

THE CINEMATIC LIFE OF THE FIGURAL:
MAPPING SHAPES OF TIME IN
TERRENCE MALICK'S *THE NEW WORLD* (2005)

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For space, too, is a temporal concept.

— Paul Klee¹

INTRODUCTION

What remains debated in the extensive literature on Terrence Malick's films is the metaphysics informing Malick's complex treatment of nature-culture relations in his films. Kit and Holly's vain escape through the badlands in Montana (*Badlands* 1973), biblical plagues in *Days of Heaven* (1978), different philosophical views on law and violence in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), cosmic and human temporalities in *The Tree of Life* (2011), and consuming moral dilemmas of love (or lack thereof) in the deeply alienated twenty-first century settings of *To The Wonder* (2014) and *Knight of Cups* (2015). As Iain Macdonald's work on Malick's *The New World* suggests, although many critics acknowledge nature as one of Malick's fundamental motifs and themes, very few have "directly purported the metaphysics and 'the problem of nature'"² in Malick's oeuvre. Operating within this critical and philosophical gap of the problem of nature, this article frames the analysis of Terrence Malick's *The New World* within a posthumanist discourse on aesthetic experiences. William Brown states that "[p]osthumanist discourse seeks to displace old, anthropocentric theories and practices with new, posthuman considerations of mankind and its creative endeavours, be they technological or artistic."³ In this framework, this article maintains that Walter Benjamin's philosophy of time and art is particularly productive for an illumination of Terrence Malick's treatment of nature in his cinema. Contrary to modernist and nostalgic conceptions of film technologies as the primary cause of humans' alienation and loss of archaic unity and harmony with the world and

nature, second technology, for Benjamin,⁴ is a possibility of a positive relation to *techne* and renewed relation to nature in the present world.

Thus, the paper specifically investigates Malick's use of cinema to deal with issues of nature-culture relations in *The New World* (2005). In narrowing the scope of the investigation to nature-culture relations, both Robert Sinnerbrink's and Iain Macdonald's readings will be foregrounded for their respective, although divergent, philosophical positions on Malick's film. Sinnerbrink argues that *The New World* "recalls the kind of 'aesthetic mythology' called for by the early German romantics in response to the crisis of reason and meaning afflicting the modern world," and concludes that the legend of Pocahontas and John Smith "provides the opportunity to develop the allegorical significance of the theme of marriage and the possibility of reconciliation between cultures or, more deeply, between human culture and nature."⁵ For Sinnerbrink, Malick's retelling of the tainted legend is, in fact, a deliberate "attempt to immerse us in the imagined experience of this mythic moment of contact between old and new worlds and to transfigure this tainted myth of intercultural encounter through the aesthetic power of cinematic poetry."⁶ On the other hand, Macdonald argues that, "*The New World* asks the viewer to look upon what occurs in the narrative, on the level of appearances [...] as nature *itself* or, better, as nature expressing itself as reason in history."⁷ Moving on from these two divergent premises, this paper asks: is this "reconciliation" and "transfiguration"⁸ between humans and nature really possible through an aesthetic approach to film? Does cinema interfere with—or alter—romantic and nihilistic visions of nature and life?

Drawing on D. N. Rodowick's account of the figural in film-philosophy⁹ and Peter Fenves work on Benjamin's concept of plastic time,¹⁰ this paper contends that cinema does, indeed, play a crucial role in the redefinition of nature-culture interplays beyond romantic and nihilistic approaches to nature. It argues that cinema enables a non-anthropocentric and non-subjective vision of the plasticity of time thereby disclosing a redefinition of the modernist space-time paradigm in contemporary culture. In order to concretely exemplify the novelties of Benjamin's figural and temporal approach to nature-culture relations in films, the analysis pauses at Malick's use of a sixteenth-century map in the initial and final title sequences of *The New World*. Malick's cinematic map evokes, subverts and reshapes the Kantian nature/culture divide ingrained in modernist/postmodernist visions of the map-territory relationship. Through a detailed

application of Benjamin's temporal reduction in film-philosophy — with its explicit relation (and distance) to Husserl's phenomenology — this article concludes that Benjamin's shape of time illuminates Malick's *The New World* as a cinematic possibility of new, non-anthropocentric approaches to nature-culture relations in the present world.

