have a self-contained meaning, always unapproachable but unavoidably compelling. These symbols are the backbone of Malick's cinema, and in their insistent presence across all his films they immediately suggest a much larger whole. Part of the experience of these symbols is our sudden recognition of a familiar form, and the very deliberate energy in them towards the whole which they are a part. These symbols, I'd

argue, are our most ready access to Malick's figurative universe, even if, as we shall see, they don't necessarily survive as symbols.

Malick's cinema creates a temporality for the figurative, a lifespan and biography for figurative tropes. The temporality De Man teases out for the specific experience of specific tropes is less important in Malick's films than how any given figure progresses, changes, decays, and is remembered over the course of the film (and films). The mutation and reformation of signs is important in literature as well, but film's temporal basis emphasizes the process as an event, and Malick's unique filmmaking style thematizes it. Indeed, the temporality of metaphor, when it appears in film, is precisely a function of timing: the opening shot of a crocodile becomes more and more figurative the longer it appears on screen (a temporality marked by the pulsing music). The opening shot of the crocodile slipping under the water, I'd argue, is metaphoric. It is metaphoric for many reasons: the length of the shot, the portentous placement, the music, the slow fade in, and the intangible menace of the shot itself. To my mind, as we watch the crocodile slip under the water, the algae swirling to cover its passing completely, it is a metaphor for a submerged violence, a beating danger at the heart of nature. Because it begins a war film, *war* is an immediate tenor for which the crocodile is a complex vehicle. But when we see the crocodile again, later in the film, tied and bound, it becomes, by virtue of repetition and this new context, symbolic. The crocodile first appears in the film alone, captured by a camera with which we associate an ultimately singular perspective. When we see the crocodile again, later in the film, it is surrounded by a group of curious soldiers. In this public eye, our eye (the camera) perceives the crocodile as a far more permanent expression than a metaphor for submerged violence: it

is now, by virtue of the multiple intelligences which intend it, an overdetermined sign and in the realm of the symbolic. As I will argue later, it is also allegorical—at least, it has a significant potential to become allegorical.

Before I turn to a few more examples of the interaction and consequences of different types of figures, I want to return to the concept of literalization to help tease out a little more how the medium of cinema contributes to the reorientation of these representational strategies. The literalization of metaphor is most commonly an historical activity, a cultural process of a metaphor losing its poetic dimension and degrading into simple noun. The word *skyscraper*, for example, was once a rich and evocative metaphoric construction, aptly suited to a 20th century of at times terrifying and awe inspiring human technological achievement—it described not just a building but one that ‘scraped the sky’. Now it is merely a noun with a literal meaning of ‘tall building’.¹³⁹ A victim of its own success, its own comprehensive evocation of an idea, the word has lost the ability to summon strong images. These literalized metaphors, these no longer functionally figurative experiences, are considered dead. The history of the poetic and practical embedded in a dead metaphor is not unlike the sense of materiality and specificity an indexical image brings to bear on a visualized metaphor.

The literalization of a metaphor into images—let’s call it visualization—establishes an accelerated potential for the death of the figurative through an image’s privileged relationship to nouns. Verbal nouns point first to mental representations of those objects (a type of image) which then points to the actual image. From this point of view, the image is already closer to the literal, its figurative meaning already diffused by the emphatic literalness of the image. Nouns, of course, don’t have to point to objects—

¹³⁹ Whittock, 7.

they can also point to concepts: the ‘images’ generated by concepts are a spectacularly complex mental melding of image, memory, and language.¹⁴⁰ This problem of pointing to concepts through images is precisely the challenge of the philosophically inclined filmmaker. Creating a visualization of a metaphor—like Chaplin’s ‘sheep-man’—is one way such an effort of communication can be explored.

A dead metaphor can be rejuvenated by mixing metaphors—a technique considered to be a rhetorical mistake. Welsh uses a mixed metaphor to express his philosophy of nature, unintentionally bringing attention to his excessive use of the metaphor of vision—“a man has to shut his eyes” and simultaneously “look out for himself.” A man, according to Welsh, also has to “let nothing touch him”—not an easy task if one’s eyes are shut. What has happened here is that Welsh’s point about self-reliance has become muddled by an intractable image that suddenly creates a distance from his meaning, and introduces new imagery into a familiar concept. Visualization can introduce the same potentially contradictory forces of imagery into the linguistic sign. An indexical image of the type which indicates an excess of similarity between image and actual object (a 65mm image of a man as opposed to a super 8-mm image of his silhouette), introduces a degree of the literal which similarly challenges the figurative dimension of meaning. The experience of the literal as a fragment of reality presents to us a sense of something intact and ultimately resistant to figuration: there is an excess of meaning which creates too much tension in the metaphor. The result is a dead metaphor,

¹⁴⁰ The study of the phenomenon of synaesthesia provides fascinating examples of some of the ‘visual images’ we use as shorthand techniques to represent otherwise abstract ideas: though in the case of a synaesthetist, this experience is far more pronounced, and the ‘aesthetics’ of the abstract is not limited only to vision. Synaesthetists can smell, taste, and even feel abstract concepts. c.f. A.R. Luria, *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, trans. by Lynn Solotaroff. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968.

and a tendency towards the figurative trope which emphasizes vehicle over tenor. In this dead metaphor, in this emphasized tenor, we can see a ghost of the literary symbolic. Because the object presented by the index has an autonomy from representation, and a presence as something other than us (other than an internal image we have authored to suss out the metaphor), what becomes emphasized is difference, not similarity. Metaphors, which are based on correspondence between unlikely terms, must maintain a hierarchy of similarity over difference: the image tips the balance so that the metaphor is strained. This difference would account for the last bit of insurmountable distance present in the visualized metaphor as it is brought close. The visual metaphor doesn't fail, but this sense of immediate distance in the visual metaphor, between audience and representation, is a difficult gap to cross before we embark on the more usual metaphoric distance: between semantic impertinence and eventual sustainable meaning.

N. Roy Clifton, whose study of tropes and schemes in cinema draws from over 1600 examples taken from over 700 films, considers "birds that rise in the sky after death, the flight of the soul" to be one of the most clearly dead of all metaphors¹⁴¹ (think of the finale of Dreyer's 1928 film *Le passion de Jeanne d'Arc*). By this, Clifton is referring to the image's force of cliché overwhelming its force towards useful figuration. For Plato, the bird is a metaphor for the soul: an image of escaping the world, and an image of perspective upon it. Birds are Malick's favourite figurative image, because, I'd argue, they are simultaneously overburdened with figuration and also powerfully indexical. Each individual image of a bird summons this mysterious totality of *birds*, this symbol; but, as bird watchers will tell you, the fleeting sight of a bird can be an auratic encounter with specificity. When we consider this totality of *birds* we can see how

¹⁴¹ N. Roy Clifton, *The Figure in Film*, (London.: Associated University Presses, 1983), 89.

versatile the deployment of this symbol can be, and how impertinent contexts both disrupt and contribute to this sense of totality. There are a lot of birds in the film, and they all seem to mean differently, and all are haunted by dead metaphors. Consider the differences between a deliberately poetic shot of an infant bird trying to stand cut into the middle of a battle sequence, a shot of a parrot calmly perched on a house cut disjunctively into a series of close-ups depicting the corruption of the Melanesian village, a shot of two birds sitting in a tree cut into a scene of soldiers walking through the jungle, a shot of a bird playing on Hoke's hand as Witt talks about his dead mother, a shot of two birds in a cage during Witt's fantasy, a shot of a bird skimming the horizon during Bell's fantasy, a hawk in twilight suddenly cut next to a shot of Marty's bath tub, a bird circling in the sky of Bell's fantasy just before he learns Marty is going to leave him, birds circling in the sky and pointed out by Dale to a suffering Japanese captain, the two parrots perched on a tree branch in the penultimate shot of the film, and the shot of the two birds circling in the sky which follow the burial of Witt.

What is at work in Malick's film is the disruption of metaphor through the complex use of symbols, thereby creating, as I will argue, an allegorical landscape. Ricoeur calls metaphor a "thinking and seeing,"¹⁴² and in the metaphor's disruption, 'thinking' and 'seeing' suddenly separate. The allegories which result, as allegories, emphatically signify the "disjunction between the way the world appears in reality and the way it appears in language",¹⁴³ and thus summons the political problem of communicating a worldview, an objective perspective. What are traced are the public and private dimensions of these figures: dimensions which introduce the figurative

¹⁴² Ricoeur, 427.

¹⁴³ De Man, "Rhetoric," 201.

pairing of self/city into the realm of self/nature and self/other self. These are the figurative players necessary to consider if we want to articulate a sustainable philosophic objectivity.

Three particular symbols—wind, water, fire—are often used in Malick’s films to disrupt a metaphor by physically embodying the vehicle at the same time that the tenor figuratively enters it. Take the symbol of ‘wind’ as an example. Malick’s interest in the wind is as a thing which exhibits ‘presence’ because it—*wind*—is an object that must be manifested. We perceive wind in three ways: through sound, movement, and feeling. Cinema can recreate two of the three; as such, the missing third way, ‘feeling’, is emphasized because it is absent. The wind is a very literal sign of sensation, but one that requires a text (a body) to manifest: i.e. the wind has to move something for its movement to be visible. Be it curtains, trees, grass, or hair. As a vehicle itself, it is polymorphous, and, in fact, most often acts to imbue other vehicles with symbolic power. In Bell’s flashbacks, the curtained window is a metaphor for Marty’s loneliness. Imbued by wind, the metaphor changes slightly—suddenly resonant with the symbolic, we lose our grip on the metaphor as it becomes inflected by the social, by history, and the distant meaning of this nature-symbol. To continue with the metaphor of distance I’ve been using to discuss the emotional/stylistic realm of these figurative tropes, I would place the symbol in the middle distance, the polite distance, where it stays until it is brought close through its circulation in the transitoriness of metaphor, or exploded out of shape and place all together by allegory. Perhaps a better way to imagine the sudden presence of a symbol is to suggest that when we feel we have moved closer to a symbol, the symbol does not move closer, but the background recedes. The symbol appears to grow in size.

The symbol exists as something that exceeds the time limit of the film, insofar as it has a cultural resonance, and though it exists in the middle distance, it is—when we recognize it—against what amounts to a white background. We are aware of its relation to background, but cannot discern the background itself.

The symbol of sunlight—it is hard not to interpret it, when it is emphasized, as a sign of the ‘philosophical’ or ‘enlightenment’—is so mobile in Malick’s films, so allied with the transcendent, and gracious in its omniscience, that it lends itself effortlessly to metaphor. Light—particularly as it is visible through forests (i.e. through nature)—is central to Malick’s aesthetic. In this case, light, like wind, is a symbol that must be manifested in a body—it is resurrected again and again in different bodies and contexts. This resurrection is, however, not always an act of interpretation—as phenomena of nature, these mobile symbols also mean something very literal and very dangerous. Sunlight becomes imbued with a godlike spirit, in its indifference, during the extended battle sequence (the assault on Hill 210 which culminates on the assault on the bunker and the attack on the Japanese bivouac). The sequence begins with Lt. White (Jared Leto) attempting to coordinate the first assault: it is early morning, not a sign of resistance. As he attempts to urge his men on, there is suddenly a break in the clouds. Music swells, and we cut to a shot of elephant grass swaying in the breeze, the sun suddenly, inevitably, steadily, sweeping the opposite direction to the wind. The troop’s positions are suddenly illuminated. The sun, which was once represented through its visibility, now produces ‘the visible’. A shot of Welsh, suddenly bathed in light, concern suddenly on his face, makes the essence of this realization clear: the company’s position has been revealed. The convergence of wind (feeling) and sun (insight) is beautiful and

terrifying. The sunlight, which was once meditated upon—which seemed to bestow a sense of grace in the early shots of it piercing through the trees—now represents a far more vicious union of the supernatural and the natural. The sun is an index, and it is pointing at the panicked soldiers unprotected, in the open. In these examples of wind and sun, the abstract symbol—this thing which presents an idea in a flash, always out of reach—makes very clear its access to the body, and the body’s ability to give it expression.

Water is the middle expression between sun and wind. Visible through wind rippling its surface and sunlight upon it—in the convulsions of its surface it seems to give light body—water is the most necessary of these three symbols in the sustaining of life (in the particular; the sun is necessary at a global level). As such, water is also closely linked to death, and to consciousness—as a symbol it inherits a lot of cultural baggage from Freud. What water *means* in Malick’s film, like any good symbol, is very hard to pin down—arguably, water is the most over determined symbol in Malick’s zodiac. It is also the symbol most used to construct metaphors—in speech, and in the juxtaposition of images.

Most of the metaphors present in *The Thin Red Line* happen explicitly in language communicated to us through voiceover. Characters use metaphoric constructions to explain what they are thinking. Very often, though, the narrators will choose a complex symbol to act as the vehicle for their metaphor, creating surprising and unanticipated consequences of expression. For example, Pvt. Bell, during a flashback of his wife, makes the claim, “We flow together like water, till I can’t tell you from me. I drink you. Now. Now.” On the line “I drink you” what was clearly—and effectively—a metaphoric

description of the onscreen coupling of husband and wife becomes disrupted by a shot of Bell's wife (Marty) naked in a bath tub. It is shot from above, she is leaning forward to wash her hair, we see Bell's hand on her back, sunlight in the water. "Drink you" is already a dangerous complication of the original "flow together" metaphor, and this sudden image, on screen, of water in the tub makes the metaphor literal, and destroys it. Bell is not "drinking the water"—the water seems undrinkable—and he is doing nothing "Now. Now." But even in the collapse of the metaphor, the symbol of water is resurrected, embodied, given another dimension. The body of water and Marty's body are merged with a literalness that makes this vehicle almost palpable, and forces us to reconsider the long history of this symbol and the way it functions in this film, particularly in relation to Marty.

To say that the metaphor is destroyed, however, is not really accurate. Cinematic metaphors, while not reborn, are re-imagined by their interaction with the symbol. The tension between the metaphor we hear in words and the symbol a character is trying to use from nature deforms the metaphor such that the vehicle is emphasized, and the tenor (the language metaphor) is brought to a standstill. Naked, and now visible, the restless meaning of the metaphor—as an event—is brought close for inspection. This is, ultimately, metaphoric for our attempt to translate the private events of mind (the metaphor) into the public realm of the symbolic; from the ideal in mind into the un-ideal world. This interaction emphasizes the difference between the two figurative tropes: the body of the symbol is constant, but its meaning is fleeting. The meaning of the metaphor can be decoded with far more authority, but its body (as a time based merging of vehicle and tenor) is far more fleeting. In this example from *The Thin Red Line*, the symbol's

fleetingness of meaning upsets the interpretability of the metaphor, bringing our consciousness fully to the metaphoric event which primed us for the experience of ‘meaning’ in the first place.

The sun which sweeps across the elephant grass in front of Lt. White does not leave the soldiers there revealed. It takes up their cause in a highly complex way. Malick has achieved the miraculous, managing to edit the film so that *every* time the American troops advance, then sun moves with them. In one of the film’s most impressive shots, the camera is at the top of a hill, American troops crouched and climbing in the middle foreground, the hill plunging down behind them into the valley below where the rest of the company, in the extreme distance, can be seen waiting. The sun starts at the lower right, and sweeps up the hill and over the soldiers as the camera tracks left. When Bell returns from his reconnaissance mission—after discovering the bunker—the sunlight retreats with him. When the bunker assault party, led by Cpt. Gaff (John Cusack), returns over the hill, the sun advances. The sun seems to be manifesting the following metaphor: “the American troops advanced like the sun across the world.” Is the light on their side? Phrased this way, it would be hard not to understand this metaphor (using this symbol of sunlight as a vehicle) as communicating the idea that the American advance is a righteous and blessed event. As if God is on their side. Here, the stress is on the tenor at the expense of the vehicle; what is being communicated is this awkward and unconvincing concept. This emphasis on the concept forcefully replacing the vehicle marks it as an allegorical experience.

