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From Mythic History to Cinematic Poetry: Terrence Malick's *The New World*

Viewed

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Abstract

Terrence Malick's *The New World* (2005) is a poetic evocation of one of America's founding myths, the story of Pocahontas. While the film allegorises - through the theme of marriage - the possibility of successful cultural exchange and of reconciliation with nature, it also fuses mythic history, subjective reflection, and the self-expression of nature. This unstable point of view has led to a critical ambivalence concerning the film's romantic *naivety*: its evocation of ideologically suspect myths or historically anachronistic tropes. My discussion defends the film as *knowingly* romantic; an aesthetic challenge to our historical scepticism towards the experience of new worlds.

*How much they err,
that think every one which has been at Virginia
understands or knows what Virginia is.*

(Captain John Smith, *The New World*)

*Come, spirit.
Help us sing the story of our land.*

(Pocahontas/Rebecca, *The New World*)

What are poets for in destitute times? Hölderlin's question, which Martin Heidegger cites in one of his essays on poetry, could

well be asked of Terrence Malick.^[1] His fourth film, *The New World* (USA 2005), is a poetic evocation of one of America's founding myths, the story of Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher) and Captain John Smith (Colin Farrell).^[2] Following nineteenth-century tradition, Malick renders the latter as a romantic tale of thwarted love, misguided ambition, and spiritual reconciliation; but unlike tradition, he lingers on the ambiguous dimensions of intercultural conflict, explores diverging attitudes towards nature, and emphasises the usually neglected marriage between Pocahontas/Rebecca and tobacco grower John Rolfe (Christian Bale). Despite its shift into the genre of historical epic, *The New World* resonates deeply with Malick's other works - *Badlands* (USA 1973), *Days of Heaven* (USA 1978), and *The Thin Red Line* (USA 1998) - presenting a mesmerising cinematic meditation on the relationship between myth and history, nature, and love.^[3] If *The New World* is a historical film, spanning the founding of Jamestown in Virginia in 1607 to Pocahontas's death at Gravesend, England, in 1617, it is history in the form of *mythic poetry*, akin to *The Thin Red Line's* presentation of the Battle of Guadalcanal in a manner evoking Homer's *Iliad*.^[4]

In what follows, I shall approach *The New World* as a work of cinematic philosophy that transforms the familiar Pocahontas legend by presenting the historical encounter between Old and New Worlds in the register of poetic myth. It is a 'song of the earth' in a romantic key, evoking not only Heidegger but Emerson, Nietzsche, and Stanley Cavell. This is hardly surprising, given that Malick studied philosophy with Cavell at Harvard, and translated an important Heidegger text, *The Essence of Reasons*, in 1969. As Cavell remarks admiringly in *The World Viewed*, with reference to Malick's *Days of Heaven*: "I think one feels one has never quite seen the scene of human existence - call it the arena between earth (or days) and heaven - quite realized this way on film before"^[5] - a comment that could be equally well directed at *The New World*.

Nonetheless, for many critics there is something troubling about *The New World*, whether understood as history, myth, or poetry. Here I shall consider three important readings of the film, which emphasise, respectively, the film's Nietzschean naturalism (Iain Macdonald), its post-colonialist critique (James Morrison), and its polyvocal narrative structure (Lloyd Michaels). In each case, the concluding part of the film - dealing with Pocahontas/Rebecca's experience of England, reconciliation with husband Rolfe, and untimely death - prompts a critical ambivalence concerning the film's romantic 'naivety': its evocation of an ideologically tainted myth (celebrating the colonial 'encounter' between Old and New Worlds), and its deployment of apparently anachronistic cultural and aesthetic tropes (of nature, love, and mortality).

This critical ambivalence, I want to suggest, is a response to the film's audacious romanticism, its untimely attempt to

rejuvenate the Pocahontas story in the register of poetic myth. *The New World*, on the one hand, confronts us with the dramatic cultural conflict between Old and New Worlds, but on the other, immerses us in the 'timeless' space of historical myth - opening up a space (and time) of awe and wonder, via the transfiguring power of cinematic poetry, in which nature itself is allowed to speak.