TIME AND THE FIGURAL

In the introduction to the edited work *After Images of Gilles Deleuze's Film-Philosophy*, Rodowick clarifies the relevance and link between his work on the figural and a Deleuzian philosophy of time:

In *Reading the Figural*, I suggest that the movement-image and the time-image are not historical concepts and that it is misleading to conceive of the latter as following the former along a chronological time line. The two concepts do suggest, however, divergent philosophies of history owing to their different relations to the Whole and to their immanent logics of image and sign ... The movement-image has a history in a dialectically unfolding teleology. It progresses to a point where it logically completes its semiotic options ... But the time-image pursues another logic altogether. Expressed as eternal return, the recurrent possibility in each moment of time for the emergence of the new and unforeseen.¹¹

Contrary to most film-historical readings of the time-image and the movement-image, Rodowick reads Deleuze's cinema images philosophically. On the one hand, the movement-image of classical cinema, for Rodowick, entails a Hegelian conception of time and history. On the other hand, the time-image of post-war cinema is inscribed within a Nietzschean genealogical perspective where linearity and teleology leave the scene in favour of a new, non-linear and recurrent logic of time. Following Rodowick, the perceptual realism of the film-image (its indexical or virtual relation to space that distinguishes analogue and digital technologies, for example) is irrelevant: "the experience of film returns to us the forms and *shapes of time as change* in its singularity, contingency and open-endedness [emphasis added]."¹² Thus, the Deleuzian shift from the

study of images of movement in space to the study of *images of time* in films inaugurates a new set of ethical and aesthetic considerations on films.

In philosophical terms, for Rodowick, the Deleuzian shift translates from a Hegelian conception of historicity to a Nietzschean concept, “[the movement-image and the time-image] do suggest, ... divergent philosophies of history owing to their different relations to the Whole [namely, Hegelian and Nietzschean relations to the whole].¹³ While Deleuze’s and, indeed, Rodowick’s work remain essential, for this reader, to an understanding of the importance of time in film-philosophy, this article proposes Walter Benjamin’s notion of time ¹⁴ as a suitable concept in tackling the “the problem of nature” and history in Malick’s *The New World*. Before turning to Fenves’ shape of time and its relevance to a figural reading of *images of time* in films, the next two sections of this article point to Malick’s dramatic presentation of an exemplary philosophical gap between Hegelian and Nietzschean conceptions of history expressed in, and through, *The New World*’s formal and narrative elements.

IDEOLOGIES AND *THE NEW WORLD*

In *The New World*, the tension between nature and culture that consistently runs throughout Malick’s oeuvre, is more evident and played upon. The contraposition between a new and an old world, between the colonizers of the western world and the “naturals” – as they are called in the movie – of the beautiful, untouched and pristine Virginia of the 1600s is the driving conflict of the story, and a purely aesthetic and perceptual one. As Sinnerbrink notes, Malick’s *The New World* challenges the imposition of philosophy and philosophical ideas over its distinctively cinematic worlds and poetics.¹⁵ Similarly, Martin Donougho argues that Malick’s turn from teaching philosophy in American academia to enrolling in the American Film School in the late 1960s can be interpreted as Malick’s way of exploring cinema’s philosophical possibilities, “... a way of allowing things to emerge into significance – to let their showing up itself be shown up ... while retaining a certain obliqueness of presentation and interpretation.”¹⁶ Indeed, as both Donougho and Sinnerbrink point out, the cinematic presentation of ideas overcomes the problem of ideologies and ideological thinking, or the problem of imposing ideas over the world. In this reading, Captain Smith’s story allegorises a precise utopian and ideological vision of

the human-nature relation; a vision that remains irremediably blocked in dualism between a dream world of love and the world of necessity and nature.

The love-story between John Smith and Pocahontas is punctuated by a dream versus reality antithesis, conflict and opposition. The film opens with Smith (Colin Farrell) as prisoner in Captain Newport's (Christopher Plummer) ship ("you come to these shores in chains"), and Smith's dualism in the film does not resolve in a dialectical and liberating synthesis of sorts; rather, his character's trajectory arguably shows the limits of a practical approach to idealism and dialectical thinking. When Smith falls in love with Pocahontas in the Powhatan village immersed in lush forest, he rather idealistically says, "They are gentle, loving, faithful, lacking in all guile and trickery. The words denoting lying, deceit, greed, envy, slander, and forgiveness have never been heard. They have no jealousy, no sense of possession. Real – what I thought a dream." When Smith returns to the fort, Malick's direction emphasises the visual contrast between the Powhatans' and the British culture, and early James Town is shown as a filthy, horrible expression of a parasitic civilization. In the fort, Smith's voiceover narrates, "It was a dream, now I am awake." The last element of Smith's dialectical journey occurs at the very end of the film, when he meets with Pocahontas, now Rebecca Rolfe, in the perfectly domesticated and assimilated nature of European gardens. Here, Smith says, "I thought it was a dream what we knew in the forest. It's the only truth." Smith's voice-overs arguably point to the limits of dialectical thinking: the dangers of thinking of life as a progression towards a better or perfect world, following (or looking for) foundational ideas and original "truths" in utopian futures and dreams of new lands.

Indeed, Smith's voyage of discovery ends on the metaphoric rocks that Malick's film openly shows when it will come to an end; not finding the "passage to the Indies," as hoped, but just a stream of running water flowing into the ocean. In this view, it is important to note that during Smith's first assigned mission to find the Powhatan king (a breathtakingly beautiful sequence shot on the Chickahominy River in Virginia), viewers hear Smith in voice-over saying:

We shall make a new start, a fresh beginning. Here the blessings of the earth are bestowed upon all. None need grow poor. Here there is good ground for all, and no cause but one's labour in the true commonwealth – hard work and self-reliance and

virtue ... We shall have no landlords to extort the fruit of our labour, or wrack us with their high rents. Men shall not make each other spoil.