We are asked very specific questions by the film: how do we interpret the world?—art? or religion? and for those of us who have very little exposure to art or

religion...can we substitute love? One of the most intriguing images in the film (and the one most maligned by critics like Tom Whalen) is that of the infant bird toppled from its nest and slowly, painfully, and impossibly trying to right itself, cut suddenly into the middle of an extended battle sequence. To be fair to the critics, I think it might strike most of us as an ill advised moment aesthetically—an image that demands tears rather than woos them. And coming, as it does, immediately after a scene of Col. Tall accusing Cpt. Staros of incompetence, it's also hard not to read the bird as directly metaphoric for the plight of Cpt. Staros or the company as a whole. It's an image akin to the last of an innumerable number of pratfalls in a slapstick, when we have started to feel an obligation to laugh. Watching the bird we decide the image must mean something—because of the conventions of interpreting cinema—but we aren't comfortable with the two-dimensionality of its import, and by two-dimensionality I mean redundancy, as if the image is an overlay over an already obvious sign. When the film, a full hour later, asks in voiceover, "One man looks at a dying bird and sees nothing but unanswered pain. Another man looks at the same bird, and feels the glory," the inclusion of the early bird imagery might strike some as specious, if not too precious, especially if matched to the word "man" is a shot of Witt—the character most likely to see the "glory" in a dying bird. And yet the film—and this can't be discounted—is *asking* exactly what you felt, asking you to summon up precisely those feelings of aesthetic discomfort. What did you see looking at that dying bird? If you happened upon that bird in the world, you might, untroubled by the mediating sensibility of a director, also wish to interpret it—to categorize the pathos you feel—and you might interpret that bird, and that bird's suffering, as a metaphor for you. "I am a bird struggling to stand." The dying bird might

be for you an image of extreme emotion in a banal world, and it would then be natural to relate it to yourself—your personal emotions and hang-ups, you are fairly certain, are not banal, but you might expect the world to be. A rare image of pathos and pain speaks to the individual in a way that mediocrity cannot. Banality, you have discovered, is in the act of translation to the real world. This bird becomes symbolic for so much.

This infant bird, of course, takes its place amongst the many birds seen in the film, including those soaring in the distance which we tried to connect with the idea of a soul escaping the body, and which we identified as functioning symbolically. It is in this highly overdetermined image of the infant bird—which references the symbolic bird now only distantly—that the symbolic becomes undone. This bird image is an idea—an idea of the soul, about loss—which now no longer signs the idea. But decay. The symbol in all of its textual and cultural resonance, in the aptness of its particular instantiation, in its death has overcome the indexical—the actual bird photographed—and rendered it a trace of once pertinent emotion. The metaphoric brought the symbol close, the symbol undid the metaphor, and language undid the symbol. It is now an allegory for decay. It is now an image of Death. An image of Hopelessness. It joins the circulating allegories—Family, Evil, War, Fate, Enlightenment, God, Redemption: these concepts in language at odds with this world of elusive visual meaning. This is an image loaded with figurative potential that we try to push away rather than bring close. This is a risky and unnerving territory of representation, one where the potential for artistic failure is the highest, but one which Malick manages to make stunningly accessible.

In summary: metaphor is the figure which defines the moment of insight (in that metaphor creates insight like flashes of thought, and metaphor attends insight's arrival);

symbol is in the realm of idea, and represents the end of metaphor's lifespan, its promise of immortality; allegory is the concept, the next stage, and it is where we can begin to suss out philosophy and its communication. In the sacrifice of symbol (the idea), given birth through the insight (metaphoric experience), the concept becomes sensible through a complex drama of beauty, anxiety, and frustration. The allegory, which signifies the concept, also signifies the concept's decay. The symbol—the idea—now ghostly, hovers behind the image of the concept. But unlike symbol, where the meaning is elusive, in allegory the meaning arrives as an object and obstacle. Its very presence, its very shape, signifies. It arrives dead, and arrives decaying. These figures, in their interaction, give expression to experience of insight in its totality.

This is not a progression, of course. It's not like metaphor climbed panting from the swamp, stood upright to become symbol, and then devolved into allegory. This interpenetration cannot occur without interpretation: from readers, and from the characters in the text. Ultimately, these modes of representation must be understood along with a character's wish for perspective, a wish to step into the background. Allegory is revealed through symbol and metaphor, metaphor remains unrejuvenated without symbol, and symbol remains at a distance without metaphor. In Malick's cinema: metaphor is the realm of consciousness; symbol is the realm of nature; allegory is the realm of history; metaphor is the private; symbol is the public; allegory is the ruin of the public. This is the figurative kingdom where Malick's characters explore themselves and their world, and it allows Malick to give expression to the nature and obstacles of philosophic desire.

One of the key differences between Malick and the Romantics is what appears in Malick's films as an alienated modern subject, dimly anticipated in Rousseau by the figure of Julie wandering her allegorical and geometric English gardens. This theme of alienation in Malick's work is most obvious in *Badlands*, but the intense sensation of separation from the world is, I think, essential to all four of his films. A state of alienation from nature, culture, and self, is recreated in cinema generally at the most glorious material level—film becomes an allegory for modern thought and sense, it makes ridiculous the objective viewpoint, and makes doubtful the intact subject through which this communication is decoded, authored, and for whom it is intended. For this reason, Malick's films abandon identity and subjecthood in the conventional sense—preferring to concentrate on the more transitional figure of the lover, the insight sufferer—and places the formation of a subject within a matrix which includes subject, object, index, figure, reason, passion, external perspective, and, very importantly, social body. The subject is everything that is reformed by insight; everything that is touched or corrupted by insight is in the realm of the subject. The private and the public sphere becomes the dominant war at the heart of the subject. This is not to say that Malick's brand of modernism (and I use this term very advisedly) shuttles around hollow existential subjects alienated from themselves and pity. Malick argues for an intact subject, I hope to show, but the poetry of his films make very clear the conventional cinematic limitations of its representation that must first be overcome: especially insofar as cinema has inherited a two hundred year old philosophic ideal of *totality* and *wholeness* that it seems to both aggressively undermine and, in the fragments of the real which shine on its fringes, spectacularly sustain.

3. The Decay of Witt's Insight

The ostensible protagonists of Terrence Malick's films are all idealists. In *Badlands*, set in 1950s America, Kit—a character who ruminates into a rich man's tape recorder, “Consider the minority opinion, but try to get along with the majority opinion once it's accepted”—turns out to be a psychopath. In *Days of Heaven*, an American immigrant story, Bill's American dream comes to an end because he cannot reconcile the image of himself with what reality demands of him. Bill is waiting for a perfect situation, for his opportunity to finally make “the big score,” and as a result he performs unwitting acts of cruelty, like asking Abby to pretend first not to love him, and then asking her to pretend to love another man. In *The New World*, John Smith, the dreamy utopianist and co-founder of the first permanent American settlement, is undone by his inability to take advantage of his good fortune. Granted grace by Pocahontas, he is sustained by constantly starting over, by trying again with a fresh perspective. As a leader, his hand always on the shoulder of the man he urges on, he is generous in spirit but in need of grounding reassurance. Older, defeated, lost, he says to Pocahontas, near the end of her life, “You knew I had promise.” He says it like a question. As if what he needs, what America needs, is the eternal return of grace.

The character of Pvt. Witt, as he appears in Malick's film, originated not in James Jones' novel *The Thin Red Line*—where Witt is a much more minor character—but in Jones' earlier novel, *From Here to Eternity*. Jimmie E. Cain has argued persuasively that by transferring some of the dialogue and traits of Pvt. Prewitt—the protagonist of the earlier novel—to the character of Witt, Malick has very keenly paid tribute to Jones'

most ambitious literary themes.¹⁴⁴ James Jones had planned a trio of novels around a group of soldiers and their experiences before, during, and after World War II (1978's posthumously published *Whistle* completed the trilogy), but when finishing the first, *From Here to Eternity*, Jones found himself making the decision to kill off his main character, Pvt. Prewitt. So as not to upset his planned trilogy, Jones—who had discovered Eastern philosophy as a young man—‘reincarnated’ Prewitt (pre-Witt) as Witt in *The Thin Red Line*.¹⁴⁵ Still a Kentucky farm boy, still a boxer, still dedicated to noble ideals and dedicated to his company, but now a harsher and more brutal soldier (temperamental, and a racist), Witt represents the second stage in Jones’ theory of the evolution of the soldier. Jones’ understanding of warfare pits the individual psyche against the machine that is the modern army: the individual either goes mad (and crosses “the thin red line between the mad and the sane”) or he adapts to the only possible rational course: submit to a mass anonymity, join the rank and file, join the line. As demonstrated by various characters in a multi-character plot, this process of ‘joining the line’ is neither straightforward, nor completely irreversible. Indeed, it even takes effort to sustain the “battle numbness” which characterizes this shedding of “romantic and idealist notions of the self”¹⁴⁶ and which makes military evolution possible. Sgt. Welsh (a reincarnation of *Eternity*’s Sgt. Warden) is the furthest along this path, and also the most bitterly self reflective. Witt, though further along than Prewitt in this evolution, is still fundamentally—perhaps even irredeemably—resistant. Malick, in the third draft of his screenplay and in a very characteristically Malickesque way, could not be any more

¹⁴⁴ Cain Jr., Jimmie E. “‘Writing in his musical key’: Terrence Malick’s Vision of *The Thin Red Line*.” *Film Criticism* (fall 2000), 5.

¹⁴⁵ Steven R. Carter, *James Jones: An American Literary Orientalist Master* (Urbana: Univ. Illinois Press, 1998), 21.

¹⁴⁶ Cain Jr., 9.

explicit about this central theme: “Who is closer to the truth—Welsh, with his disillusioned view of things (which Storm and, in varying degrees, the rest of the company share) or Witt, with his idealism?”¹⁴⁷

This costly and contradictory process of a soldier’s evolution is not without its gain. Indeed, the chilling drama of Jones’ novels—expertly recreated in Malick’s early screenplay drafts—comes from the complex and brutally efficient ways soldiers become psychologically adapted to their conditions. Jones’ characters arrive at a stage of cool yet tenuous sanity after a squirming metamorphosis through terror, flesh, excrement, and humiliation. Goaded into battle through the fear of public ridicule and the commodity of glory, Jones’ characters are first shell shocked by mechanized warfare, and then after-shocked by the raw and strange emotions (or lack thereof) which follow. But even split open, Jones’ characters show remarkable aptitude for stitching themselves back together. The methods of attaining a haphazard wholeness amidst the madness of war seem rational and inevitable, and this force to wholeness is presented, by Jones, as basically instinctual. Characters move through despair, to self loathing, to a sudden surprise in their abilities, and it is this sudden surprise which sustains them—for awhile. This instinctual move towards wholeness is thus juxtaposed to much more conscious philosophic attempts at the same, and charges the character’s world with an intensely symbolic tendency. As unlikely empathetic friendships form out of trauma and psychic rebirth, characters find their lives joined by bonds of brotherhood. Indeed, as the characters cast their eyes amongst their fellow soldiers, they witness not mechanically reproducible allegories of soldiers, but profound symbols for their own experience. These symbols are highly unstable.

¹⁴⁷ Malick, *The Thin Red Line*, third draft screenplay, 176.

This idea of creative energy which comes from trauma squares with Jones' personal philosophy of human development. James R. Carter, in his book on Jones, describes the author's very deliberate neo-transcendentalist affiliation, and places his novels within an American tradition that includes Jack Kerouac, J.D. Salinger, John Steinbeck, T.S. Eliot, and Eugene O'Neill. For Jones, "how can we call hurt evil since it is through pain and only through pain that we grow?"¹⁴⁸ Jones believes in a constantly instable deity who has created a cosmos where sin is not inviolate, but in flux: the real sin is not to grow, change, or evolve.¹⁴⁹ Is this philosophical position of Jones' a link between his brand of neo-transcendentalism and the German Baroque allegorists studied by Benjamin? Both, it would seem, see vividly the capacity for catastrophe to sign its opposite. There is, of course, nothing to criticize in the wilful transformation of trauma into growth and rejuvenation, but in its mythic form the specificities of catastrophe disappear, the victim cycles obsessively over clues to causality, and the larger questions of philosophical investigation stall. The victim becomes obsessed by the idea of "why did the catastrophe occur?—why to me?" rather than questions of "what is the catastrophe?" Malick, speaking about his very first film, reveals that at the outset of his career he was fascinated by the paradox of extreme trauma's ability to both liberate philosophical investigation and also to stultify it: "The movies have kept up a myth that suffering makes you deep...people who've suffered go around in movies with long, thoughtful faces, as though everything had caved in just yesterday. It's not that way in

¹⁴⁸ Carter, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Cain Jr., 23.

real life, though, not always. Suffering can make you shallow and just the opposite of vulnerable, dense.”¹⁵⁰

For Witt, these bonds of brotherhood are nothing short of metaphysically erotic: overwhelming feelings of fraternity described metaphorically, by Malick and Jones, in their urgency and primacy, in their submission to a sort of indifference to fate, as “nearly sexual.”¹⁵¹ A hint of Malick’s cinematic style really only appears in the screenplay during a scene where Witt, under the full influence of this sensation, returns to the Company, an act that will end in his death: “He sees a group of flying foxes, stirring uneasily in their roost. He sees a strangler fig, choking the life out of a tall hardwood. The grass about him throbs with CRICKETS. He feels the cold presence of fear, like someone standing behind him. He could still turn back. His eyes glisten. Now MUSIC comes in, like a call of summoning love.”¹⁵² Nature here takes on an almost occult power to communicate, to prefigure Witt’s death, and thus takes on an allegorical character—it is hardly the symbolic landscape of the Romantics, the pleasant mirror of an engaged thinker. Witt seeks a reunion with the company, though his desire towards wholeness is complicated by the exigencies of his philosophic insight, and the fear he feels is of an unusual type.

After his insight, Witt returns to the village and has a discussion with a young Melanesian mother. He remarks that the children in the village never seem to fight; she laughs and disagrees, but Witt seems undaunted in his revelry. Witt and Hoke enjoy a

¹⁵⁰ Walker, 82.

¹⁵¹ Malick, 139.

¹⁵² Malick, 177. Malick also makes a note, shortly after Witt returns, “To convey the men's heightened sense of fear we shift for a brief while from 35mm to 65mm film stock.” While this technique was not used in *The Thin Red Line*, it was used in *The New World*, as cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki reports, for “‘hyper-enhanced moments’—when, for example, John Smith or Pocahontas has an important realization.” *American Cinematographer* 87, no.1 (2006): 57.

prolonged stay in the village, shown to us through a montage set to a reorchestration of a Melanesian hymn: as would be expected, many of the shots are structured as POVs from Witt's perspective. One extended shot is of a father and son. When the villagers gather by the beach to sing, Witt watches from the shoreline, first as a figure in the background, then fully as the point/glance of a POV shot. His face registers a mounting worry. Already, we might surmise, he is drifting from the brief happiness he's known here; perhaps the glory of his insight is dissipating, he has realized a subtle objection to its sustainability. Perhaps here, in the village, he sees a calm that is far more distant from death, a distance he is increasingly unable to find tenable. Perhaps these people have become, for him, symbolic, and as an image he can ever only *approach* this emotional center. The fleeting center of symbol becomes allegorical for his inability to fully inhabit that center again. In these people there is the trace of insight's arrival: the truth of the symbolic remains unapproachable, visible only in a flash—but the trace is concrete, historical, never to be dug out. His face registers this same look when he and Hoke spy an American patrol boat. Perhaps his disquiet stems only from fear of returning to the army.