History, myth, poetry: in praise of romantic 'naivety'

A cursory look at critical reviews of *The New World* reveals ambivalence over its 'naïve' celebration of nature and risky historical handling of Colonial contact. It has been variously described as a "transcendentalist visual symphony"[\[6\]](#) in which "beauty transcends history",[\[7\]](#) or as a "heavily aestheticised" but faltering epic[\[8\]](#) that shows how "to the innocent eye ... every world is new".[\[9\]](#) Yet it is precisely this romanticism - or rather Malick's *romantic naivety* - that troubles critics and scholars alike.[\[10\]](#) James Morrison, for example, dismisses this 'naïve romanticist' approach, arguing that if Malick "were indeed rehearsing North America's myths of origin merely as occasions of neo-Romantic exercises in transcendentalism, or sporadic bouts of an accustomed lyricism, complete with Edenic pastorals and noble savages", then the film would surely deserve to be dismissed for its "terminal naivety".[\[11\]](#)

The romanticism of *The New World* is undeniable; what is troubling is its *naivety*, its seemingly unwitting evocation of ideologically suspect myths or historically anachronistic tropes. There are two questions to be explored here. Is the film unwittingly naïve or *knowingly* so? And why is the alleged 'romantic naivety' of the film so problematic?

To address these questions I propose the following thesis. This critical ambivalence is prompted by what critics perceive as an uncomfortable dilemma: either *The New World* is a lyrical, poetic work that lapses into *unknowing* naivety, celebrating what was in fact a tragic historical contact between Colonists and natives; or else it is a sophisticated apologia for Colonialism, one

that *knowingly* elaborates an aesthetically rich but ideologically dubious version of this troubled history. Given these alternatives, it is not surprising that, for many critics, *The New World* is compromised by its *unknowing* romantic naivety, without clarifying why this should be resisted. This critical ambivalence, moreover, points to a genuine difficulty: the film's simultaneous screening of an historical event and an experience of myth, a poetic presentation of subjective experience and a metaphysical attempt to give voice to nature itself.

In what follows I present an alternative response to the worry that the film remains unwittingly tainted by ideology or vitiated by outmoded tropes. Far from being 'naive', *The New World* is a *knowing* kind of romanticism: a concerted 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 Malick's cinematic poetry. The film generates an immersive experience of 'The New World' - openness to 'the New' as such - that would transfigure our perception of its history and open up the possibility of renewing its original promise. The audacity - but also questionability - of Malick's romanticism, as I shall argue, is to rejuvenate the Pocahontas myth not only to retrieve the possibility of reconciliation between cultures, but also to suggest the possibility of a 'New World' in which human dependence upon *nature* is acknowledged as the basis for any enduring intercultural or historical reconciliation.



The new world

as Nietzschean naturalism

Before developing my argument more explicitly, I shall begin with a discussion of the ways in which three important critics have

dealt with *The New World's* romanticism. In each case we find expressions of the critical ambivalence I have just sketched, and different strategies offered for rationalising or neutralising this alleged 'naivety'.

One strategy has been to shift the focus away from the 'surface' narrative (the Pocahontas story) and to argue that the film's real purpose lies in its reflections upon human nature and our relationship to nature. The most striking version of this approach is Iain Macdonald's 'naturalist' reading.^[12] For Macdonald, the film expresses a Nietzschean materialist metaphysics of nature that deconstructs the romantic narrative of Pocahontas and Smith, thereby revealing the real subject of the film to be nature itself. On this view, the fundamental question motivating Malick's film is how the shared reason defining human nature is related to nature as such. Indeed the film prompts us to bracket the familiar 'Pocahontas story', Macdonald argues, and to see it instead as the story of nature, more specifically, of the 'nature' of human nature. Understood in this 'Nietzschean' naturalistic manner, nature is an expression of the will to power and reason an expression of our cognitive capacity to survive through the rational mastery of our natural environment.

Why suspend the 'Pocahontas story'? For Macdonald, it is because the film provides us with subtle clues that discredit it. Chief among these is Malick's choice of two actors in *The New World* who also participated in the animated Disney version, *Pocahontas* (USA 1995): Irene Bedard, who voiced and modelled Pocahontas for Disney plays Pocahontas's mother in Malick's film; and Christian Bale, who voices Thomas in the Disney version, plays *The New World's* John Rolfe. These casting choices should be read, Macdonald claims, as signs of Malick's subtle strategy of subverting and discrediting the Pocahontas myth (what we are to make of newcomer Q'orianka Kilcher's extraordinary performance is unclear).

Malick's "simple but iconic tale of ill-fated lovers" separated by cultural difference thus serves as a narrative pretext for philosophical reflections on human reason in nature (100). In doing so, the latter part of the film, for Macdonald, becomes "a consciously ironic caricature of an allegedly archetypal story of human experience" (105). By retelling the Pocahontas legend inflected via Disney's *Pocahontas*, Malick has composed a "self-deconstructing narrative" that aims to show the way all forms of human culture are "parasitical" upon nature understood as will to power (106).