Despite the remarkable historical detail in the mise-en-scene (and implication of substantial work carried out in the film's pre-production phases: scouting locations; the resurrection of an extinct Powhatan language in the scriptwriting and acting; and historical research informing detailed make-up and costume design), Smith's "progressive" vision in the voice-over narration produces a gap and interruption of narrative teleology that strikes the viewer not only for its anachronism, but also for its distance from the historical events that arguably followed Smith's mission in real history. In light of five hundred years of American history, coupled with contemporary awareness of the disasters of colonization and the systematic destruction of Indigenous cultures in the name of cultural superiority, Smith's words present as particularly disturbing and, indeed, naïve.¹⁷ Arguably, it is in this discomfort that Malick exposes the dangers of imposing abstract ideas over the world and history, and the all-too-human tendency to give new names to old practices of war and conquest.

A NEW WORLD, BEYOND NIHILISM?

As Donougho remarks, in Malick's film there is a constant preoccupation with naming. *The New World* displays a "consuming interest in language, in the naming of world and thing."¹⁸ For example, the scene where Pocahontas learns from Smith the English name of things, as if Smith "was speaking for the first time" as he will confess at the end; or the scene where the maid (Janine Divitski) teaches Pocahontas how to dress, wear shoes and read the written word. Significantly, at their first encounter the maid says: "My name's Mary, and yours I believe, is..." to which the young man introducing them hastily replies: "Oh no! She says it's not her name anymore. She hasn't got a name," and the maid politely says: "How unfortunate. Well, we shall have to give you one!" The maid is a key figure helping the unnamed Pocahontas on her journey to a new name, when she marries John Rolfe (Christian Bale) as the newly christened Rebecca. Their courtship begins when Rolfe joins Pocahontas, who is broken and lifeless after Smith's abandonment and decision to follow his dreams and look for "the passage to the

Indies.” The courtship is shown in a montage sequence that starts with a handheld camera following Pocahontas’ silent walk and her silent and timid gaze at Rolfe, and voice-over of the maid saying: “... a nature like yours can turn trouble into good...” The maid’s words then continue over a montage moving in and out of her pedagogic speech as she combs Pocahontas’ hair, with images of imposing trees with broken branches, and culminating in Rolfe’s visit, and a visibly satisfied Mary. The maid’s speech, in its entirety, is as follows:

A nature like yours can turn trouble into good. All the sorrow will give you strength and point you on a higher way. Think of a tree how it grows round its wounds. If a branch breaks off it don’t stop, but it keeps reaching towards the light. We must meet misfortune baldly and not suffer it to frighten us. We must act the play out, then leave our troubles down, my lady.

Here, the maid’s words refer to Pocahontas’ humanity, “a nature like yours,” a nature that is common to the “naturals” and to the English speaking colonisers in the film, and whose differences are only apparent at the aesthetic level of language, clothing and naming. Thus, the parallel between humans and nature would ostensibly give credit to Macdonald’s reading of human and non-human nature as an expression of an inexhaustible “will to power” in Malick’s *New World*. The film’s romantic aesthetic would remain at the surface of a deeper nihilism.

In this view, Macdonald’s reading suggests that the need for foundational truths is ingrained in human cultural production and arguably not an exclusive prerogative of the Western philosophical tradition. Indeed, *The New World* opens with Pocahontas invoking the muse (like Homer and many others in literary history) to tell the story of her land, “Come spirit help us sing the story of our land.” This singing/telling is shown as a human necessity, as a way of regaining contact with the “spirit,” the origin and mother of all things. In this, Pocahontas’ and Smith’s worlds are no different. Pocahontas asks: “Mother, where do you live?”; Smith asks: “Who are you, whom I so faintly hear? Who urge me ever on? What voice is this that speaks within me, guides me towards the best?” However, in a compelling reading of the images associated with Pocahontas’ last voice-over in the estate’s gardens (“mother, now I know where you live”), Macdonald concludes that the camera answers for viewers.¹⁹ He writes:

As the angle changes from the topiary hedges and trees that dominate the last part of the film, stressing the attempted mastery of nature. In an explicit shift of perspective, an orderly hedge gives way to its sinuous branches ... and one kind of order yields to another, deeper order of which it is part.²⁰

For Macdonald, Malick's film illustrates how humans' rationalization of nature is an expression of the will to power, and, as such, how the rational is part of nature itself. Nevertheless, as Sinnerbrink's reading points out, it is problematic to relegate Malick's cinematic poetics to a nihilistic and totalizing worldview without distorting the overall balance of its aesthetic elements and without engaging with the ethical questions they pose.²¹