Witt, we discover, is not AWOL because of cowardice or a moral objection to war. Recaptured by the army, Witt is reprimanded—in the brig of the *U.S.S. Victory*—by Sgt. Welsh, a man who claims of C-for-Charlie Company, “Captain Staros: he’s the C.O. But I’m the guy that runs it,” and yet also a man who feels an odd kinship with this ostensible deserter. Just as Malick’s Witt (in the final film) is far gentler and less judgemental than Jones’, Malick’s Welsh is hardly the mad drill sergeant of Jones’ novel, characterized there by his brutal efficiency and open distaste for the army. Malick’s

Welsh—as played by Sean Penn—is far more introspective, far more ruminative, and far more tentative about his role as public purveyor of cynical philosophy. Malick’s Welsh seems less eager to reveal his thinking, but in Witt he finds a surprising interlocutor. Both prove themselves to be—in spite of their philosophical objectivity about war—superb soldiers.

Welsh’s respect for Witt comes from his recognition of Witt’s fundamental idealism. Not only is Witt the most independent of all the soldiers in Welsh’s care—the least incapacitated by fear and the desire for public approval—he is, paradoxically, also the most loyal. Witt demonstrates a contempt for the army—the chain of command in particular—but a profound love for his fellow soldiers. Welsh understands that this love is misplaced, but shares with Witt a privileged and piercing view of the institution within which they struggle. Welsh’s mocking of Witt’s idealism is always tinged with the sadness that Witt will inevitably be crushed. And in this melancholy, Welsh reveals a hint of his own philosophical doubt. Welsh decides not to court martial Witt, but instead, to transfer him out of the company and sends him to a disciplinary outfit where he will work as a stretcher bearer. He leaves Witt in the brig.

It is in the brig that Witt experiences his second insight. We see Witt, sitting in his cell, lighting and extinguishing matches. He contradicts Hoke—who is in the next cell—that he (Witt) doesn’t feel that Welsh, “hates me. Because I don’t hate him.” Witt looks pensive. The drifting smoke from an extinguished match, flowing, free, meandering, is cut to a shot of the rigid yet oddly beautiful patterns of the cell’s corrugated metal floor. On the soundtrack we hear wind echoing through metal and a deep almost primeval groan. The sound of dripping water. We cut, suddenly, to a shot of

a small boy dressed in farmer's overalls facing into a wind tossed pile of straw, turning his face away from the blowing chaff his lips caught in a smile. There is a viscerally poetic force in this juxtaposition between cold metal and hot straw. Behind him, a full grown man chews a stalk of grass, and seems prepared to assist the boy. It seems an idyllic memory—very brief—an image both of work and play, and it is very hard not to assume that it shows Witt as a boy with his father. It is followed by a shot of Witt looking lost in thought, then another of Witt lighting yet another match. He speaks suddenly, "I love Charlie Company." He looks up at Hoke, "They're my people." That this second insight should be preceded by an image of Witt's father—and that narratively we have moved from an idyllic village to the belly of a machine of war—is highly significant. After all, Witt's first insight was inspired by thoughts of his dead mother.

All four of Terrence Malick's films begin with missing mothers. In *Badlands* the first words we hear from Holly, in voiceover: "My mother died of pneumonia when I was just a kid. My father had kept their wedding cake in the freezer for ten whole years. After the funeral he gave it to the yardman." *Days of Heaven* begins with Linda telling us, "there was just me and my brother," followed by a shot of a dark room where Abby, is lying, almost feverishly, in bed. Bill is convincing her that they need to leave Chicago and start a new life. Unmotivated baby cries echo on the soundtrack. In their flight across country, Bill decides that it would be wise if he and Abby pretended to be brother and sister. If, instead, they had pretended to be married, Abby would effectively become the much younger Linda's mother, a role that Abby is unwilling to fulfill even after Bill has died and Linda is orphaned.¹⁵³ In *The New World*, the first lines heard, in voiceover,

¹⁵³ Notably, in the original screenplay of *Days of Heaven*, Linda was Abby's sister, not Bill's. Janet Wondra, in her excellent article "A Gaze Unbecoming: Schooling the Child for Femininity in *Days of*

are, “Oh spirit, help us sing the story of our land. You are a mother. We, your field of corn. We rise out of the soul of you.” Pocahontas’ philosophical quest is to discover where her dead mother now ‘resides’: her concern about her mother’s afterlife (literalized as a spatial question) becomes allegorical for the sudden presence, at a distance, of a new world, when before the world was always very close.

The allegorical presence of the Masculine and the Feminine in Malick’s films is, in many ways, at the center of his art, and though, like many of Malick’s tropes, they are ostensibly conventional, they are configured in unusual ways. For Malick, the Mother is not a psychological figure but a philosophical one. The absent mother, in her absence, is paradoxically a presence: on the surface, a symbol for Being. There is an optimistic hope that in the image of the mother there is a solution—not a sense of plenitude or joy (the characters don’t seek union with the mother), but a sense of understanding, which may or may not be a sense of union with ‘mother nature’. The appeal to the mother is an appeal to clarification, and not only about originary causes—where we come from—but also about what is now at stake. The mother, in the way she is figured as a force that emphatically resists reconciliation and union, is allegorical. The Father, in Malick’s narratives, is much more present, and paradoxically, thus more absent, more at a remove. Kit’s murder of the remote, authoritarian, but essentially good natured and loving father in *Badlands*, played by Warren Oates, establishes this pattern of dispatched fathers. In *Days of Heaven*, we have a series of failed father figures—Bill, the Farmer (Sam Shepard), the Farmer’s Foreman (Robert Wilke)—and key references, in the screenplay,

Heaven,” *Wide Angle* 16, no. 4 (1994) argues persuasively that *Days of Heaven* is a film about its narrator, Linda, arriving into womanhood through a story she is telling. The film reaches its emotional peak not in the death of the male lead, but in the sadness it feels for Linda. Linda, who seems so far on the margins is revealed as the film’s real central protagonist.

to the Farmer's father.¹⁵⁴ In *The New World*, John Smith begs God for forgiveness just as Pocahontas asks the same of her father, Chief Powahatan. The narrative force in the film is a union with the father, a union with the symbolic, though this union is similarly frustrated, often by death (the realm of the mother).

The Father is a force of law, but, because of the absence of the mother, also the only form of paternal love functioning in the world. Mother, if she has any claim on the symbol of the 'Eternal Feminine', is limited by her manifest form in memory and in the Father. And, as we've seen, the Father in Malick's films is routinely dispatched with: either murdered, or, like Chief Powahatan, a casualty of history. I see the divide between Mother and Father in Malick's work functioning in terms of a split between the private and the public, two non exclusive realms of expressivity. Philosophy, the conventionally masculine activity *par excellence*, in Malick's film occupies both realms—expressing, at the very least, the problem of philosophy's representation. Both states of expressivity are burdened with their own set of metaphoric and symbolic baggage; both are involved with using the elements of their expressiveness to attempt to understand and overcome the fundamental problem of the inability of the private to give authenticity to the public, and the inability of the public to provide meaning for the private. My sense of the 'privateness' of the feminine is no doubt assisted by the female narrators of the first two

¹⁵⁴ The presence of the father in the *Days of Heaven* screenplay is fascinating. A story revealed to us in flashback—and demonstrating one of the only uses of voiceover in the script—Chuck's father (in the screenplay the Farmer is named Chuck) was a Russian immigrant who staked out his son's future land, defended it, and cultivated it despite extreme poverty. "We see no sign of Chuck's mother," only various items and artefacts a woman might have, standing oddly with the rest of their possessions in the open air. The Farmer is very close to his father, even wanting to embrace him when he succumbs to smallpox. His father holds him at bay with a long stick, and "passes on some last instructions in Russian." The father drowns himself rather than suffer a slow death (or, perhaps, rather than risk infecting his son), and the Farmer is the one who fishes him out of the river and buries him. But even in death, the grave of the Father still exerts a solemn influence: "Nearby the grave of Chuck's father stands in helpless witness to Abby's deception. A cottonwood tree rises against the cold blue sky, still as a statue" (41).

films, and their choices of language when describing events taking place in a male-driven narrative world.¹⁵⁵ In the later two films, this position of the private is maintained at a remove, but the more radical use of voiceover destabilizes the representational exclusivity of the two realms even further, more fully exploring how philosophy is articulated in the troubling of the split between private and public.

For Malick, the female-male paring is a particularly expressive figure, one defined by a built-in tension and generative power (both literal and figurative). Steven R. Carter in his study of the writing of James Jones points out that the Female is embedded in Jones' narrative by the oddly feminine names of many of Jones' soldiers: Pvt 'Big' Queen, Pvt Don Doll, Pvt Gwenne, Pvt 'Carrie' Arbre, Pvt 'Milly' Beck, and Pvt. John Bell(e).¹⁵⁶ Carter sees it as a critique of wartime machismo, but it is also a gesture towards removing war from a resolutely masculine realm. In *The Thin Red Line*, ideas of the Masculine and Feminine are played out, beyond the presence/absence of Witt's mother, by two male-female pairings: Bell and his absent wife; and, figuratively, in the relationship of Witt and Welsh. Fundamentally, these ideas find their expression in the theme of family.

When Witt lights and extinguishes matches in the brig of the *U.S.S. Victory* he introduces us, for the first time in *The Thin Red Line*, to the symbol of 'fire'—one of the most central symbols in Malick's cinema. While 'water' is most important to Bell's experience, 'fire' is the most important to Witt's, and it is a symbol that is not only associated with him but is one he actively uses in language. While 'water' provides a

¹⁵⁵ Malick indicates his early interest in female subjectivity in his 1975 *Sight and Sound* interview: "Holly is in a way the more important character; at least you get a glimpse of what she's like. And I like women characters better than men; they're more open to things around them, more demonstrative. Kit, on the other hand, is a closed book; not a rare trait in people who have tasted more than their share of bitterness in life."

¹⁵⁶Carter, 96.

sort of ground for the experience of the Company—they are fighting on an island in the middle of the Pacific, they can never get enough water to drink, their final assault is in a river—‘fire’ is associated much more with the individual, and it is a symbol passed and circulated amongst the soldiers.

The shot of Witt holding the match is intercut with a shot of the ship breaking through waves, and then our first shot of Colonel Tall: standing on the command deck of the *U.S.S. Victory*, facing to the left of the screen, smoking a cigarette. In this transfer of flame, a poetic connection is made, an association of objects. What follows is a complex scene involving General Quintard (John Travolta), detailing the upcoming attack, preparing the Colonel in an obliquely patronizing way for the importance of the mission, while asking the Colonel about his family and inviting the Colonel to offer an opinion about the upcoming attack. The Colonel makes it clear that his job isn’t to think about these questions, about the purpose of the campaign—his job is to get the job done. However, the Colonel, in voiceover, also expresses doubt about his more existential purpose: “Worked my ass off. Brown-nosed to the generals. Degraded myself. For them. My family. My home.” His resentment is also tinged with profound regret, and even gratitude, “All they sacrificed for me. Poured out like water on the ground. All I might have given for love’s sake. Too late. Dyin’. Slow as a tree.”

Quintard suddenly looms close to Tall and tells the Colonel, long overdue for promotion, how hard it is to do one’s job with the Admiral watching, “there’s always someone watching.” We cut to a shot of another deck on the ship and see a line of men looming above this conversation—but they are not commanding officers, but infantrymen. Another close up and we see, for the first time, Pvt. Train. Train is,

notably, also smoking a cigarette. Quintard and Tall continue their tour of the ship, falling into silence. They stand awkwardly—Tall seems unclear if he is dismissed. Quintard then reaches into his pocket and offers Tall a cigarette. Quintard lights it. Tall takes it, and turns to the horizon. We have returned to the shot that opened the scene. Suddenly, with a sense of revelation, we discover the status of that first shot, and we learn the history of that cigarette. This is another example of Malick's interest in bringing innocuous objects from the background to the foreground. This spark, this flame, has history. The cigarette, which when we first saw it marked Tall's private meditation, is in fact revealed to be allegorical for a complex order of hierarchy, power, and regret. The presence of the flame is linked dramatically to the public. This is a small firework of revelation.

Tall's wartime practical morality is put to the test against Captain Staros' Christian-esque conscience. Staro's Christianity is represented by shots of a candle flame flickering in the wind, as Staros, the night before the attack, prays for God's presence and the strength to deliver his men from harm. Tall's and Staros' confrontation over the decision to attack frontally (and boldly), or to attack from the flank (and risk ignominious failure but fewer casualties) drives the film's main battle sequence. Staros is clearly a noble figure—an intelligent and honest man trying to do the best in the worst circumstances—and yet Malick's relationship to Staros' plight is complex, and a lot of this complexity comes from the use of music. Staros' musical 'theme'—which is later transferred, for a key scene, to Witt—is a brilliantly re-orchestrated American folk song called "The Christian Race." We first hear it when we first meet Staros—an introduction instigated by two soldiers complaining about the incompetence of their Captain. We

don't necessarily believe the soldier's complaints, but followed as they are by their Captain's hang dog expression and this lilting music, the Captain is marked, almost immediately, as spiritually beleaguered.

This music is consistently connected to the Captain, and accompanies his soulful regard of his shattered men, and begins to make sense in his scenes of prayer. The music also returns when Tall, after Staros refuses a direct order to attack, comes to visit the front of the line. Tall, in their confrontation, visually occupies the high ground, and the music is initially reminiscent of the droning music that accompanied the crocodile at the beginning of the film. We cut, looking down, to a shot of Staros, and "The Christian Race" returns: Staros moves from hero to martyr. The music is in fact almost silly, far too excessive for the exchange. It shows conflict, but it also marks Staros' position as involuntarily—perhaps to his conscious chagrin—self aggrandizing. As self-righteous. His moral triumph is put to the test; up against the military machine, marked by Tall and his looming music, it seems ridiculous. A lost gesture. The 'lostness' of it is made clear when Staros is finally relieved of his command. Tall, concerned with the public reputation of his battalion, offers Staros medals ("Take the purple heart." "Why?" "For that scratch on your face.")—in effect, re-writing history to efface Staros' Christian sacrifice. It is only in the bitter-sweet scene between Staros and his 'family'—the soldiers who come to say goodbye—that there is any hint that the deed will be remembered: his moment of sacrifice is private history, not public. We might think of Sgt. McCron—described in the screenplay and book as a "Mother Hen"—who loses all twelve of his men, and is so shattered that he is reduced to babbling. "Dirt. We're just dirt." His family has disappeared from record. The culmination of the Staros and Tall

confrontation comes at the burning of the makeshift village which served as the Japanese bivouac, and invites us to consider it as the destruction of a community.