Macdonald's argument is a good example of the way critics rationalise Malick's romantic 'naivety'. Rather than credit the film's romanticism, one reads an ironic strategy into the film's narrative trajectory, even when this conflicts with the film's poetic style, performances, and mood. One can surely question, however, Macdonald's claim that the film is ironic or self-

deconstructing, not least because there are more obvious filmic reference points for *The New World* than Disney's *Pocahontas*. As Lloyd Michaels points out, the title sequence of seventeenth-century maps 'coming to life' was also used in *Black Robe* (Canada/Australia 1991), Bruce Beresford's dramatic depiction of the French Jesuits' attempt to convert the Hurons of Quebec, while the arrival of the English ships in the Virginian Tidewater region amidst the sounds of nature and swelling music recalls Herzog's operatic depiction of the Spaniards' descent into the Incan Amazon basin in *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (Germany/Peru 1972).^[13]

Moreover, the fact that there are actors who appear in both Malick's *The New World* and in Disney's *Pocahontas* does not prove that the film is ironic or self-deconstructing. Rather, it is more likely that Malick takes up the romantic story between Pocahontas and Smith - part of popular mythology for over two centuries - because it allows for a deeper exploration of the theme of love than in Malick's previous films. And more significantly, it opens up an allegorical dimension concerning the possibility of cross-cultural reconciliation - between Worlds as well as between human culture and nature - that is figured in the theme of *marriage*, which both divides and unifies the two main parts of the film (the Pocahontas/Smith story and the Rebecca/Rolfe story).



Marriage, we should note, has two opposing manifestations in the film. The first marriage (between Pocahontas and Smith) is 'natural' but unsustainable, existing within the ahistorical realm of myth but disappearing as soon as it comes into conflict with the mores of family, community, and history. The second marriage (between Rebecca and Rolfe) is thoroughly 'cultural', having

to be cultivated or learned and requiring sanction from the nascent colony; but it also successfully reconciles both Worlds, however briefly, redeeming Pocahontas/Rebecca in an affirmative gesture directed towards the (historical) future (Rebecca's gradual transition from disgrace and mourning to acceptance and grace, from solitary outcast to intercultural ambassador). Indeed this marriage between Rebecca and Rolfe - one that enables Pocahontas to be reborn as Rebecca - can only be affirmed once the 'natural' bond between Pocahontas and Smith is acknowledged but then left behind. For Rebecca/Pocahontas, it is this final acknowledgment, during her poignant meeting with Smith in the formal English garden, that becomes a condition for her reconciliation with Rolfe, with her life and her impending death.

Macdonald's naturalist reading of the film ignores Malick's subtle transfiguration of the Pocahontas myth. Reading the film philosophically as a self-deconstructing Nietzschean narrative rationalises away the film's mythic treatment of the moment of historical encounter between Worlds, a moment of open possibility in which nothing has yet been historically decided. It forces an inapt philosophical framework on to the film - Nietzschean naturalism coupled with self-deconstructing irony - that ignores *The New World's* aesthetic mood of awe, wonder, and joy.

***The New World* as Post-Colonialist Critique**

From an opposing point of view, James Morrison presents a 'post-colonialist' reading of the film that provides a different way of dealing with the film's naivety.^[14] Like Macdonald, Morrison rejects the 'naïve romanticist' approach to *The New World*, arguing that this appearance of naivety conceals and reveals a "new kind of sophistication" in Malick's treatment of the "brutality and potential transcendence of 'world-making'" (199). Morrison interprets the latter via Hannah Arendt's notion of *world-alienation*: the displacement of pre-enlightenment myths of wholeness by the modern discovery of a plurality of worlds, which then prompts the colonial-imperialist attempt to reduce this threatening plurality - and the sceptical undermining of knowledge and morality it entails - to *one* universal world again by means of conquest and domination.^[15]

From this point of view, Malick's meditation on the "historical epoch of world-making" becomes a cinematic post-colonialist critique designed to show "how the inexpressibly violent becomes intertwined with the provisionally 'beautiful'" (200). On the one hand, nature is portrayed in the film as unchanging and inert, and so becomes vulnerable to the "colonial gaze" centred upon domination; on the other, it can also invite the open gaze of a receptive consciousness, sensitive to nature's capacity to individuate and differentiate itself (201). The film thus shows how worlds are 'made' in light of how we view them, whether as

sites of conquest and domination or as places of dwelling and reflection.