So, what other meanings can be derived from Malick's *The New World* other than (or in addition to) nihilism and failed romantic ideals of love and new lands? At the simplest level, Malick's carefully crafted historical detail in the mise-en-scene and contrasts with the film's romantic aesthetics does indeed point to the dichotomy and polarization between empiricism and rationality, nature and culture, body and mind (and all other binaries of Cartesian derivation) that arguably started to be *en vogue* in Western thought from the time of *The New World's* setting onwards. Nevertheless, Malick's artistic use of a sixteenth-century style cinematic map that sinuously draws itself in the film's initial and final title sequences, complicates this simplistic Cartesian reading, a complication moving well beyond philosophical "interpretations" and readings of *The New World's* narrative and formal elements. The cinematic map operates as a potent metaphor able to illustrate the philosophical novelties of *cinema* in destabilising obsolete space-time coordinates. In order to support this claim, it is important to frame the map-territory relation as a figural motif in philosophical and cultural discourses.

THE MAP-TERRITORY RELATION: A "CONTINUUM OF EXPERIENCE" FROM KANT TO BAUDRILLARD AND BATESON

The map-territory metaphor is a recurrent one in cultural discourse, able to illustrate the power of representation as well as the irremediable split between sensory perception and the world. The modern use of the metaphor can be traced back to Kant's first critique.²² It

is widely noted that Kant's first critique was a direct response to the philosophical debates between the rationalist and the empiricist positions of the seventeenth century.²³ Far from being obsolete disputes belonging to seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, debates between rational and empirical positions are responsible for polarized epistemologies in the natural and cultural sciences in modern culture and still relevant in increasingly globalized academic structures. Attempts to overcome the polarisation of natural and cultural sciences are certainly relevant today in cultural-ecological discourses. Nevertheless, within a twentieth-century context, Gregory Bateson writes:

We say the map is different from the territory. But what is the territory? [...] What is on the paper map is a representation of what was in the retinal representation of the man who made the map; and as you push the question back, what you find is an infinite regress, an infinite series of maps. The territory never gets in at all. [...] Always, the process of representation will filter it out so that the mental world is only maps of maps, *ad infinitum*.²⁴

For Bateson, as for Kant, the problem seems to be that the territory is *Dinge an Sich* or unknowable in itself, "The territory never gets in at all."²⁵ The Kantian epistemological condition is bound to know through representations, maps and approximations based on how phenomena are perceived, but not at all "true" to how things are "in themselves."²⁶ In a twentieth century context, as in Kant, the territory is still nothing but illusion and appearance, the human condition is bound to endless simulations of the ungraspable real thing, to the point that in Jean Baudrillard's notable postmodern "desert of the real" the map has replaced the territory and "only simulacra exist."²⁷

Kantian philosophy inaugurates modernity and sets forth the enormous philosophical task of bridging the abyssal distance between Cartesian rationality and empirical objectivism.²⁸ Kant's seventeenth century solution to the problem of perception is in the transcendental categories *a priori*; however, a non-transcendental and material overcoming of the rational versus empirical positions to the world is still very much a contemporary philosophical preoccupation, especially in Deleuze's and Benjamin's projects. Deleuze's answer to the Kantian impasse is the plane of immanence, a Spinozian²⁹ univocal substance that overcomes the problem of the phenomenological or transcendental subject altogether. Conversely, this article suggests that Benjamin's shape

of time overcomes the subject/object problem by *deanthropologizing subjectivity* and phenomenological experiences. The next section of this paper will explicate this claim and will use Fenves' work on Benjamin's "shape of time" to suggest that a Benjaminian approach to time is precisely able to remain suspended (without synthesizing) over the gap left open between the map and the territory in post-Kantian thought.

TEMPORAL PLASTICITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

Benjamin's philosophical project develops a non-subjective and equally non-metaphysical conception of life and experience. In the early essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," Benjamin lays the foundation of a philosophical project that will resonate throughout his non-linear and non-systematic work; that is, the overcoming of the Kantian divide between the perception of the empirical world and the apperception of the transcendental (or unknowable) world through what he terms a "continuum of experience."³⁰ In this, Fenves' ground-breaking study on Benjamin's notion of time points to a novel conception of historicity based on the plasticity of time: a "recapitulation" of time in singular openness to new experiences of space *as* a temporal concept. In his study, Fenves draws on a number of philosophical influences qua possibilities in Benjamin (including Kant, Husserl, Bergson and The Marburg School)³¹ to argue that Benjamin's shape of time is non-integrable:

a particular *phenomenon* will be identified in the course of this study that nevertheless guarantees the existence of a fully "reduced" sphere [...] And a name will emerge from this sphere: time. The term time in this case refers neither to the time of "inner-time consciousness" (Husserl) nor to time as "possible horizon for any understanding of being" (Heidegger), but rather, to a "plastic" time, which is shaped in such a way that its course is wholly without direction, hence without past, present and future, as they are generally understood. [Original emphasis]³²