It is in the context of this fraternity—of this strained makeshift family—that Witt has his third insight. Witt, when we rejoin him, is working as a stretcher bearer and away from his company, surveying a triage scattered beside a picturesque stream. In voiceover, Witt tells us “Maybe all men got one big soul who everybody’s a part of. All faces of the same man. One big self.” This third insight is a direct result of his first insight that immortality is located in a sort of calmness towards death. As he surveys the wounded from his position of conceptual calm, their pain becomes an object of contemplation, and thus an allegory for Witt’s experience of insight on the beach. In their being-towards-death, Witt—who has already recognized the possibility of his own mortality—recognizes a shared mortality. He, we know, is looking for an image of *immortality*, and in this calmness towards death—which is to say, peacableness—he recognizes a basic human connection. This calmness towards death, in wartime, is powerfully *visible*: your death, while quick, will be seen by many (this is a theatre of war). You will not, as in life back home, pass away quietly in the night, or disappear into the crumpled body of a car accident. Witt is looking at men in various degrees of *visible* pain, of *visible* nearness to death. If they demonstrate calmness, it is a social calmness: their calmness floods throughout the company, making their death easier to bear for the men lucky enough not to be wounded. That this insight is linked to community organization is made doubly clear by the fact that Witt’s insight is not really his own—he’s paraphrasing Tom Joad’s insight at the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*.¹⁵⁷ If Witt

¹⁵⁷ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking, 1989), 572. “Well maybe like Casy says, ‘a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one.’”

realizes how the public, at this moment, in the form of popular culture, was speaking through him it would hardly matter: the insight, for him, is clearly authentic. Witt's original insight, which marked him as an outsider, has now been integrated into the social, and he now follows the insight. If he is a philosopher, he is an altruistic one. Thus, for Witt, the possibility of immortality is in this connection of brotherhood—hence his Emersonian ideas about an Oversoul. When Sgt. Keck (Woody Harrelson) throws himself against an embankment to save his platoon from a grenade accidentally detonated while still strapped to his belt, it is Witt who comforts him before he dies: “Don't be afraid. You didn't let your brothers down.” Witt finishes his thought amongst the wounded: “Every man looking for salvation by himself. Each like a spark, thrown from the fire.” We cut to flowing water. Witt becomes, with an almost angelic guilelessness, a student of death. This scene depicting Witt's third insight, the moment he outlines his public philosophy, is the last time he is granted voiceover in the film.

Witt's private insight—born out of the death of his mother—finds final expression in a public doctrine describing a brotherhood in a state of constant readiness for death. As inspiring as this is for Witt, it marks a fearful antinomy in human experience and a fundamental inequality in philosophic experience. As mulled over by Pvt. Train, near the end of the film, “When one man looks at a dying bird, he sees nothing but unanswered pain...another man looks at the same bird, and feels the glory.” This voiceover is very pointedly matched to shots of Welsh and Witt. Witt is asleep while these thoughts are presented; Welsh is walking, contemplating, and smoking. As much as we want to believe that Witt's position is the more enlightened one, the film gives us ample reason to doubt. At the very least, Witt's sleepiness—though a literalization of

this 'calm' he has sought—suggests also this insight has left him complacent. How quickly peace can seem like weakness.

After the death of Witt, only minutes from the credits, we are privy to the most overtly political moment of the film. The troops are mustered, and Captain Bosche (George Clooney), the replacement for Captain Staros, is addressing the men. We hear the Captain speaking on the soundtrack, and during his pauses, we hear Welsh's voiceover. The captain berates the men for their consumption of homemade alcohol—something he doesn't criticize, "as long as you are ready to make reveille. If you can't do that, you're going to have trouble. From me." To this, Welsh, in his first voiceover of the film, responds, "Everything a lie." Bosche: "I like to think of myself as a family man..." Welsh: "So much to spew out. They just keep coming, one after another..." Bosche: "And that's what we all are here: we are a family. I'm the father. I guess that makes Sergeant Welsh here the mother." We cut to Sgt. Welsh who sneers faintly. Bosche: "And that makes you all the children in this family. Now a family can have only one head and that is the father. Father's the head; mother runs it. That's the way it's going to work here." This idea of family has come to its fullest expression—not as Witt's vision of brotherhood—but as a vision of a military machine given charisma and frankness by Captain Bosche. Welsh knows exactly what it means to be part of this family: both the merging of individuals into a single body, and a sharp and insurmountable separation from each other: "You're in a box. A moving box. They want you dead. Or in their lie."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ The line, "you're in a box, a moving box" is, as many have pointed out, taken from Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (W.W. Norton & Company, 1962), 21. It is a classic American story about war and nature and clearly an influence on Malick.

The image of the ancient and powerful crocodile slipping and disappearing into murky water at the beginning of the film was first, for us, metaphoric; later, for the men who witness its death, symbolic. But ultimately it is an allegorical image, and is used very specifically, I'd argue, to reference Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*.¹⁵⁹ Hobbes' 1651 political-philosophical treatise is itself an investigation of the 'meaning' of the biblical crocodile described in Job 41, and in its biblical examination redresses an array of essential biblical imagery. Hobbes' grimly practical approach to human nature—an approach which sees human beings ruled by petty desire—allowed him to formulate a political science that addresses and provides for the worst in human nature, rather than attempting to nurture the best. For Hobbes, human beings outside of a stable political regime exist in a “state of nature,” where they are ruled by fear of “violent death.”¹⁶⁰ We—the masses, any average human being—would wilfully and rationally sacrifice some of our freedom to a sovereign in exchange for protection from the threat of natural savagery. Hobbes describes this ‘body’ of people represented by a ‘head’, the sovereign, as an artificial Leviathan—a monster that could overcome the biblical Leviathan, the symbol representing God’s mastery over nature, nature being the source of fear and violent death. For Hobbes, war is akin to the state of nature, and war is the result of political faction, the family of the nation turning against itself. The image of the crocodile in *The Thin Red Line* followed immediately by the words, “What’s this war in the heart of nature?” completes the allusion.

Welsh’s speech to Witt midway through the film, before the attack on the bunker, re-enforces his disdain for the systems of institutional oppression, and his amused

¹⁵⁹ I am indebted to Paul Diduch for first suggesting this interpretation.

¹⁶⁰ Hobbes, 186.

bemusement towards Witt's idealism. Welsh tells him that this *army* is going to kill him—not the war, but the army. Welsh's fascination with Witt comes from Witt's refusal (or inability) to play the game that Welsh is so expert at—but not a refusal born out of contempt: Witt's insubordination arises out of his manifest individuality. For Hobbes, the Leviathan is a necessary evil, a method of controlling the baser instincts of man, giving free reign to those who know how to control it. Welsh sees this clearly—and in his privileged knowledge he attains an uneasy identity—but nonetheless feels contempt for such a system which would interpret him so basely. Welsh, in his cynicism, is unable to take advantage of this degraded vision of humanity and is left only with contempt. In Witt he sees someone who is likewise outside the system (as much as one can be), but not outside of mankind. When Welsh finally drives it home, “There's not another world out there where everything is okay. There's just this one,” Witt, with a bit of a sheepish smile on his face glances up at the moon. A literal other world, the moon is also a vehicle for the symbol of light. Here, the light of revelation is double ended: it shines upon this other world (the moon) and shines upon Witt. The next shot is far more earthly: dogs, under moonlight, devour a human corpse, a potent reminder of the state of nature and the only ‘other world’ envisioned by the Leviathan.

Witt's vision of another world, as I have suggested, is a shared other world: it is not a lonely transcendence where Witt can exist apart from his beloved company. Which is why when Charlie Company enters the fray, Witt begs Captain Staros to let him join. Witt's decision has two allegorical antecedents. One is in Jesus Christ, who dies for our sins. And the other is Socrates who, as represented in Plato's the *Crito*, has every opportunity to flee Athens after being sentenced to death, but argues that it is his duty to

stay. Both of these figures are ridiculous to Welsh: their sacrifice, and even their existence as symbols, are irrelevant in a modern age of self-interest masquerading as public good. The philosopher—the stranger, the shadow, the misfit—I'd suggest, exhibits two positive representational forms. First, as a humanist and as an altruist: the philosopher's success is directed towards the public, to recorded history. Second, we can see the philosopher as an outcast, beyond good and evil, wise: in this formulation the philosopher's success is directed towards the private. His or her influence is more intimate, and resonates in a private history, if it resonates at all.

After the revelry the men experience 'off the line', we see the crocodile again, this time nearly dead, bound and lying in the back of a truck, a number of soldiers gawking. This short scene—three shots long—comes immediately after a conversation between Storm and Welsh, in which Storm confesses his achievement of a Jonesian 'battle numbness', and Welsh declares being too knowledgeable to share that "bliss", or long past it. In the back of a truck, a man with a rifle shakes the body of the crocodile, provokingly and yet also solemnly, almost as if trying to shake life back into it. Someone offscreen pokes the crocodile's head with a long stick and summons the biblical quotation, "Canst thou fill [Leviathan's] head with barbed irons? Or his head with fish spears? (Job 41:7)." The reptile's eyes close slowly involuntarily: indeed, nature's Leviathan has been overcome. On the left of the crocodile are the American soldiers. On the right, two Melanesian natives peer into the back of the truck, one holding a cigarette. In front of the crocodile, at the end of the truck, Welsh is standing stone faced. Behind him we see Bell. The scene ends with a close up of Bell, who seems at a loss. An

involuntary and subtle spasm strikes him as he rocks back and forth. In the following scene Bell will learn that his wife wants a divorce.

This interlude acts as a bridge between Welsh's scene and Bell's and effects a sophisticated juxtaposition. A sequence of shots like this is a reminder of cinema's capacity to be allegorical in the most traditional sense. In the *Trauerspiel* study, Benjamin makes reference to a famous Albrecht Dürer engraving entitled "Melancholia I". The engraving depicts a winged woman, her head resting on her palm, deep in thought, a look of frustration on her face.¹⁶¹ She is surrounded by "the utensils of everyday life"—a saw, a planer, nails, a mill stone, a ladder. In this Dürer example of allegory, the picture becomes a puzzle, a rebus of meaning designed to be solved. Every element of the image signifies something explicitly, and the objects' "lack of a natural or creative connection" defy even a surrealist re-mythologizing: the objects remain always tantalizingly close to the realm of explicit meaning and never spin off into the portentous and witty dream-critiques of Surrealism. The mystery of the allegorical image is that it signifies a potential for meaning which overwhelms its status as an image; religion's interest in allegorical images stems precisely from this sensation of another world beyond the surface. As we peer deeply into the image, our attempts to account for the scene—to read it merely as an image of a woman sitting—becomes increasingly superficial: our attention is drawn to the style of the art, rather than any content. Without a ready-to-hand interpretation—commentators have suggested that Dürer's image is representing everything from the history of alchemy to Plato's *Hippias Minor*—these intentional objects, scattered around the image, become loose from specific content, and instead

¹⁶¹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 140.

attain, as Benjamin puts it, “an enigmatic wisdom”.¹⁶² Which is to say, that they are beyond ‘meaning’: they are solemn witnesses to the passing usefulness and utility of meaning.

The experience of the allegorical is an interpretative moment where a sign is spectacularly replaced by a concept: this equation of meaning incites us to push the image away, rather than bring it closer. The concept, in its acts of displacement, enters the realm of the spectacle, and achieves a distantly apprehended ontology. As such, the experience of allegory is an experience of loss. Not a dramatic sense of loss—like a death in the family—but a once structured absence. Contrasted to the symbol, where the components that make up the figure persist in a unified, eternal presence, the aftermath of allegory leaves only the concept and the *audience* in an uneasy face to face. Our interpretation of the symbol, in its representation of the eternal, suggests a potential that we—the audience—may yet be unified with it. As much as the symbol exists in the public sphere, our interpretation of it is always personal—this is the value of public symbols: ideally, to function as vehicles for community identification, they create ‘shared’ private experiences. The allegory offers no such promise of individual interpretation: even if we uncover the secret to unlock its rebus, this secret meaning of the allegory enters the realm of the public as straightforward knowledge, as a secret revealed. Unlike our experience of the symbol—which must be *felt*, and is thus subjective, individual and private—the meaning of an allegory, once it has been unlocked, is intellectual: the meaning of the allegory is available to all. And though we may all have a subjective interpretation of the *purpose* of that allegorical connection, the experience of it is one fundamentally tied to a public experience. Once solved, the allegorical image

¹⁶² Ibid.

‘means’ the solution, and the memory of the solution. In this way, the crocodile, which was once perceived as symbolic, as an intact wholeness, now signifies a potential to decay, to ruin.

This scene with the bound crocodile could be recast as a single allegorical image, and one not unlike the frontispiece for Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, which depicts a sword and sceptre wielding sovereign looming over a village, his scale-like armour on closer investigation revealed to be made up of a marching throng.¹⁶³ Beneath this centrepiece, in a series of reliefs, are images of the State contrasted with images of the Church—a fortress next to a chapel, a crown next to a bishop’s miter, a cannon next to God’s lightning. Malick’s image of the bound crocodile, surrounded by the wind and sunlight in the trees, the water beneath the men, and the cigarette flame in the Melanesian’s fingers, is an allegorical image of the End of Man. The faceless multitudes. The regret. In this image, Welsh looms large, face to face with the dying Leviathan. On the margins, Bell appears as an allegory for the loss of family. Welsh’s profound understanding of the Leviathan—his brutally pragmatic philosophy—is immediately undermined by the consequences Bell suffers. Bell here is a figure of Loss. Welsh, a figure of Power. And Witt, absent from this rebus, and as we shall see, a figure of Pride.

Why communicate *these* ideas *this* way? What is to be gained through such a representative strategy? What is gained and what is lost by forcing characters into such an overdetermined universe of associations, of threatening their subjectivity with the burden of philosophical representation? Malick’s use of figurative tropes represent the seemingly insurmountable obstacles between our idea of the world and its reality, a form of thinking which, as De Man, argues is recreated in allegory, which always shows “a

¹⁶³ The frontispiece to Hobbes’ *Leviathan* can be seen on page 71 of the edition cited in my bibliography.

disjunction between the way the world appears in reality and the way it appears in language.”¹⁶⁴ The promise of insight, already signified as an experience of loss, infuses Malick’s world of heart-wrenching beauty with a nearly unbearable negativity. Even in war—in this heightened state of nature (and its interpretation), in this vivid closeness to what our experience is founded upon—our attempts at finding closure, meaning, and purpose, come up short. After Bell’s wife leaves him—and Bell’s wife, as we shall see, exists mainly as a symbol, one used by Bell to reinterpret the war as an insufferable trial he must overcome to get back to her, thus denying the ontology of War—Bell ceases, for a time, to be human, and becomes overburdened by the demands of his allegorical status. When Witt returns to the company for the last time before their disastrous manoeuvre up river, when Witt regards his brothers-in-arms with fervent devotion and we hear on the soundtrack “The Christian Race” (indeed, Witt at this point has replaced Cpt. Staros as a surrogate father for the men), and even sheds a tear on their behalf, there is intercut—quite suddenly into a disrupted chain of POV shots originating from Witt—a shot of Bell sitting alone on a hill, the wind in the grass. By himself, Bell is just a man who has lost. Cut within this sequence of shots, Bell is an allegorical image, one placed within the corner of Witt’s image of himself—in the corner of Witt’s philosophy—prophesizing clearly the end of Witt’s family and the conditions of his insight. As an allegory, he becomes lost, and is pushed away.

To read the film we find ourselves reading characters based on their associations with particular objects. Once associated with an object, that object inflects our viewing of other characters who come in contact with it, and re-intends our sense of that original character. Malick’s characters don’t develop as much as they are re-presented through

¹⁶⁴ De Man, “Rhetoric,” 201.

objects which come in contact with different subjectivities and force us to re-categorize how we were reading that character. Malick places the burden of character analysis on us as readers, not on his characters as creatures growing and learning for our delectation. When Marty (Bell's wife) leaves her husband, there is a shot of curtains blowing in the wind. The next shot is of trees, also moving in the wind. This shot of moving trees begins Witt's narrative line—this is the scene where Witt returns to the Melanesian village to discover that it is not the welcoming paradise he remembers (the natives reject him, he sees signs of cannibalism and disease, we see him wandering the margins of his own POV shots)—which is also a narrative of rejection. In Bell's case, he lost his wife; in Witt's, an entire community. The wind becomes a literalization of the act of interpretation: the linking force between these scattered objects on the stage of allegory. It is a destructive force to the tenuous peace characters find within themselves, and through Malick's figurative strategies, this burden of interpretation forced upon us—the survivors of allegorical experience—is itself shown to be an endeavour fraught with potential disappointment.