Contra Macdonald, nature, for Morrison, is not really the central theme in *The New World*. This becomes evident, he suggests, in the way Malick transforms the Pocahontas myth into an allegory of intercultural encounter: "a story about the possible reconciliation of diverse 'worlds'" in a context where such reconciliation seems under threat (205). From Morrison's perspective, the film explores the historical moment when, for both colonisers and natives, the fragile prospect of cultural co-existence seemed possible, "through mutual education and consort" - but fails under the pressure of a triumphant will to power (205). Far from engaging in irony, Morrison insists that Malick gives us a tantalising glimpse of the hope for a humane collective existence, asking us to remain open to the hope of such reconciliation, "even as the film recounts how and why this fleeting hope evaporated" (206).

Having presented this persuasive interpretation of the film's allegorical treatment of the Pocahontas story, Morrison then shifts tack, sceptically construing the film as an allegory of Arendtian world-alienation. The principal characters thereby assume an allegorical significance that obscures the ambiguities of their cross-cultural and interpersonal relationships. Smith becomes an expression of world-alienation, torn by his lyrical vision of authentic human community (with Pocahontas and the Powhatans) and his worldly desire for conquest, fame, and glory. Pocahontas, on the other hand, "exemplifies another kind of world alienation," for Morrison, with respect to her loss of agency (208). Indeed, she acquiesces to her fate, and even desires her own oppression in her devotion to Smith and then Rolfe (both representatives of a "pseudo-benevolent humanism" (208)). Morrison thus regards Pocahontas's divided, alienated subjectivity as expressing both a yearning for unity with nature, and an alienated desire to become acculturated within the oppressive Colonialist order.

While claiming that the film exposes the desire for wholeness to be nothing but "ideology", Morrison also acknowledges that it strongly credits Pocahontas's "final epiphany" as she prepares for her untimely death. Nonetheless, Morrison then proceeds to rationalise away its romanticism, insisting that Pocahontas's final epiphany leaves us with a troubling question: "what it is she thinks she has learned and can we take it as anything more than a reflection of the naivety that Malick himself appears to foster so avidly?" (208). Like Macdonald, Morrison refuses Malick's romantic 'naivety', dismissing the film's affirmation of Pocahontas/Rebecca's sublime gesture of natural/spiritual reconciliation. Instead, the affective power of the concluding sequence of the film - Rebecca's wondrous experience of the Old World as New, her reconciliation with Rolfe, and spiritual

acceptance of death - now becomes an implicit post-colonialist critique, "archly satirising the habits, customs and traditions of England as a nucleus of colonial enterprise" (209).

Once again we are offered a counter-intuitive interpretation of this sublime passage of the film, which, far from reverting to irony and satire, dwells at length on Rebecca's wonder, grace, and joy: her wonder at the marvellous sights she encounters upon arriving in London (the marketplace, horse-drawn carriages, cathedrals, and royal court); her gracious parting from Smith and reconciliation with Rolfe; and her joyous affirmation of life, spiritual acquiescence to death, and sublime return to mother earth.

Morrison's tragic-symbolic interpretation of Rebecca's fatal encounter with Europe rationalises this romanticist expression of awe and joy - the inversion of the Old World now experienced as New. Indeed, Pocahontas/Rebecca, in death, Morrison argues, becomes a potent historical reminder of the tragic conflict between the colonists and the natives, existing posthumously as "a casualty of empire" (210). The poetic depiction of her death, he claims, both commemorates her role as a lost potentiality and represents a historical symbol of oppression, suffering, and loss (210). Hopes for a humane collective life, Morrison concludes, are thus exposed by the film as illusory; a "sentimental fantasy" that is silenced by the "inspiring fusion" of "ecstasy and sorrow" in Rebecca's final farewell (210).

The problem here is that Morrison's post-colonialist reading of the film significantly *underplays* the question of nature. In arguing that all three principal characters - Pocahontas, Smith, Rolfe - represent different manifestations of world-alienation, he overlooks how each also articulates a different attitude towards nature (spiritual reconciliation and thanksgiving; conquest and romantic longing; cultivation, work, and nurturance). Does it really illuminate Pocahontas/Rebecca's experience to describe her as suffering a world-alienation similar to that of Smith? This analysis removes any agency from her choice of Rolfe over Smith, her ethical decision to "find joy in all that I see", reducing Pocahontas/Rebecca's poignant reconciliation and spiritual redemption to so many generic expressions of world-alienation.