For Fenves, the shape of time generates a non-integrable "reduction" in aesthetic experiences. In this view, a non-anthropocentric *epoché*³³ is a possibility enabled by the turning and plasticity of time itself:

if the course of time can be captured by a curve of this kind [sharply turned on itself] its concept can be aptly described as “highly enigmatic,” for every time, down to the smallest unit, would be similar to every other time and to time as a whole [...] History interpolated in the form of a “constellation” acquires the monadic character of time by virtue of an *epoché* whose unity is of a higher power than that of an activity of thinking that directs itself toward immanent objects of thought [emphasis added].³⁴

Such a conception of time and history, for Fenves, allows a “bracketing” that does not reside in bodily or rational subjectivity. To this end, Fenves details the difference between Benjamin’s and Husserl’s “reductions” and notes:

what ultimately separates Benjamin’s mode of thought from Husserl’s is this: from its title onwards, *Ideas* [Husserl’s work *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*] proceeds as though the philosopher is fully capable of “turning off” the attitude that bars access to phenomena [the original split of perception generating the subject/object encounter] and can thus enter into the sphere of “pure phenomenology” on the strength of will; Benjamin, by contrast, makes no such concession to the profession of philosophy.³⁵

For Benjamin, phenomena and experiences cannot be grasped in “pure” bodily or rational receptivity. A Benjaminian *epoché* requires the “arresting” of the perceiving and thinking subject, the suspension of intentionality and the *recognition* of a constellation of meaning: “[w]here thinking suddenly halts [*einhalten*] in a constellation saturated with tensions, it imparts to this constellation a shock through which it crystallizes as a monad [or new turn of time].”³⁶ Thus, the only “higher power”³⁷ capable of guaranteeing a fully reduced—yet, non-integrable—sphere is the turn of time itself rendered *visible* and *re-cognisable* in aesthetic and phenomenological experiences.

Fenves’ conceptualisation of Benjamin’s reduction is an important contribution to phenomenology and is significant in acknowledging the important function of aesthetic experiences in contemporary culture. Benjamin’s shape of time is a “sphere of total neutrality” an “innate sphere of knowledge”³⁸ which guarantees a non-anthropocentric unity of experience in a non-integrable, reduced sphere of “life.” In this view, Fenves’ interpretation of Benjamin’s early work on Hölderlin’s poetry,³⁹ suggests that “life” for

Benjamin is precisely this sphere of total neutrality, and that the “poet” (artist, engineer or filmmaker) “exists on the verge of life by momentarily converging with *the limit* called ‘life.’”⁴⁰ This limit is a turn of time, a *temporal* sphere of action. Benjamin’s word for this material “life-context” produced by temporal convergences is *das Gedichtete* [the poetized], a noun made by a verb, which implies further actions, further “turnings of time” in the act of “poetizing” (perceiving, reading, interpreting, *using* technology or art).⁴¹ In this way, Benjamin’s philosophy clearly articulates a post-Kantian and non-Hegelian conception of “life” in *both* non-exclusively empirical *and* non-exclusively rational terms, but in pursuing the study of *techne*, intended as any creative manifestation, phenomenon or practice in the world (human technology and science included).⁴² It is precisely through the study (and contemplation) of art and nature that time can be apprehended: aesthetic and figural experiences give time its “life” in re-cognisable shapes and forms.

THE CINEMATIC LIFE OF THE FIGURAL IN *THE NEW WORLD*

Benjamin’s philosophical project enables a clear non-subjective and non-metaphysical continuity of experience of figural gestures. In this view, Malick’s *The New World* does not simply allude to the Pocahontas legend in an inter-textual exercise, but concretely enacts the possibility of “continuity” and recapitulation of the Pocahontas’ story in *time* intended as a new, *temporary space*. The space of the figural is a temporary ground generated by time. Space (the figural map) collapses in an impossible idealisation of an always-changing territory (time). Nevertheless, this collapsed space and disjunctive gap of perception becomes a possible “life-context,” the temporary ground that enables new experiences and significations of figural gestures. Time generates and *disrupts* space, it constantly forces onwards, towards a *non-directional pluriverse* of potential life-contexts. Just as Malick’s appropriation of the map-territory relation used in the initial and final title sequence bears with it *all* approaches to the metaphor, from Kant onwards, as a “continuity” and recapitulation of all meanings that have been assigned to it in different historical, philosophical and cultural contexts, so does Malick’s use of Pocahontas and John Smith as figural gestures. Malick’s retelling simultaneously draws on the Disney’s version⁴³ and on all other popular and fantasized versions and (com)modifications of the supposed love story between John Smith and Pocahontas that have been used to construct personal and national myths and identities. In this way, Malick’s retelling simply *offers* the

possibility of a new shape and turning of time that encompasses, *recapitulates* and transforms all previous experiences *at once*. But how is Malick's retelling distinctively cinematic? Does Malick's use of cinema differ from other forms of figural storytelling?