Malick makes clear the capacity for the heartfelt—the private—to become unstable when revealed publicly, during a small exchange in the third draft screenplay, when Witt is asking Captain Staros if he can return to the company, "I always feel like maybe I could help somebody, you know? Maybe save somebody." The screenplay goes on to explain this sudden admission: "it is the first time he [Witt] has ever told anyone his secret. Stein ['Staros' in the film] stares at him quizzically, and Witt curses himself. He learned long ago in his life never to tell anybody anything about what he really felt—

what made him do it now?"¹⁶⁵ With that, Witt, in the screenplay, rejoins his company and finds himself suddenly suffused with feelings of overwhelming loyalty to Captain Stein, who shares in his secret and lets that secret pass back into the private and Witt back into the public. When, in the film, Witt is face to face with the corpse of a Japanese man buried in the earth, we hear Cpt. Staros's voice on the soundtrack "Are you righteous, kind? Are you loved by all? Know that I was, too. Do you think your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness? Truth?" Here Witt is directly confronted by the possibility of his hubris, by the center of doubt in his philosophy sapping his communal feelings with the suggestion that they were born out of inauthentic ego rather than goodwill. There is the very real possibility that his insight—and this will be his insight's mortal contradiction—that his insight will inevitably separate him from the world.

Witt's journey to his self-sacrifice, his journey to death, is through a series of crises of introspection. When Witt leaves the Melanesian village the second time he is downcast. In his wandering he happens upon a wounded soldier, Pvt. Ash, left behind on the top of a grassy hill. He seems happy to see Witt, but asks him why he has strayed so far abroad. Witt's answer seems vague and almost indecisive. His response, seemingly abbreviated, is "I'm just...heading back to the Company." Did he just decide this now? Witt volunteers to carry Ash back to the company, but Ash declines: "it's peaceful up here," he says. Witt feels a genuine kinship with Ash's decision to spend this time alone, and Ash, at this juncture, represents a real possibility for Witt to once again abandon his company.

When Witt returns to the Company he is met with handshakes and smiles. As he surveys the men—some play cards, others stand solemnly, more than a few lay dying—

¹⁶⁵ Malick, *The Thin Red Line*, third draft screenplay, 141.

his eyes finally rest upon dark-skinned hands clasped on a knee. Does Witt, here, remember the conditions of his first insight, represented, we remember, through a scene ending with a shot of two Melanesian men holding hands? He wipes a tear and continues wandering. He finds Welsh sitting alone in an evacuated house. Welsh acts almost like an older brother to Witt, patronizing yet empathetic. Welsh: “You still believing in the beautiful light, are you? How do you do that? You’re a magician to me.” From the middle room of the house Witt can see straight up to the sky, and as he wanders around the rooms he pauses to inspect an empty bird cage. With these images we return in memory to the images of Witt’s first insight, the images of his mother’s death. Though the Melanesian village is not as he remembers it—it was unable to fully recreate the conditions and proof of his insight—the Company can. Witt has found his place in the shell of his insight, this dim reminder. The content long lost, the experience remains as an empty and lonely house. The blasted house, the long evacuated bird cage. This is the shell of insight, the content long lost, the emotions caught in the resin of figuration. It is Welsh, the cynic, who occupies this mother’s house now—the man called, by captain Bosche, the “Mother” of the company, the man who heroically rushed into the fray to deliver a lethal dose of morphine to a wounded soldier whose death screams were so upsetting to the company, who actively delivered a chemically induced sense of calm. These are desiccated signs, allegories for the decay of good ideas.

The decay of Witt’s insight is given fullest expression in the figural trajectory of ‘fire’. This symbol’s final transformation in the film begins with Witt telling Welsh, mustering the fullness of his earnest belief and in an effort to disarm Welsh’s cynicism, “I still see a spark in you,” followed by a shot, at night, of a ruminating Welsh holding that

very spark, a metaphor now literalized, a symbol made specific, held in his hand at the end of a glowing cigarette. In this way the symbol is made allegorical—it becomes over emphasized, and we want to push it away. It is not deconstructed, because the image itself is still intact as it is pushed away, but the symbol begins to disintegrate and the idea—as an image of an idea—begins to signify *as* content rather than as *content*. As Welsh wanders a ramshackle bivouac, men lounging on the grass, we hear Train—who we glimpse, in the corner of the frame, sitting and smoking—pontificating on the problem of shared philosophic truth. On his final thoughts about “reaching out, and touching the glory” there are shots of soldiers stomping out a campfire, sparks arcing from the flame. This shot is the beginning of a slow dissolve to the river—the embers are visible for a moment superimposed over the roaring water—where Witt meets his death. This shot of sparks “thrown from the fire” reminds us of Witt’s second insight, when he likened each soul “searching for salvation by himself” to a single spark, an insight that ended with this metaphor of salvation subtly undone by the literal imposition of a shot of a flowing stream. Thus, Witt’s philosophic concept always contained the seed of its undoing, always the potential to sign its opposite, his death foretold.

When Witt rushes out of the jungle, the diverted Japanese troops following him close behind, he rushes into a clearing¹⁶⁶—it is here that the Japanese troops have him

¹⁶⁶ Malick seems to be overtly invoking the Heideggerian metaphor of a ‘clearing’ (a *lichtung*) in thought. The metaphor comes about from a discussion into “the matter of philosophy as well as its method.” For Heidegger, for anything to appear present, it requires light shone on it, to radiate—here, Heidegger is summoning the classic philosophic metaphor of the light of reason. For Heidegger, however, philosophy, as we know it, discovers light, but not the break in “the dense forest” which allows light to pass—for Heidegger, not surprisingly, this break is the question of Being: “All philosophical thinking that explicitly or inexplicitly follows the call ‘to the thing itself’ is already admitted to the freespace of the opening in its movement and with its method. But philosophy knows nothing of the opening. Philosophy does speak about the light of reason, but does not heed the opening of Being.” Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, trans. J. Stambaugh (Harper and Row: New York, 1973), 31.

surrounded; it is here he finally meets his death. One Japanese soldier begins to speak at first sharply and then brusquely, stepping towards him, his gun raised. Though Witt does not speak Japanese, the soldiers' intent seems clear. They want him to surrender. They want him to put down his gun. Witt's decision is long in the coming. And while we search his face for a sense of 'calm' his face is hard to read. It is impassive, yet it is also so still it seems strained—he might be holding his breath. The camera pushes in towards him, the Japanese soldier charges forward, stops, yells at him to surrender. Witt's face is still the same. He has turned almost to face the camera. A sudden, almost imperceptible glance to the right. A dramatic low angle shot, Witt raises his gun, and is shot dead. A shot of light arching through trees—very similar to the third shot of the film as well as the shot immediately preceding the attack on the Japanese bivouac, and highly reminiscent of shots following the death of Keck and Bead—is followed by 6 shots of Witt swimming underwater with the native boys who opened the film. Then, a shot of a tree highly reminiscent of the tree which opened the film and which was associated with the lines, "Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power but two?" And there is a cut to Witt's grave—in sand, beside a still pond—and Welsh leans over the grave and whispers, "where's your spark now?" Whatever metaphoric potential we'd like to associate with those shots of Witt swimming underwater—as much as we'd like to read them as a sign of transcendence, of some sign of the 'rightness' of his act—we have to account for the metaphoric implications of yet another juxtaposition of fire and water in the articulation of Witt's insight. If a transcendent afterlife is represented by water, then the question is—exactly—what happens to Witt's spark? Here, the physics of nature overcome the traditional expressiveness of metaphor and symbol, leaving us with a

metaphor of conflict—Witt seems lost to us, lost in cliché and platitude, his representative tools of afterlife neutralized.

In this, Malick shows his tender regard for Witt's guileless nobility and quiet vision of self sacrifice. Witt's eternity beneath the water is an image of limbo, an image removed immediately to memory, entered directly into a network of overdetermined figurative connections. The men of his Company seem to be able to draw little meaning from Witt's death, as they wander ashen faced from his gravesite, their glances deflected from glances; it is Welsh who must give representational life to this sacrifice. But it is a task he—even as the Mother of the Company—is ill equipped to carry out, and indeed, Cpt. Bosche's philosophy of Company as Family makes Welsh's task of meaning production all the more bitterly unfulfilled. For Welsh, Witt's death is a tragic example of the sort of delusion the Leviathan sustains in its ceaseless appetite for the self-same, in its campaign of appropriation. Witt's active rebellion found expression in a profound love for his fellow man; Witt's sacrifice, a necessary death that gives birth to the symbolic, also realizes the symbolic in the realm of death. Philosophy in the age of the Leviathan is inevitably only an aestheticization of politics. It is in this experience of what Benjamin identified in Fascism as the erotics of self-annihilation, that Witt—under the Leviathan's gaze—becomes an object for his own contemplation. And indeed, when Witt dies he does not become a 'dead body', on display—he survives as a spectator, caught in an endless repetition, as a sign, himself, moving towards and away with every moment of attention. It was War that granted Witt his insight into death—which made him, like Heidegger, a student of mortality—but it is War which brought him to the inevitable conclusion that his own destruction was the highest expression of his

philosophy. That Witt should be dispatched by this world—and by thought—is made very clear by Welsh’s original final line to Witt printed in the third draft screenplay, whispered at Witt’s gravesite: “Where’s your pride now?” It is precisely ‘pride’ which Hobbes identifies as that which will ruin the Leviathan, the super state, and thrust us back into a state of nature. This pride, this spark, this individual must be smothered, hidden, removed from view—not destroyed, not martyred, but made, in absence, a marker, a desiccated sign, a sign of disappointment.

Consider the scene of Witt filling his canteen at some murky water after the assault on the Japanese Bivouac. This scene is important on a practical level: it shows that the soldiers finally get the water they have been denied while fighting. Witt is quiet, thoughtful, even melancholy. He pours water on his head. This moment begins a remarkable Malickian memory sequence: the water on Witt’s head should remind us of the water he poured over the head of the wounded soldier when Witt meditated on the idea of “maybe all men got one big soul.” It’s a touching moment. Witt, the survivor unscathed, administering his own medication, is physically attempting to imagine himself in the place of a victim. Not unlike his attempts to image himself in the place of his mother. This projection of self is a philosophic attempt towards understanding. He watches the water from his canteen roll off a broad leaf. This image, however, reminds Witt of the *Tabu*-like waterfall in the Melanesian village. A shot of rippling water poetically substitutes for an optical dissolve. We cut from rippling water straight into memory, a shot of Witt emerging from a waterfall. A few cuts to happy families, and a shot of boys constructing something out of leaves and sticks, by the ocean where a boat (that cage of the spirit and body) propels men to blue hills in the distance. On the beach,

with the boys, is the same leaf that Witt, in his melancholy, poured water over and which began the chain of memories.

This memory is, of course, overburdened by what those pure and hopeful memories in fact signify for Witt. As much as the image of the mother playing with her son is a peaceful image, for Witt it is a memory of her allegorical significance for him. She reminds him of the death of his mother, she reminds him of the moment of his insight, she reminds him of the now distant joy of that insight. That memory of joy remains, but it is loose from the knowledge the insight manifested. Witt began with the cleansing ritual of water (taken from the moment of his third insight), a good memory which is mnemonically linked to another good memory (the moment, in the village, of his first insight) and by the unrestrained mnemonic connections it unleashes, this cleansing water is now, in fact, an allegory. It signifies its opposite: decay, poison. From the flashback scene to the image of Witt crouched at the muddy water, we find him alone among men, lost in thought, desolate. When Witt finally returns to the Melanesian village of his memory and finds it not as he remembered, the connection between this image of authenticity and perfection, and its ability to signify its opposite—War—is made explicit. The fine memory, revisited as a bulwark against negative thoughts, now signs only the negative thoughts. Bell experiences the same disillusion, the same drifting of thoughts of perfection—of goodness—to their opposite. In Malick's allegorical landscape, where images represent not pagan gods but philosophical proclamation (and promise), this powerful tendency of things towards their opposites—born out of disparity, loss, heartache—defines the experience of a crisis of belief. Malick's figural framework reveals the ability of all signs to mean their opposite. No insight is sustainable for long.

In Malick's cinema, it is not truth, meaning, or theme which is coy. Malick's films are not about ambiguity or "unanswered questions." At the heart of Malick's work is not the gloriously unknowable. But the object that is decaying knowledge. *The Thin Red Line* begins with knowledge and ends with desire.

4. Epilogue

Most of the film's philosophizing is done by only one character, a character we see only four times in the film. What follows is a brief annotated synopsis of some of Pvt. Train's insights; most answered only by more questions:

"Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power but two?" Not just a power that gives life but a power that punishes? A power that might balance the destructiveness of this war?

"Who are you to live in all these many forms?" The image track reveals that he's talking about nature. For Train, nature is the basis for all authentic experiences: glory, mercy, peace, truth, understanding, courage, the contented heart. Later, we will discover that his conception of nature is perhaps one that is self created, and also one that reflects the presence of God.

"War don't ennoble men. It turns 'em into dogs. Poisons the soul." War is what drives men back to the state of nature.

"Does our ruin benefit the earth? Does it help the grass to grow, the sun to shine? Is this darkness in you too? Have you passed through this night?" Is this nature's avenging power? Generation from destruction? Does nature desire war to recreate itself, is there a force that embraces decay in spite of our philosophies of radical affirmation?

“We were a family. How d’it break up and come apart? How’d we lose the good that was given us?” When did we have the good? This may remind us of a previous line about evil, “Mockin’ us with the sight of what we might’ve known.” Is this the allegorical function of the family—of nature—the unattainable utopia? Is this also Welsh’s plea, “let me feel the lack”?

“One man looks at a dying bird, and thinks there’s nothin’ but unanswered pain. That death’s got the final word. It’s laughin’ at him. Another man sees that same bird. Feels the glory. Feels somethin’ smilin’ through it.” Are philosophic insights always so unevenly distributed? Is each context different? Do we read nature each differently—is this why it takes so many forms? Does wisdom take just as many forms?

And over one of the last images of the film, matched to Doll’s POV, Train wonders about the duality of man: “Darkness and life, strife and love, are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face?”

These final images from the back of the transport are images of retreating from the world, and in that recession the witnessing of something profound, and terrifying, is an experience well matched to Train, our narrator whose physical absence so complicates his auditory presence. He is philosophizing alone, apart. And yet his words find physical manifestation in the action: think of how oddly his word “steal” (as in how did evil “steal in the world?”) matches with the image of Doll’s theft at the Japanese Bivouac. There is a sense that Train’s words only manifest as real in those odd moments of juxtaposition. His private thoughts float free until colliding with practical literalizations of his metaphoric language, his grappling with any sign of successful, ordered thinking.

Philosophy has not been kind to Train, and yet he clings to it. This metaphoric rush of images and ideas towards and away is an assault and an evacuation.

As Chion points out, loneliness is a theme in all of Malick's films.¹⁶⁷ Witt asks Welsh, revealing much about his own state of mind, "You ever get lonely?" Welsh: "Only around people." But perhaps loneliness is best expressed by the character of Train, who speaks only twice, and both times he is so desperate to talk to someone that the words pour out, and the interlocutor can only stand and listen. It is notable that his two witnesses are Welsh and Charlie Dale—the two characters with the most worked out philosophies (it is Dale's which completely collapses after the attack on the Japanese Bivouac while he clutches the stolen teeth of dead Japanese in his hand). Train sputters to Welsh his private anxieties, near the beginning of the film, "I can't believe how damn scared I am Sarge. My step-daddy took a likin' to beatin' me when I was real little. I hid out in the chicken coop a whole lotta nights. I didn't think it would get no worse than that."