Again the problem of how to credit Malick's *knowingly* romantic conclusion reappears. Here the poetic condensation of images and sublime musical accompaniment in this sequence - the third time Wagner's Prelude to *Das Rheingold* is used - speaks strongly against Morrison's sceptical reading. Despite the aesthetic evidence of the film, Morrison concludes that it reverts to a satirical critique of romantic naivety in the face of Colonialist domination, while at the same time expressing a chimerical hope

for human community that can only ever remain a "sentimental fantasy" from our sceptical historical point of view. *The New World's* romantic naivety thus prompts another interpretation that rationalises away its aesthetic power.



The New World as elegiac art film

This critical ambivalence is clearly linked with the film's unabashed romanticism: *The New World's* audacious attempt to rejuvenate the Pocahontas myth, to transfigure its 'tainted' colonial history of ideological appropriations, and to present it anew cinematically - as though this cinematic myth could open up a new beginning, a re-founding of the myth of America. Malick's mythic and poetic treatment of history is equally risky. As an attempt to screen the past, the film is paradoxical: on the one hand, it strives for historical verisimilitude in its presentation of the imagined *experience* of the encounter between the English colonists and Powhatan natives (the use of local materials to build the fort at Jamestown, the requirement that indigenous actors learn to speak Algonquin, and the meticulous attention to costume, weaponry, and bodily decoration). On the other, it takes real liberties with the historical facts, so far as they are known, of John Smith's relationship with Pocahontas, particularly the alleged romantic involvement between the two (a staple of nineteenth-century versions of the tale).^[16] In knowingly retelling the Pocahontas story in this romantically 'naive' manner, Malick recasts the encounter between Old and New Worlds in a mythic-poetic register. Indeed, the film quickly immerses us in a multifarious experience of 'the New World'; not only the myth of Pocahontas but also an experience of newness as such. It is a mythic-historical poem experienced as though we somehow remained naively unaware of what lay tragically in store for the Native American peoples, and yet it is precisely this tragic fore-knowledge that serves as a poignant counterpoint to Malick's poetic recasting of the Pocahontas myth.

This knowing romantic naivety extends to Malick's treatment of the relationship between nature and history. Indeed, *The New World* presents nature as though history did not exist and history as if it were a piece of nature. As in Malick's other films, human beings are presented as figures embedded within landscapes that envelop them. Rather than the 'indifference' of nature, his films show a variety of ways in which human beings inhabit nature or dwell upon the earth, whether harmoniously or indifferently, recklessly or reverentially. The signature Malick-shot is of a human figure, moving slowly through thick grass, forest, or vegetation, framed by earth, water, and sky, accompanied by bird song and insect sounds. Such signature images - of poignant human figures immersed in the creaturely life of nature - are abundantly on display in *The New World*.

Consider, for example, most of the (non-battle) scenes featuring Smith: we see him wandering through fields or forests, traipsing through swamps and gliding across rivers; or communicating with Pocahontas through gesture and play, gazing in silence, caressing the grass or her skin. Or consider how Pocahontas is viewed: the images of her swimming, or frolicking in the grass; the numerous scenes of her miming and acting, whether in jest, communication, or worship; we see her beholding a magnificent gathering storm; or lying thoughtfully on the earth or grass, contemplating the trees and the sky; or joyously dashing, cartwheeling, giving thanks to mother earth. The 'naturals' too (as the indigenes are called in the film) communicate as much through gesture, dance, and mime as through dialogue, action, or ritual (as in Smith's idyllic sojourn with the Powhatan). There is in Malick's work a whole cinema of touch and gesture, mime and dance, silence and song; a poetry of images depicting the manifold ways human beings inhabit both human and natural worlds, whether in harmony or in conflict, and dwell as dependent upon nature, whether they are alienated from, or autochthonous with, the earth.

Such mesmerising scenes have prompted Lloyd Michaels felicitously to describe Malick as the "Last Mohican of the art film"^[17]. For Michaels, Malick is a cinematic auteur whose "anachronistic cinematic aspirations" to present the sublimity of nature and explore spiritual truths in a "cinema of beauty and ideas" inevitably marginalises his work in relation to the Hollywood mainstream (81). Steering a course between the Scylla of post-colonialism and the Charybdis of naturalism, Michaels offers a complex reading of *The New World* as a polyvocal narrative comprising a number of distinct but related stories: the historical epic (the founding of the Colonial nation); the creation myth (Malick's retelling of the story of Eden and the Fall, of Paradise Lost and perhaps regained); the love story (continuing Malick's abiding interest in the "philosophy of love", and echoing the triangular plot of *Days of Heaven*); and the personal story (Malick's autobiographical concerns). All of these stories are woven together in the film's extraordinary concluding sequence, which, as Michaels describes, attains a pitch of lyrical intensity not

found in Malick's other films (94).