In an application of Benjamin's insights in the Work of Art essay, Malick's *The New World*, like the Disney Corporation, uses the affective power of nature as a metonym of a lost, mythical unity with the world. In *The New World*, however, Malick's vision expresses an oblique, neutral and distinctively non-anthropomorphic⁴⁴ point of view. Despite the affective power of Pocahontas' story, Malick's camera work in *The New World* is strangely rendered unable to produce defined gazes, affects, or any form of bodily or rational subjectification in its viewers.⁴⁵ Malick's seeing ostensibly frustrates closures⁴⁶ and arguably *releases* a new filmic experience by collapsing existent experiences and associated ideals in the material reproducibility of the film's figural gestures. In this way, Malick's *The New World* does indeed reveal an "equipment free aspect of reality"—time—through the utmost "intense interpenetration of reality with equipment;"⁴⁷ that is, using the cinema, Disney's *Pocahontas* and "auratic" encounters with nature. In other words, the "seeing" of Malick's subject-less visions of nature expresses the kinematic character of the shape of time "immediately"⁴⁸ in a seeing with a material event that arrests and "halts" thinking,⁴⁹ releasing a new *possibility* of time, a possible new figure of re-cognition in a temporal life-context.

CONCLUSION

In "Approaching the New World" Adrian Martin states that, "each of Malick's films, for those who love them, is an experience demanding its witnesses and its testament."⁵⁰ Indeed, the myth of Pocahontas and John Smith needs retelling in light of the disasters of colonialism and imperialism. These disasters cannot be reconciled or transfigured through an aesthetic approach to cinema, but they can be *re-cognised* as a continuity of experience expressing itself in a new possible shape, a new possible now. As argued, Malick's cinematic retelling of the Pocahontas legend in *The New World* is not a "new map," so to speak, or a new representation of an original "territory," nor a liberating and triumphant "synthesis" of previous experiences in a progression of time. Benjamin's thinking opens up the film's "silent witnessing and testament" to a concrete, autonomous and non-

subjective cinematic life able to recapitulate and turn time into new potential life-contexts, into new possibilities, shapes and forms.

The potential consequences of Benjamin's shape of time in figural film-philosophy are significant. The figural approach to films can contribute to the articulation of the important philosophical role of film technologies in the disruption and *transformation* of fixed significations (including the humanist need of a perpetual foundation of time) in Western thought. Acknowledging time as a non-integrable, non-directional and disruptive "now" of re-cognisability, enables that interplay⁵¹ between nature and culture that Benjamin so clearly foreshadowed in an increasingly mediated and alienated world. Fenves' work on Benjamin's messianic reduction informs the possibility of a non-anthropocentric vision of film experiences: a virtuality that this article locates in the kinematic character of Benjamin's philosophy, possibly opening up new abilities and possibilities of films in shaping new nature-culture relations in the present world.

¹ Paul Klee, "Creative Credo," in Herschel Chipp, (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 184.

² Iain Macdonald, "Nature and the Will to Power in Terrence Malick's *The New World*," in David Davies (ed.), *The Thin Red Line*, (Routledge: London, 2009), 88.

³ William Brown, "Man without a Movie Camera – Movies without Men," in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. Warren Buckland, (London: Routledge, 2009), 66-85.

⁴ One of the most often-cited passages from the well-known Benjamin's Work of Art essay reads: "the first technology really sought to master nature, whereas the second aims rather at an interplay between nature and humanity. The primary social function of art today is to rehearse that interplay. This applies especially to film. *The function of film is to train human beings in the apperception and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily.* Dealing with this apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity's whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free [original emphasis]. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935-1938*, ed. Eiland Howard and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 107–08. Within the posthuman context of this article, the Benjamin passage acknowledges a specific function of film technologies in setting free "new productive forces;" these are not abstract, metaphysical and transcendental powers, but material, concrete, immanent new abilities qua possibilities released and set forth in language (*logos*) by technology (intended as *techné*, meaning every form of art or artifice in the world.)

⁵ Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*, (New York: Continuum, 2011), 195.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁷ Macdonald, "Nature and the Will to Power," 99.

⁸ Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film*, 195.

⁹ D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); and D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction. Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011).

¹¹ D. N. Rodowick, *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xix.

¹² Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 78.

¹³ Rodowick, *Afterimages*, xvii. The capitalization of the word “whole” in Rodowick is, of course, a reference to Deleuze’s *Cinema 2*. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, (London: Continuum, 2005), 81.

¹⁴ Recent work on Walter Benjamin’s philosophy, points to Benjamin’s renowned work on Holderlin’s poetry (“Two Poems”), language (“On Language as Such”) experience (“The Coming Philosophy”), and two newly translated essays (“Two Rainbows”) to present the philosophical relevance of Benjamin’s notion of “plastic time”. See Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 247-255. As will be further detailed in this article, the philosophical sketch provided in Fenves’ ground-breaking work on Benjamin presents a compelling reading of Benjamin’s engagement with (and distance to) Husserl’s phenomenology.

¹⁵ Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film*.