When we meet Train again, at the end of the film, we can only imagine what he's been through, what it means for him to have survived—what his philosophy has masked, what it might be allegorical for. "I want to get back to some kind of foundation. I don't know what your plans are, but I'm determined now. I've been through the thick and thin of it. I may be young but I lived plenty of life. And I'm ready to start livin' it good. You know, my daddy always used to say, 'It's gonna get a whole lot worse before it gets better.' Because life ain't supposed to be that hard when you're young. It's time for things to start getting better. That's what I want. That's what's going to happen." When he says "Daddy" does he mean "Step-Daddy", the Stepfather who used to beat him so

¹⁶⁷ Chion, 28.

badly that he'd hide in the chicken coop? Is this what his stepfather would tell him before he beat him, "It's gonna get a whole lot worse before it gets better"? Or do we imagine the little boy standing tear-streaked but resolute in front of his absent biological father, consoled with these words of his philosophy, "It's gonna get a whole lot worse before it gets better." Is this the 'avenging power in nature' which Train hopes to find: this force that might redress his fear? Is this the place from which the film's voice of philosophy originates: a boy abandoned by his father to brutality, trembling alone in the night company of animals? "We were a family." In this fugitive biography of Pvt. Train, we can clearly see Malick's figure of the philosopher caught between death and love.

CONCLUSION: The Afterlife of Insight

1. Summary and Repetition

At the outset we identified four stylistic oddities of *The Thin Red Line*: an emphasis on point of view shots, deferment or disruption of narrative question and answer structures, aggressive documentary-like techniques of production and re-editing, and the movement of objects from the background to the foreground. As intriguing and as at times overwhelming as these techniques can be, they are nonetheless bound to a very strong and structurally conventional forward moving narrative. We suggested that these stylistic innovations might best be understood functioning figuratively: the use of jumpcuts, for instance, could be seen as metaphoric for a character's state of mind, the

repeated shots of sunlight could be symbolic for knowledge, etcetera. Because the film is so insistent about creating experiences of point of view, there is a temptation to read these disruptions as communicating something to us about character. However, Malick's characters remain oddly at a remove from us, their motivation and desire enigmatic. I use the word 'oddly' because this sense of flatness of characterization manifests in spite of the eagerness of these characters to be expressive about themselves. For some critics this is a sign of Malick's failure as an artist: too much 'telling' us how characters feel, and not enough 'showing'. This emphasis on 'telling' makes the characters seem flat, uninteresting, two-dimensional.

If we are interested in Malick's cinema we are most likely looking for some way to account for the beauty of its images. Malick's films seem built out of imagery which glows from within, which seems far beyond language and the fringed glitter of literary figurative devices that relate ambiguously to the image they decorate. We wonder if we couldn't excise these complications of interpretation entirely and thus bring ourselves closer to the thing-in-itself, the image as a thing of pure sensation. If we accept this approach to the 'charged' cinematic moments of these films, Malick's formal techniques I've discussed are thus not engineered to create a figurative experience, but to frame the images, even caption them, so that we can achieve a sort of cinephilic experience of immediacy and self reflection. Noel Carroll groups Malick with filmmakers like Werner Herzog and Stan Brakhage who, "share an advocacy of the immediacy of experience, that is, an avowal of the possibility of experience ... independent from routine, social modes of schematization" (284). Carroll also comments, "indeed, all three regard normal practices of perceiving and otherwise organizing the world—such as, most dramatically,

language—as filters that exclude whole, existing dimensions of qualities and feelings from our ken.”¹⁶⁸ This is why we want to talk about ideas like ‘visual thinking’ in regards to these filmmakers: a way of removing ourselves from the fundamental inadequacies and prejudices of language to achieve a pure and uncorrupted perception. In such a wish for a pure experience of intellect there is something of the utopian. And cinema has, historically, been made to promise such an eventual achievement.

This sort of wishful thinking about the immediacy of experience—a being-in-the-world, an experience of a thing-in-itself—is a long sought philosophic goal, and it is one which art imagines itself close to achieving. But does this Romantic vision of art only deliver the image to a subjective, anti-social, and ultimately elitist ambiguity? Is it fundamentally anti-philosophical? How can we caption these images without occluding them, without putting them under glass? The relationship between philosophy and poetry is a key hint to a method, and an essential study in what is at stake in this hazy opposition between pure sensation and rational thought, between visual arts and linguistic arts, between showing and telling. ‘Showing’ is on the side of the cinematic; ‘telling’ is on the side of the literary. Paul Willemen argues that this division is a crude denial of the heterogeneity of the film medium, a medium where language and image meet through the murky and subjective—though also intensely *immediate* phenomenon—of “inner speech.”¹⁶⁹

Stanley Cavell, writing briefly about *Days of Heaven*, has argued that Malick’s visual style is a way of transposing for cinema a key component of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. As Cavell puts it, Malick has discovered a quality of photographic

¹⁶⁸ Noel Carroll, “Herzog, Presence, and Paradox,” *Persistence of Vision*, no. 2 (1985), 284.

¹⁶⁹ Paul Willemen, “Cinematic Discourse: The Problem of Inner Speech,” in *Cinema and Language*, ed. Stephen Heath and Patricia Mellencamp (AFI University Publications, 1983), 143.

representation which, when properly exploited, creates a state of viewing answerable to Heidegger's ethics of thought: a relationship to the objects of the world in which the objects participate in their representation. As Furstenau and MacAvoy point out, this property of the cinematic image to make us experience an object as both absent in fact but present in representation is a quality shared, to some degree, by all photographic representations. However, unlike most practitioners, Furstenau and MacAvoy argue that Malick has discovered a way to put this phenomenon to use, has discovered a way "to explore the significance of the distance between the thing seen and the thing itself, between the object and its realisation as idea or image."¹⁷⁰ The photographic image, if properly used, can communicate the drama whereby we represent an absent world to ourselves. This process of 'conceptualization' is a fundamental human tendency. Heidegger's unique approach to the problems of our representations is centered in his philosophy of *thinking*—an extremely complex phenomenon intimately related, for Heidegger, to the question of language. In *What is Called Thinking?*—the text Cavell sees as most pertinent to Malick—Heidegger brings poetry and thought, language and sensation, into relatedness: "Joyful things, too, and beautiful and mysterious and gracious things give us food for thought...if only we do not reject the gift by regarding everything that is joyful, beautiful, and gracious as the kind of thing which should be left to feeling and experience, and kept out of the winds of thought."¹⁷¹ For Heidegger, thought and poetry "*are* the essential telling."¹⁷² What is the relationship between the telling of thought and the showing of truth? For Furstenau and MacAvoy, Malick fulfills Heidegger's call for a "poet in destitute times," an artist/thinker who revivifies the

¹⁷⁰ Furstenau and MacAvoy, 176.

¹⁷¹ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Perennial, 1968), 31.

¹⁷² Heidegger, 128.

essential wonder of the world and its representations by poeticizing thinking and literalizing metaphysics.

Cinema is not clearly poetic. What do we mean when we call a filmmaker's style *poetic*? What happens to the image when it becomes burdened by this post-revelation realm of the figurative, the method of communication that compels measured interpretation? What sort of filter of experience do these tropes so familiar with language create? How do they keep us from the pure moments of experience and *photogénie*? Why do they create a sense of objectivity, and is this objectivity at the expense of the heartfelt subjective feeling which is the source of philosophic desire? If we can't construct a satisfying theory of a 'language' of cinema which can philosophize, or even a 'language' of cinema which can poeticize, it might be worthwhile examining how philosophy too wants to think in images—metaphorically speaking—but philosophizes in language. We looked at Plato's allegories of love, and tried to trace this essential relatedness by examining the experience and representation of insight. The experience of insight brings together language and imagery in a complex way which can help us account for the meeting of the figurative and literal realms in Malick's cinema, and understand the experience of each in their idiosyncrasy. To arrive through the phenomenon of insight to some kind of understanding of this phenomenon of representation, we need to appreciate that the essence of insight may lie in what happens after the moment of insight, in the thunder and fire of the lightning strike. We looked at the figurative nature of insight, and how its decay may help point to the lifespan of figurative tropes: this lifespan is a peculiarity of the meeting of language to images, and one Malick has thematized and made uniquely expressive. The idealism of symbol, the

desire of metaphor, and the decay of allegory, and their interrelatedness, helps define a cinematic poetry alive to thought and self. If cinema can help us understand the nature of insight, it can help us understand the psychology of the philosophic lover. Malick's characters inherit the problems of insight, and it is in these characters' thinking—and what we must do to think through their thinking—that the film itself begins to define a philosophic psychology, and in so doing begins philosophy.

Pvt. Bell's experience of insight and its decay is not unlike Witt's. His profound love for his wife is an insight-like experience which is the background to all his thought, but his narrative experience isn't determined, like Witt's, by an original insight we can pinpoint. His thinking, in fact, turns around an insight rarefied: a symbol. Bell is the only character in the film to actually verbalize the Jonesian symbol of 'the blue hills', and appropriately so since it is clearly marked as a romantic image. Jones, in a letter dated January 25, 1949, describes his use of the symbol 'the blue hills' to a friend: "All men must have ideals, to go on living. An ideal, 'the blue hills in the distance,' is basically romantic...I know I will never reach my 'blue hills,' as you will never reach yours. But I must have them to strive for."¹⁷³ A literal image of blue hills in the distance appears four times in the film and is associated with a variety of characters, most notably with Witt. During the opening sequence, a shot of Witt treading water at dusk reveals the blue hills for the first time, tantalizingly out of focus in the background. Bell later stands on a shoreline gazing at a small boat paddling towards him, the blue hills in the distance. Bell asks, "How do we get to those other shores? Those blue hills?" He answers this with another question: "Love. Where does it come from?" Bell will attempt to articulate this question through the same mixed imagery that defines Witt's experience: water and

¹⁷³ Quoted in Carter, 28.

flame. Staros, whose image of God is a flickering candle, sees the blue hills as well. All three of these characters find themselves involved in making a sacrifice.

There is very little we know of Marty, the wife, the cause of Bell's misfortune. Bell was an officer before the war, couldn't stand to be separated from her, resigned his commission, angered his superiors, went home, the war started, he was one of the first to get drafted. We first see Marty stepping across a green lawn at twilight, loose flower print dress, and then tracing a finger down Bell's back, in blue twilight, in Bell's poetic subjective flash back. Because this flashback is instigated by the question, from another soldier, "Where is she now?" and because the answer is, plainly, "She's home" there is immediately some uncertainty as to the status of Bell's 'images'. In this uncertainty, Bell's 'images' relate directly to Witt's. Is the shot of Marty walking across the grass a shot of her as she is now, at home? She glances back, almost to look at Bell. In the next shot Bell appears. These images must then be flashbacks. Or are they fantasies in which Bell has inserted himself? Both? And more importantly, when we see her, do we see her as she is, or as Bell remembers her? Has Bell created this imaginative scape for her, which—at least for him—represents her present, a present in which he imaginatively inserts himself? Indeed, this seems to be the case, as we see Marty circulated through various poses, in various costumes. Bell is labouring over discrete moments of memory, trying to revivify them through a complex series of reposes. That his voiceover becomes increasingly metaphoric, that her roles in his fantasies, as we will see, seem tied closer and closer to his experience of the war is not surprising. Bell's tender poetry is beset by the same mixing of flame and water imagery that defines Witt's experience.

When Bell sets off on his own to find the Japanese bunker the music cue is hypnotic, drowning, frightening, personal, mesmerizing, and most of all mysterious. Narratively, we are at the center of the film's promised mystery. As the sun sweeps over the landscape, the camera follows Bell cresting the last fold of ground, venturing further into the unknown than any of the soldiers so far. This is a moment of revelation. But before the bunker discovered, we cut to another of Bell's fantasy/flashbacks. The music linking the two is unbroken. Bell's struggle through the warm grass is cut against images of him holding his wife—a very effective, yet odd, mnemonic and metaphoric connection. But at the end of this flashback we suddenly cut to a shot which feels clearly more like a fantasy than a memory. But it's also more than fantasy as well: the shot will be echoed in a later shot of Bell, standing against the water, watching a boat in the water paddle, in the distance, to his blue hills. It seems as if Bell has created, for himself, a symbolic image. Marty is suddenly standing in the water which separates the shore from those blue hills, except she is standing against a vast empty horizon. She turns to Bell, and, in voiceover, invites him to, "Come out, come out where I am." This is the only time in the film that a woman is given access to this philosophical realm of voiceover, a striking moment in Malick's filmography: in his previous two films, all of the voiceovers were female. Her invitation is dangerous, a danger made clear as we cut back to Bell's discovery of the highly fortified bunker. This places the feminine, as it also appeared in Witt's images of his mother, in the highly mysterious realm of mortality. Bell is sent on this reconnaissance mission to try and provide a glimpse of the 'big picture'—the objective view—which the Americans have so far been missing. At the center of that mystery he articulates a symbolic image of his wife, and he comes across a woman

looking back. “Who lit this flame in us?” he asks as bombs explode overhead. The war, for Bell, is a metaphor for his love: it is through this war that he will literally, one day, get home to his wife. She is a symbol he has constructed, and it is through metaphor that he will bring her close.

What is most remarkable about Bell’s flashbacks is how dreamily disconnected Marty is from them—on her face we can surely read genuine love, but also sadness: a tightness in her smile, a sense of performance. Her odd demeanour may signal the fact that what we are seeing is a memory of the last moments they spent together before Bell left for war. But there are also several shots of Marty alone, waiting, gazing out to sea—these don’t seem like events Bell experienced, and twice involve shots from Marty’s point of view. And in the last fantasy scene, it seems we can actually witness the other man Marty has fallen in love with, the reason she must ask Bell for a divorce. The more we see these scenes, and especially once we know how Bell’s and Marty’s narrative plays out (once we, the audience, have had the destabilizing flash of insight which follows the reading of Marty’s letter), the more we want to ‘read’ Marty’s face—and, in fact, the more we want to read it against the grain. Bell may be the author of the fantasies (the war is the producer) but Marty is an actress, with her own agency, and her own interpretation of the situation, and in fact, her own agenda: in these quiet roles as suffering wife she is desperate not to hurt her beloved; she, like Witt’s mother, is the bearer of privileged knowledge. Indeed, watching these scenes again through Marty’s eyes, they seem, in fact, co-authored by her. The oddness of these fantasy spaces comes from the fact that they are dialectically constructed: perhaps Malick’s most interesting cinematic innovation, and one that asks us to re-read how we understand Witt’s fantasy

spaces. Marty, as if acting from within Bell's inner speech, has constructed a fantasy that is appropriate to both of them, appropriate to their shared circumstances of self representation: his state of physical danger, and her state of privileged knowing. Sensation and thought meet here in a highly figurative cinematic representation that despite the best intentions of the lovers cannot be sustained. This dialectic nature of this fantasy space is beautifully reflected by our interpretational challenge when faced with these scenes: reading subjectivity (i.e. Bell's fantasy) through indexical signs that cannot be entirely accounted for through the perspective that intends them.

Marty's thoughts meet Bell's thoughts in a now-space of fantasy. She knows that she is about to leave Bell, and, indeed, images of the 'other man' begin to invade the fantasy space, an event prefigured by the passing cars outside the gently swaying curtains, the world outside glimpsed intermittently. One transition from Bell's reality to this domestic fantasy space is effected not by the sound of wind we've heard so often, but the sound of an airplane passing by: a metonym for the air force captain Marty has fallen in love with. The public is always at the edge of these private thoughts of Bell's; in his articulation of Marty as a symbol he has fully invited it in. The naked symbol is now standing in the ruins of metaphor; we have lost the possibility of coherent connection between Bell's war and Bell's vision of Marty's faithful self-denial: we are now in the ruined kingdom of allegory.

Bell has existed at only the surface of thought; his memory a bulwark repelling all contingency. His desire for symbols is appropriate to such a state of thinking; his wish to remain eternally the same, tender: "I want to come back to you the man I was before." The war—and its eager metaphoric connections—exist at this level as well: the

war has presented the paradigm for such superficial and blinkered thought. Bell admits that what has sustained him through this war is active repression, is a fortification of self: “I haven’t even looked at another woman since I was called up. Or talked to one.” His reason: “I don’t want to feel the desire.” He has instrumentalized desire, which means his thinking is unreceptive to Marty’s desire, which means that he has no resistance to the dissolution of his thinking. Bell cannot fully comprehend the extent of his folly; Bell cannot fully think through this catastrophe. Bell realizes that he is accused of failing to recognize what he has asked of Marty; he has failed to think clearly what his sacrifice—and its representation—asks in gratitude: what Marty must sacrifice to stand in his thinking. Bell realizes that it is a bitter irony that this war which its philosophizers have argued is a fight for sake of family has caused Bell’s family to be lost. But what Bell cannot conceive—not from this place of regret where this war and his thinking has now left him—is his betrayal of their memory.

Bell felt Marty’s presence through the war—and it was her felt presence, her stepping out of memory, which defined his own. Bell has lost himself; the symbol brought close, the thinker withdraws: the thinker now incoherent. Bell is an allegory for loss. Bell’s history has been a history of representation: now, that she is gone, all representation as representation signifies his loss. Marty, however, leaves him with a melancholy promise: “We’ll meet again some day. People who have been as close as we have, always meet again.”

2. Eternal Return

Repetition and return are key themes in Malick's work. *Days of Heaven* is based on a circular narrative: Bill murders a foreman in Chicago and flees to the country; he murders the Farmer and must flee once again. *The New World* emphasizes its narrative themes of 'new beginnings' through music: its triple use of Wagner's "Vorspiel" from *Das Rheingold* is a circular, pulsing, orchestration designed to summon the eternal change of the river. This music marks the beginning of the film, a new beginning midway through, and returns at the film's finale. In *Badlands*, Kit leaves the burning house of Holly's father with a recording of his faux suicide note playing in an eternal loop. The concept of eternal return—Nietzsche called it the doctrine of eternal recurrence of the same—is played out in *The Thin Red Line* by the circularity of its narrative (the final shots of seemingly numberless ships, just like the ones that first carried the American soldiers, chugging towards to the island as Charlie Company sails away), the explicit Buddhist themes of reincarnation and repetition inherited from Jones' novel, the circularity of the film's creation of space,¹⁷⁴ and by an intertextual reference in Train's last speech which bears close analysis: "Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining."

¹⁷⁴ Perhaps the most striking example of circularity in *The Thin Red Line* is through its use of screen direction. In *Days of Heaven*, Bill, Abby, and Linda flee the city from Chicago to Texas moving right to left (there is that unforgettable shot of the train going over the bridge, right to left, against blue sky); when the trio flee the farm by river, they take a left to right direction, a sign of the journey *from* nature and back to the city (a journey made explicit in the original screenplay, page 118). In *The Thin Red Line*, the troops arrive to Guadalacanal right to left—notably, the Japanese (and Witt when he is AWOL) are marked as facing left to right: in opposition to the American troops. When the company returns to the beach to board the transports and leave the island they are still moving right to left: it is as if the camera were on a hill in the middle of the island, following the troops as they circumscribed it in a clockwise fashion. This directionality is one prefigured by the Melanesian children at the beginning of the film moving stones in a clockwise circle as if moving soldiers in formation.

The words “Oh my soul” are used forcefully in the penultimate chapter of Book 3 of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Called “On The Great Longing”, Eugen Fink calls it “perhaps the most beautiful chapter in the whole book,” and it is the chapter in which Heidegger suggests “the whole work achieves its summit.”¹⁷⁵ The chapter describes a dialogue between Zarathustra and his soul, each declaration made by Zarathustra beginning with “Oh my soul”—e.g. “Oh my soul, I gave you back the freedom over the created and uncreated; and who knows, as you know, the voluptuous delight of what is yet to come?” The chapter comes immediately after “The Convalescent,” in which Zarathustra has been conversing with the animals—not nature, precisely, but an aspect of nature—who expound to him the doctrine of eternal recurrence of the same. Zarathustra cannot accept such a truth, decrying human cruelty and the petty human speeches which he refuses to believe are worthy of eternal recurrence. “On the Great Longing” comes before “The Other Dancing Song,” in which Zarathustra discusses the possibility of eternal return with Life and Wisdom, both personified by women. It is in this chapter that Zarathustra whispers to Life, in an act of seduction and in a pledge of eternal devotion, that after his death he will return eternally.

Laurence Lambert, in his book length interpretation of Nietzsche’s text, suggests that this particular dialogue is characterized as a competition between Zarathustra and what Lambert suggests is his feminized soul. Zarathustra is cast as a manly storm; his soul is a pliant sea.¹⁷⁶ The dialogue is mostly one-sided: Zarathustra recounting all he has given his soul to make her what she is. It may strike many of us, when listening to Train at the end of the film, as a curious formulation: this idea of a soul as being something

¹⁷⁵ Laurence Lambert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Yale University Press, 1986), 344n90.

¹⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 224.

separate from us. We tend to think of our soul as something separable from us in death, but blended with us in life. That idea that we could ‘enter’ our soul seems counter intuitive. But what it emphasizes, as it is emphasized in *Zarathustra*, is that our souls are subject to our creation, that our souls are responsive to the decisions we make for them.

And yet, curiously, the soul’s response to Zarathustra is unanticipated. Rather than expressing her gratitude, she questions the authenticity of Zarathustra’s sacrifice, convincingly deflating his mythic authorial reverie, and wondering if the gift-giver is not infinitely more joyful than she who receives. “Which of us has to be thankful? Should not the giver be thankful that the receiver received? Is not giving a need? Is not receiving mercy?”¹⁷⁷ Bell’s sacrifice meets a similar criticism.

This profound questioning of the value of sacrifice, of the consequences for the community forged by it, and left traumatized by it, strikes me, among other things, as an expression of the practical problem of the decay of insight. For Nietzsche, this problem—all problems—are based in the experience of vengeance. As Heidegger puts it, “For Nietzsche, revenge is the fundamental characteristic of all thought so far.”¹⁷⁸ To redress the seeds of revenge, it is necessary not to erase history—not to erase the sacrifice (be it male or female), or the obligatory genuflection to historical greatness (and, indeed, the purveyor of private history is most likely female)—but to will it eternally in an effort to overcome but not transcend. In this way, Nietzsche can bring ‘transcendence’ back down to earth. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is an attempt, on a mythic level, to create the imaginative conditions which construct narratives free of that desire to revenge, the desire to recast the imperfections of the past in the urgency of the present moment and

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 223.

¹⁷⁸ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 97.

perceived anticipation of a perfect future. Not to erase that past, but will it to return eternally. Heidegger, in *What is Called Thinking?*, describes Nietzsche's project like this:

Nietzsche's thinking focuses on the deliverance from the spirit of revenge. It focuses on a spirit which, being the freedom from revenge, is prior to all mere fraternization, but also to any desire to mete out punishment, to all peace efforts and all warmongering—prior to that other spirit which would establish and secure peace, *pax*, by pacts. The space of this freedom from revenge is prior to all pacifism, and equally to all power politics. It is prior to all weak donothingism and shirking of sacrifice, and to blind activity for its own sake.¹⁷⁹

Heidegger links this experience to memory. That eternal return is linked to memory is clear: the recognition of the past repeating itself is an experience only possible by an animal living temporally, and disposed to the apperception of history. It is our existence as temporal animals, however, which make revenge central to our experience. “Revenge is—the will’s revulsion against time and its ‘It was’.”¹⁸⁰ Heidegger links ‘memory’ back to the Old English origins of the word ‘thought’—*thanc*, which means a ‘grateful thought’, and which survives today as *thanks*.¹⁸¹ Likewise, “‘Memory’ initially did not at all mean the power to recall. The word designates the whole disposition in the sense of a steadfast intimate concentration upon things that essentially speak to us in every thoughtful meditation.”¹⁸² For Heidegger, the act of remembering is an act of devoted contemplation upon something: “abiding” with not just with the thing in the past, but also in the present, and “in the same way...with what may come.” In this act of memory, “out of the memory, and within memory, the soul then pours forth its wealth of images—of

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 139.

¹⁸² Ibid., 140.

visions envisioning the soul itself.”¹⁸³ This is a striking reformulation of the memory as a stage for the *figure*. These figurative images Heidegger imagines pouring out of the soul—let loose by the act of memory—signify the state of the soul itself. The soul, in this case, is revealed through an anamnestic experiment which embraces the most furtive and treacherous imaginative and mnemonic connections, instead of pushing them away, instead of trying to take revenge upon a past which, while once beautiful, has decayed into only an allegory for decay.

It is thus, in memory, in *thanc*, that the possibility of redemptive gratitude—the site of personal eternal return and freedom from revenge, the imbalance of gratitude redressed—is realized. *The Thin Red Line*, in its formal design, and its thematic circularity, creates such devotion out of its interplay with memory. And, perhaps, it is indeed this wish to escape revenge, and its wish to recognize loss, that drives it towards transcendence.

While I’m reluctant to ‘close’ the final image of the film in a single intertextual interpretation, it is worth considering that the image of Zarathustra’s soul is, finally, a single lone plant (a vine), in a state of waiting, and from which is the pregnant possibility of a future which will return eternally. The last image of the film, the coconut sprout against the water, earth, and sky horizon, is certainly suggestive of such a complex relationship to the future. And as I’ve tried to identify in the allegorical figures of ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Malick’s work, the generative potential of this union is not, in itself, a mythic solution to the problem of decay. The merging of public body and private soul, and in their union witnessing—from the position of the soul potentialized in self-creation—the creation of a world, perhaps one willed to return eternally, defines the

¹⁸³ Ibid.

sadness, even the menace of the film's final image. The transcendent, but also terrifying image of earthly responsibility: "All things shining."

The final three shots of the film, as Chion rightly points, are a descending hierarchy: man, animal, vegetable. We have a shot of three human beings in two boats (a father and two sons?), a shot of two birds in a tree, and the newly sprouted coconut on the beach and its reflection. The final images are indeed suggestive of dualities, but perhaps they are more clearly a count down: 3, 2, 1. A movement towards clarity. The final image of the lone sprout of life against a dead horizon of water, sand, mist, blue hills, and rain may also remind us of the only other shot like it—a *single* living thing in the foreground against a curving horizon in the background—the shot of Marty, Bell's wife, venturing alone into the water. She has turned back with a glance, and this may remind us of the glance given—though unmet—in the graveyard, by a Melanesian woman who turns to look, as if in answer to Welsh's figurative desires heard in voiceover, just as Welsh turns to look away: "if I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack. A glance from your eyes, and my life would be yours." Or the quick glance to the right Witt makes before he dies. These are images of terrible loneliness, and in their exquisite singularity they are so close and so terrifyingly intimate with the company of philosophy, memory, potential, and resolution, that the world seems to have turned to look.

The most ostensibly philosophic films, I'd argue, are interested in 'overcoming', in human ascending. Think of Tarkovsky's scientist at the end of *Solaris*, alone on an island of memory made physical by a scientific phenomenon that eludes even science. Or at the end of *Nostalghia* (1983), where a lone hero must walk a candle across an empty pool to save a world where civilization has long ago collapsed and nature rushed

in to reclaim it. Or in the films of Werner Herzog, where nature is at one moment sublime, and then the grim instrument of a lonely annihilation. Or in the seminal cultural-philosophic cinematic event: Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), where the image of man's transcendence is a star child peering at the camera with a doll's dead eyes. All of these filmmakers find a heroic—in some cases, existentialist—role for their protagonist, who accomplishes (alone) something important, and can never re-integrate back into the social once they have bestowed their gift: most often, because the social is long long gone. Malick's philosophical films—all set in the past—trace a heroic philosophical narrative sustainable through its focus upon the survivors. Linda on the railway tracks starting a new story, Holly staring out at the clouds, Welsh wandering a graveyard, Pocahontas turning cartwheels in an English garden. Just as nature persists indifferently to narrative, so too do Malick's films identify the life which persists after insight.

3. Love and Memory

The desire for sustainability is explored through concepts like 'love' and 'nature', but the stage of this drama of thought is ultimately our memory: that realm of inner voice where the division between internal and external becomes problematic. A space wherein our identity as the subject of inner speech is a split identity "sustained...as the tension between 'I' and 'other'."¹⁸⁴ It is in our memory, for Heidegger, that "thought is gathered."¹⁸⁵ The metaphors of 'near' and 'far', 'realms' and 'spheres', 'planes' and 'ladders', while not absent in Heidegger's vocabulary, meet new 'spatialities' of language

¹⁸⁴ Willemsen, "Cinematic Discourse: The Problem of Inner Speech," 153. Willemsen is drawing from the work of C.S. Peirce.

¹⁸⁵ Heidegger, 11.

and emotion, subject and object, new verbs and participles: “keeping safe,” “calling,” “crying,” “respecting,” “acknowledging,” “dwelling,” “passing,” “pointing,” “giving,” “participating,” “letting-lie-before-us,” “relatedness,” “taking-to-heart,” and, of course, “being.” To understand to what in experience this rejuvenated language of Heidegger’s answers, how it explains this space of inner speech and thought where ‘I’ and ‘other’ meet, to what fear it overcomes, to what hope it sustains, we need to understand the phenomenon of figurative thinking in the drama of its decay. The philosophic in cinema is a record of such an engagement.

When Socrates critiques the art of writing in the *Phaedrus* he concludes definitively, arguing that if anyone were to write, “privately or for the public...a political document which he believes to embody clear knowledge of lasting importance, then this writer deserves reproach...for to be unaware of the difference between a dream-image and the reality of what is just and unjust, good and bad, must truly be grounds for reproach even if the crowd praises it with one voice” (277D-E). The philosophic writer, on the other hand:

When he writes, it’s likely he will sow gardens of letters for the sake of amusing himself, storing up reminders for himself “when he reaches forgetful old age” and for everyone who wants to follow in his footsteps, and will enjoy seeing them sweetly blooming...the dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge...such discourse makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it as happy as any human being can be. (276D & 277A)

The philosophic writer writes so as to leave “reminders”: the word is *hupomnēmata* and is a reference to a burgeoning trend in Greece of Plato’s day: the keeping of *hypomnemata*. As Foucault explains, *hypomnemata* were not personal diaries in the sense of a biographical commentary, but rather written down reminders—everything

from accounts, to schedules, to sayings or snippets of things overheard: “They constituted a material memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation.”¹⁸⁶ For Foucault, what is astonishing in this sudden encounter between the public and this new technology of writing is how it was immediately put to use in an effort to analyze and define a sense of self: the fragments of reality jotted down constituted a personal encounter with *logos*, with the accumulated thinking of a culture unlike what usually filtered down through authoritarian channels.¹⁸⁷

The cinephile meticulously collecting into memory—and into fan magazines, and ciné clubs, and lecture halls—subjective moments of ‘reality’ discovered in eternally re-darkening movie theatres represents an encounter with a technology of representation that re-enacts the ancient Greek encounter with writing. Like the fragments of the ancient urban world recorded in *hypomnemata*, the cinephile’s ‘reality’ is a highly mediated one. For the theorists of *photogénie*, the essence of the cinephilic experience is one of ‘pure’ reality in fragment form: glimpses of a cinematic stylization “which does not alter the plain truth” but reveals it.¹⁸⁸ Thomas Elsaesser argues that the cinephile—like the *hypomnemata* keeper—turns the experience of memory and technology into an experience of self definition: a process of gathering and reflecting which has found new life in new digital technologies that have allowed the cinephile to collect and manipulate their fragments directly.