¹⁶ Martin Donougho, “Melt Earth to Sea: The New World of Terrence Malick,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 25.4 (2011), 361.

¹⁷ James Morrison, “Making Worlds, Making Pictures: Terrence Malick’s *The New World*,” *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, ed. Hannah Patterson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 199-211.

¹⁸ Donougho, “Melt Earth to Sea”.

¹⁹ As will be further elaborated in the last section of this article, camera work in Malick’s *The New World* is not tethered to human perspective and does not express an anthropomorphic point of view; the camera flows over bodies and land, grass and water, and remains virtually suspended in-between the film’s romantic aesthetics (nature’s beauty and sublimity) and its utter indifference to humane vicissitudes (nature as expression of a “will to power”).

²⁰ Macdonald, “Nature and the Will to Power,” 106.

²¹ Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film*.

²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Marcus Weigelt (London: Penguin Books, 2007), B295, 296 / A236.

²³ See Marcus Weigelt’s introduction in Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, xxviii. In broad terms, while the rationalists ground knowledge in reason, empiricists ground knowledge in experience, based on sensorial approaches to phenomena.

²⁴ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 460.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ The Kantian unknowable *Dinge an Sich* rests on a dualistic approach to phenomena and noumena. Kant introduces the concepts noumena and phenomena in the chapter entitled “The ground of the distinction of all objects in general into Phenomena and Noumena.” The chapter follows “The Transcendental Doctrine of Elements,” where Kant details all that is pure and transcendental, or the highest possible realm for the Kantian human mind. Nonetheless, Kant starts the new section in effective poetic style and uses the map-symbol to convey the concept that the transcendental world, the world of things in themselves, is a world that cannot be known but only mapped out in textual representations. Before moving to phenomena, then, Kant asks: “Before we venture on this sea, in order to explore its length and breadth, and to find out whether it has anything to offer, it will be useful to glance once more at the map of that country which we are about to leave, and to ask ourselves, firstly, whether we might not be content with what it contains, nay, whether we must not be content with it, supposing that there is no solid ground anywhere else on which we could settle; secondly, by what title we possess even that domain, and may consider ourselves safe against all hostile claims [emphasis added].” For Kant the objective noumena is not subject to time and space and therefore is unknowable and empirically “inaccessible.”

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation*, (New York: Foreign Agents Series, Semiotext(e), Columbia University, 1983). Baudrillard, too, uses the power of the figural map when he writes: “If we were able to take as the finest allegory of simulation the Borges tale where the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory ... then this fable has come full circle for us, ... it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself.” Baudrillard’s allusion to Borges arguably illustrates the cultural passage from the modern to the postmodern condition in effective figural form. The modern cultural movement of the first decades of the twentieth century acknowledges, in artistic forms, the fall and crumbling of overarching metanarratives that dominated cultural production from the Classic era onwards; including the Christian era and the time of an “Enlightened” Reason. Baudrillard arguably continues the modernist discourse and applies it to twentieth century technologically mediated culture. After all, as Jean-François Lyotard puts it in *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), postmodernism is, essentially, a rewriting of the modernist period.

²⁸ Kant's philosophical response to Cartesian subjective rationality can be understood as follows: even if things in themselves are unknowable, their "appearances" (or phenomena) have empirical epistemological validity under the formal conditions of space and time, and therefore "...the empirical truth of appearances is sufficiently established and adequately distinguished from a dream" (B520/A492 § 7).

²⁹ As widely noted, Deleuze's overall philosophical position privileges a Spinozian "univocal" Substance, see Daniel Smith and John Protevi's entry "Gilles Deleuze," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/deleuze/>. On the other hand, Benjamin's philosophy privileges a Leibnizian position. The relevance of Leibniz's philosophy in Benjamin's thought is acknowledged in Fenves' work, see *The Messianic Reduction* and, also, "Of Philosophical Style—from Leibniz to Benjamin," *boundary 2* 30.1 (2003). At great risk of oversimplifying complex philosophical issues, it is perhaps useful to point to the substantial difference between Spinoza and Leibniz in pre-Kantian thought. To this end it is perhaps useful quoting a passage from Ross Wolfe's study, "Substance, Causation and Free Will in Spinoza and Leibniz," *Arche'* 2.1 (2008): "in summation, we might concisely appraise the extent to which Leibniz provided an acceptable counterargument to Spinoza's necessitarian determinism. Spinoza's system is, taken on its own terms, theoretically impregnable. If one agrees to his definitions and axioms, it is difficult to see any other way of construing things. One quickly sees that his system is based principally upon the notion of a single, all-encompassing Substance constrained by an efficient species of causation. Conversely, Leibniz's system takes for its point of departure the notion of a plurality of simple substances (monads) which ultimately obey a teleological or final order of causation. Commonalities surely exist between the two philosophers' conceptions of Substance. But Spinoza's definition in *The Ethics* permits of no diversity; Leibniz's claim to the contrary in his *Monadology* indicates a significant redefinition of the term" (19). For Deleuze's position on Leibniz, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Coming Philosophy," trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004) : 105.