¹⁸⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 363.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 365.

¹⁸⁸ Louis Delluc, qtd in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism Volume 1: 1907-1929*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 110.

Elsaesser argues for the importance of disappointment and disenchantment within the nature of cinephilia, and suggests how this disenchantment has been intellectually useful.¹⁸⁹ Elsaesser suggests that the disappointment of the cinephile with the object of their love, nostalgia, and sentimentality—a recognition of a discrepancy between the world as they want it to be and the world as it exists—is “the prerequisite for there to be any insight or feeling at all.”¹⁹⁰ Like the ancient scribbler in their *hypomnemata*, the cinephile is similarly using an encounter with technology to discover self—*photogénie* is after all, tied intimately to the cinema’s photographic power, its ability to finely slice the real for our close inspection to discover an interaction with the world, and turn the random experiences of life into some sort of language-like collection. Elsaesser sees the forging of identity in cinephilia as not a symbolic union with a whole but a resistance: “disenchantment is a form of individuation because it rescues the spectator’s sense of self from being engulfed by...the self-sufficiency and always already complete there-ness that especially classic American cinema tries to convey.”¹⁹¹ For Elsaesser, this is a process of differentiation which stems from an interaction with love and faith.

This process and progress of self is of course linked to community and to communities of cinephiles. Stanley Cavell argues that a key part of the experience of cinema is a reflection on self which must overcome the corrupting influence of time: an attempt to remember and reclaim both past experiences of films and the temporal ‘self’ which lived said experience. As Cavell puts it, films incite a kind of desire to remember self: “As with dreams, you do sometimes find yourself remembering moments in a film,

¹⁸⁹ Thomas Elsaesser, “Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment,” in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, ed. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 32.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

and a procedure in trying to remember is to find your way back to a characteristic mood the thing has left you with.”¹⁹² Cavell goes on to remark that it is other people who help you remember movies.

Elsaesser defines two different historical forms of cinephilia (a “take one” and a “take two”): the first, the classic form and the one influenced by theories like *photogénie*, is concerned with authentic experience; the second is concerned with *any* experience. Both seek the “same self-presence that love promises and sometimes provides.”¹⁹³ Both are based on anxiety and disenchantment, and in this relationship to knowledge and self share the philosophic realm. However, they seem to represent opposite poles of desire, and the heady days of intellectual stimulation through disenchantment seems to have passed—was cinephilia a stage in an intellectual maturation? What have we matured into? Elsaesser wonders, “is it possible to once more become innocent and political?”¹⁹⁴

For Elsaesser, the “happy perversion” of cinephilia is a constantly returning and essential feature of our engagement with the modern world because it, in “whatever form,” attempts to engage with “a crisis of memory.”¹⁹⁵ Even though they are manifested so differently that they appear contrary, “take one” and “take two” cinephilia meet in the crisis of memory. The latest form, the “take two” of cinephilia, engages with this crisis not through the authenticity of a unique event which is long lost—not through the ambiguity of symbol like experience—but through repetition and return, an awareness and a closeness to the philosophic state that Benjamin saw as defining the hellish face of modernity, and Nietzsche saw as offering a shining potential for liberation. Elsaesser

¹⁹² Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 16.

¹⁹³ Elsaesser, 39.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

puts the difficulty facing take two cinephilia this way: “The paradox is similar to what Nietzsche expressed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: ‘all pleasure seeks eternity,’ meaning that pleasure has to face up to the fact of mortality in the endless repetition of the vain attempt to overcome it.”¹⁹⁶ In this vision of cinephilia we can see the persistence of the optimism of symbolic thinking, an optimism and idealism that cannot be merely pushed aside but must be recognized as constituting the persistent debris of insight.

If we want to move beyond the superficial but profoundly instructive cycles of the figurative and explore this energy of repetition as a philosophic engagement with the world, *The Thin Red Line* could be discussed as a film which communicates at the level of the cinephilic—a word encapsulating the shared anxieties and desires of its dual historical manifestations. The film’s unique stylization of reality and its intense investment in the indexical nurtures cinephilic moments: moments of memory, beauty, and community. The butterflies at the edge of the frame, wind, sunlight, a flashing glance, a crystal tone. These are the sorts of moments which seem to answer to that unique capacity of cinema fretted over by those who theorized *photogénie*: moments of pure sensation and impression which we have ignored in our analysis so far, and which can so easily lead to a state of desperate and grasping nostalgia, an eternal return of decay, a wasteland of thought and feeling. But if reconsidered in terms of the questions of the union of poetry and philosophy, we can begin to understand the background out of which these shining cinematic moments seem to compulsively step. If we accept the cinephilic as a figurative trope, perhaps it is one defined by the lifespan of the literary tropes cinema has inherited, the events which Malick’s film depicts: the undoing of metaphor, the bringing close of symbol, the decay of allegory. This unique figurative

¹⁹⁶ Elsaesser, 39.

trope might in fact best be called *cinephilic*: any other word might forsake the rapture and disappointment, the self and other, the micro and macro, the beauty and regret, the memory and loss, the motion and stillness, the love and sacrifice, the clamour and silence at its heart.

APPENDIX 1:
The Voiceovers of *The Thin Red Line*

A number of high profile interpretations of *The Thin Red Line* make claims for the film based on mis-attribution of voiceovers. While the voiceovers in the film do tend to blend together, they are not all by the same actor, and, most importantly, surprisingly few are by the character of Witt. There are 29 uses of voiceover in the film, by 12 different characters.¹⁹⁷ There are also 3 instances of characters speaking out loud but speaking in such a way that they are essentially speaking to themselves. Thinking about these voiceovers also leads us to consider the representation of the Japanese soldiers, whose words aren't subtitled for English-only speaking audiences to understand, who speak without being understood. The scene at the Japanese bunker, after the successful American attack, is notable for the way the Japanese prisoners seem so intently engaged in their own contemplation, and yet, unlike the American soldiers, we hear no voices. The film includes several voiceovers that are easily attributable to specific characters, and then one set of voiceovers not clearly attributable to anyone: this voiceover (the voice that opens the film) is essentially occupying the position of the film's classic narrator. While I was unable to identify this character on my own—I admit, that when I first saw the film I thought it was the voice of Woody Harrelson—DVD has somewhat cleared up the mystery. The DVD's subtitlers have done an admirable job matching lines of dialogue to character, and nearly all the attributions can be discovered by watching the film with the subtitles on. The first voiceover, believed by many critics (writing just after

¹⁹⁷ Originally, Billy Bob Thornton was hired to record all of the voiceovers (if the voiceover text recorded by Thornton would've been the same as what is in the finished film I haven't been able to ascertain). We do know that in the theatrical trailer for the film there is voiceover text read by a single unidentified male voice (and notably it is not Southern): the first part is taken from what Train says in the film "How did we lose the good that was given us, how'd we let it slip away, scattered, careless, trade it for what has no worth?", but the second ("Can you find me here, even where the world is darkest, where evil surrounds us on all sides?") is not in the final film.

the film's release, and even years after) to be the voice of Witt, is in fact the character of Train (played by Billy Dee Smith). There are some later voiceovers attributed by the subtitlers to Witt, which, to my ear—and a random selection of impartial listeners—seem to be spoken by the same voice they've previously attributed to Train. It's an interesting interpretative puzzle, and if I'm proven wrong, I don't think it'll seriously hurt my argument. Train is a fascinating peripheral character, and the way he pops up repeatedly on the margins of the film—and often preceding his voiceover (he can be seen in the back of the truck right before the line, "Hour like months..." and then sitting on the grass smoking before the line "One man looks at a dying bird...")—indeed places him in a narrator-like position.

The following transcription of all the voiceover in the film is well worth reading straight through as if it were a single poem: it provides an interesting synopsis of the movie; it's an interesting challenge to memory.

NOTE: The lines in italics are not technically voiceovers, but function as soliloquies—interior thoughts spoken aloud that receive no answer, are unheard, or can't be understood.

0:00:10 PVT. EDWARD P. TRAIN (Billy Dee Smith): "What's this war in 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?"

0:04:10 PVT. WITT (Jim Caviezel) to Hoke [this begins as a voiceover and then becomes part of a conversation]: "I remember my mother when she was dying, 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. I couldn't find nothin' or upliftin' about her going back to God. *I heard people talk about immortality, but I ain't seen it.*"

0:05:54 WITT: "I wondered how it'd be when I died...what'd be like to know that this breath is the last one you's ever gonna draw. I just hope I can meet is the same way she did. With the same...calm. 'Cause that's where it's hidden—the immortality I hadn't seen."

0:16:27 COLONEL TALL (Nick Nolte): “Worked my ass off. Brown-nosed to the generals. Degraded myself. For them. My family. My home.”

0:18:29 TALL: “All they sacrificed for me. Poured out like water on the ground. All I might have given for love’s sake. Too late. Dyin’. Slow as a tree.”

0:19:48 TALL: “The closer you are to Caesar, the greater the fear.”

0:25:03 PVT. BELL (Ben Chaplin): “Why should I be afraid to die? I belong to you. If I go first, I’ll wait for you there. On the other side of the dark waters. Be with me now.”

0:27:43 UNKNOWN: “Okay.”

0:30:56 TRAIN: “Who are you to live in all these many forms? You’re death that captures all. You, too, are the source of all that’s going to be borned. You’re glory. Mercy. Peace. Truth. You give calm a spirit. Understanding. Courage. The contented heart.”

0:36:37 WITT: “Maybe all men got one big soul who everybody’s a part of. All faces of the same man. One big self. Everyone lookin’ for salvation by himself. Each like a coal, thrown from the fire.”

0:40:36 STAROS (Elias Koteas) to God?: “Are you here? Let me not betray you. Let me not betray my men. In you I place my trust.”

0:50:31 STAROS: “Children.”

00:52:57 DOLL (Dash Mihok): “I killed a man. Worst thing you can do. Worse than rape. I killed a man, and nobody can touch me for it.”

1:11:53 TALL: “Shut up in a tomb. Can’t lift the lid. Played a role I never conceived.”

1:13:28 McCRON (John Savage): “*Show me how to see things the way you do. Show me how to see things the way you do. We’re dirt. Just dirt.*”

1:17:29 MARTY (Miranda Otto): “Come out. Come out where I am.”

1:23:28 McCRON (John Savage): “*Go ahead! Come on, come on, come on! Who’s deciding who’s going to live? Who’s deciding who’s gonna die? This is futile! Look at me. I stand right up here and not one bullet! Not one shot! Why!? How come they all had to die, and I can stand right here, I can stand right up and nothin’ happens to me!?*”

1:24:10 BELL: “We. We together. One being. Flow together like water. Till I can’t tell you from me. I drink you. Now. Now.”

1:26:10 STAROS: "You're my light. My guide."

1:44:12 FIFE (Adrien Brody): "You seen many dead people?"

STORM (John C. Reilly): "Plenty. They're no different than dead dogs, once you get used to the idea. We're meat, kid."

[The previous is a conversation taken from an unused part of the film, and transformed into a voiceover, presumably to function as a memory of Fife's.]

1:44:45 JAPANESE SOLDIER (read by Elias Koteas): "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?"

1:50:34 TRAIN: "This great evil. Where does it come from? How did it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from? Who's doin' this? Who's killin' us? Robbin' us of life and light? Mockin' us with the sight of what we might've known? Does our ruin benefit the earth? Does it help the grass to grow, the sun to shine? Is this darkness in you too? Have you passed through this night?"

1:52:28 CHARLIE DALE (Arie Verveen) to a Japanese Soldier: *"I'm going to sink my teeth into your liver. You're dyin'. See them birds up there? They gonna eat you raw. Where you're goin', you're not comin' back from."*

1:54:14 DALE: "What are you to me? Nothin'."

2:02:57 TRAIN (mis-attributed on the DVD to Witt): "Hours like months, days like years. Walked into the golden age. Stood on the shores of a new world."

2:05:29 STAROS: "You are my sons. My dear sons. You'll live inside me now. I'll carry you wherever I go."

2:06:04 TRAIN (mis-attributed on the DVD to Witt): "Can't nothing make you forget it. Each time you start from scratch. War don't ennoble men. It turns 'em into dogs. Poisons the soul."

2:07:21 BELL: "My dear wife. You get something twisted out of your insides by all this blood, filth, and noise. I want to stay changeless for you. I want to come back to you the man I was before. How do we get to those other shores? To those blue hills? Love. Where does it come from? Who lit this flame in us? No war can put it out. Conquer it. I was a prisoner. You set me free."

2:12:25 MARTY: "Dear Jack. I've met an air force captain. I've fallen in love with him. I want a divorce to marry him. I know you can say no, but I'm asking you anyway, out of the memory of what we had together. Forgive me. It just got too lonely Jack. We'll meet again some day. People who have been as close as we've been always meet

again. I have no right to speak to you this way. I can't stop myself. A habit so strong. Oh, my friend of all those shining years. Help me leave you."

2:17:36 TRAIN: "We were a family. Howd'it break up and come apart? So that now we're turned against each other. Each standing in the other's light. How did we lose the good that was given us? Let it slip away. Scattered, careless. What's keeping us from reaching out, touching the glory?"

2:23:03 TRAIN: "One man looks at a dying bird, and thinks there's nothin' but unanswered pain. That death's got the final word. It's laughin' at him. Another man sees that same bird. Feels the glory. Feels somethin' smilin' through it."

2:37:16 WELSH: "Everything a lie. So much to spew out. They just keep coming, one after another. You're in a box. A moving box. They want you dead. Or in their lie. Only one thing a man can do. Find something that's his. Make an island for himself. If I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack. A glance from your eyes, and my life would be yours."

2:40:56 TRAIN: "Who were you that I lived with? Walked with? The brother. The friend."

2:41:50 TRAIN: "Darkness and light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining."

APPENDIX 2: Cast List

Sean Penn First Sergeant Edward Welsh
Adrien Brody Corporal Fife
Jim Caviezel Private Witt
Ben Chaplin Private Jack Bell
Nick Nolte Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Tall
John C. Reilly Sergeant Storm
John Travolta Brigadier General Quintard
John Cusack Captain John Gaff
Woody Harrelson Sergeant Keck
Don Harvey Sergeant Becker
Tom Jane Private Ash
Elias Koteas Captain James Staros
George Clooney Captain Charles Bosche
Jared Leto Second Lieutenant Whyte
John Savage Sergeant McCron
Tim Blake Nelson Private Tills
Mark Boone Junior Private Peale
Norman Patrick Brown Private Henry
Paul Gleeson First Lieutenant George Band
Gordon MacDonald Private First Class Earl
Marina Malota Marina
Dash Mihok Private First Class Doll
Larry Romano Private Mazzi
Arie Verveen Pvt. Charlie Dale
Kirk Acevedo Private Tella
Simon Billig Lieutenant Colonel Billig
Jarrod Dean Corporal Thorne
Matt Doran Private Coombs
Travis Fine Private Weld
David Harrod Corporal Queen
Danny Hoch Private Carni
Penny Allen Witt's Mother
Benjamin Melanesian Villager
Kengo Hasuo Japanese Prisoner
Ben Hines Assistant Pilot
Robert Roy Hofino Private Sico, BAR Man
Jack Melanesian Man Walking Past the Troops
Jimmy Melanesian Villager
Polyn Leona Melanesian Woman with Child
Simon Lyndon Medic #2
Kazuki Maehara Japanese Private #1

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