³¹ The breath and vastness of the philosophical (and mathematical) sources that Fenves masters and applies to his detailed reading of Benjamin's writings is outside the scope of this article. This article is nonetheless concerned with an application of Fenves' insights to contemporary film-philosophy.

³² Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 3.

³³ *Epoché* is what Husserl terms the "phenomenological reduction" or a "bracketing" of the "natural standpoint" that is at the base of singular experiences, see *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, (London: Routledge classics 2012).

³⁴ Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 243.

³⁵ Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 135.

³⁶ The passage, quoted from Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 243 is from thesis XVII. See, Walter Benjamin "On the Concept of History" *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Eiland Howard and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 396.

³⁷ Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 243.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Coming Philosophy," trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 104.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin," in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004): 18-36.

⁴⁰ Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 45.

⁴¹ See "Two Poems," 18. For a philosophical rendition of Benjamin's "poetized" as "transitivity" and "shaping force" see, Warwick Mules, *With Nature: Nature Philosophy as Poetics through Schelling, Heidegger, Benjamin and Nancy*, (Chicago: Intellect, the University of Chicago Press, 2014): 141-143. On the "poetized" as a specific vision of the "turning of time," see Peter Fenves "Renewed Question: Whether a Philosophy of History is Possible," *MLN* 124 (2014): 514-524.

⁴² Here, it is perhaps important to repropose the remarkable and profoundly non-synthetic study of Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay, performed by Susan Buck Morss in her interpretation of Benjamin's work quite literally "suspended" between empiricism and rationalism. Along similar lines, Miriam Hansen, in "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Enquiry* 34 (2008), suggests that Benjamin's thought distinguishes itself for its capacity and intellectual courage "to appropriate and transform theoretical impulses from philosophically and politically incompatible, if not antagonistic, camps" (375). Susan Buck-Morss' essay "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (1992): 3-41, is, for this reader, a performative example of Benjamin's philosophical approach. Buck-Morss writes: "the senses are effects of the nervous system, composed of hundreds of billions of neurons extending from the body surfaces through the spinal cord, to the brain. The brain, it must be said, yields to philosophical reflection a sense of the uncanny. In

our most empiricist moments, we would like to take the matter of the brain itself for the mind. (What could be more appropriate than the brain studying the brain?) But there seems to be such an abyss between us, alive, as we look out on the world, and that gray-white gelatinous mass with its cauliflower-like convolutions that is the brain (the biochemistry of which does not differ qualitatively from that of a sea slug) that, intuitively, we resist naming them as identical. If this “I” who examines the brain, were nothing but the brain, how is it that I feel so incomprehensibly alien in its presence? Hegel thus has intuition on his side in his attacks against the brain-watchers. If you want to understand human thought, he argues in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, don’t place the brain on a dissecting table, or feel the bumps on the head for phrenological information. If you want to know what the mind is, examine what it *does*” (ibid., 11). Yet, Buck-Morss does not follow the empirical approach of the natural sciences, or the study of human history and human culture alone. In her reading and application of Benjamin’s insights in “The Work of Art”, Buck-Morss remains suspended between antithetical positions, hovering “over the abyss” that exists between them. This abyss, Buck-Morss’ essay suggests, is Benjamin’s philosophical ground.⁴³ As Macdonald points out, Malick’s retelling of the legend of Pocahontas deliberately draws on the Disney’s 1995 version, casting Irene Bedard, the model and voice of Disney’s Pocahontas, as the fictional mother of Malick’s Pocahontas (Q’orianka Kilcher.) See Macdonald, “Nature and the Will to Power,” 100.

⁴⁴ The “non-anthropomorphic” vision of *The New World*’s distinctive camera work is indebted to Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hanager, see *Film Theory. An Introduction to the Senses* (New York: Routledge 2010), 114.

⁴⁵ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit study on Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* already identifies the complex “seeing” of Malick’s film as “erasure of perspective.” See “One Big Soul” in *Forms of Being: Films, Aesthetics, Subjectivity*, (London: BFI 2004), 146.

⁴⁶ This frustration of defined perspectival gazes and bodily affects is beautifully brought to an extreme in Malick’s latest film *Knight of Cups*.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 116.

⁴⁸ In *The Messianic Reduction*, Peter Fenves maintains that Benjamin’s thought “... does move in the direction of philosophical kinematics: experience is not so much “transient” (*verganglich*) as “transitional” (*ubergänglich*). The putative objects of knowledge are neither realities nor potentialities: they are, rather, “virtualities” that can be known as such—as “something” that exists in a medium that it instantiates” (176). For the “immediacy” of the medium in Benjamin, see Weber’s “impart-ability” of language as medium in *Benjamin’s Abilities* (31-52).

⁴⁹ Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, 243.

⁵⁰ Martin, “Approaching the New World,” 220.

⁵¹ Benjamin, “The Work of Art.” See note 4 above.