Rather than rehearse Michaels' finely articulated reading, I shall focus on the significance of the fourth story he identifies, the 'personal story'. Unlike other commentators, Michaels does not rationalise away the romantic 'naivety' of the film's concluding sequence. Indeed, he acknowledges that this sequence "conveys a different feeling from almost anything else in Malick's oeuvre" (94), its emotional intensity deriving from its "synthesising of the epic, religious, and romantic stories into narrative closure that stirs the senses and stimulates thought" (94). *The New World's* concluding hymn to domestic bliss provides a striking conclusion to the romantic retelling of the Pocahontas myth, which Michaels construes as expressing Malick's personal concerns with questions of love, marriage, and mortality.

Michaels' exemplary reading of the film leaves us, however, with a question: what weaves together the three main stories - epic, religious, and love - in the film's rhapsodic conclusion? Michaels adverts here to Malick's autobiographical concerns, conjecturing, for example, that there is an element of identification between Malick and Smith, both of whom are rebellious visionaries "separated by talent and inclination from civilized society yet dependent upon wealthy patrons to finance their ambitions" (95). Moreover, he suggests that there is an autobiographical element in Smith's self-reproach concerning his missed opportunity with Pocahontas; a reflexive moment in which Malick reproaches himself for the missed opportunities of his interrupted filmmaking career (95). Whether one accepts this autobiographical reading or not, the film's concluding sequence is unusual, Michaels remarks, given that classic American literature tends to locate truth not in marital harmony but in "landlessness alone" (as Melville has it in *Moby Dick*) (95). *The New World*, however, "closes with a paean to domestic bliss, as if Captain Ahab returned to his young wife and child in Nantucket" (95).

The parallel Michaels draws here can be questioned. It is less domestic bliss at issue, I suggest, than the allegorical marriage between Worlds: the spiritual and sensuous reconciliation between Rebecca/Pocahontas's divided self, the estranged worlds she inhabits, and her return to nature in the film's sublime conclusion. It is the theme of marriage - between Pocahontas and Smith, Rebecca and Rolfe, but also between Old and New Worlds - that unites the different stories in the film and provides its thematic unity. While Michaels admirably articulates the film's mythic and poetic dimensions, his emphasis on the domestic aspect of marriage itself domesticates the allegorical reach of this marital theme. In this regard, Michaels' confining of the marital theme to autobiographical, rather than mythical or philosophical registers, expresses a more subtle ambivalence

regarding the film's romanticism.



From mythic history to cinematic poetry

In all three cases I have considered there are attempts to resist the film's romantic naivety (through irony or scepticism) or to restrict it (to autobiography). In conclusion I would like to propose an alternative interpretation of this naivety, and a response to the critical ambivalence it provokes.

First we should reflect on what it means to describe the film as 'naïve', which is clearly a charge levelled from the perspective of superior knowledge or judgment tempered by historical experience. To (implicitly) criticise *The New World* for romantic naivety is to suggest that it is ignorant of, or remains ideologically captured by, a history that it is unable to comprehend or adequately portray. Or it is to suggest that the film reverts to tropes - concerning nature, love, and mortality - that have become historically enervated or culturally obsolete. At the same time, the implication is that the film *unwittingly* suffers these historical, moral, or aesthetic lapses. Otherwise one would have to propose that Malick's film *knowingly* attempts to aesthetically justify one of the more ideologically 'tainted' myths supporting the Colonialist project and its destructive impact upon native peoples. Since this alternative would compromise the aesthetic and moral worth of the film, the former alternative provides a means of rationalising or domesticating *The New World's* unabashedly romanticist gestures.

How does Malick's romantic naivety work in the film? Here I would emphasise the theme of *marriage* as expressing the possibility of a reconciliation between Old and New Worlds, but also of the discovery - or recollection - of another way of inhabiting the earth. Marriage - or better, remarriage, as is the case with Pocahontas/Rebecca - unites aesthetically the

allegorical dimensions of the Pocahontas myth. The 'natural' marriage between Pocahontas and Smith is superseded by the 'cultural' marriage between Rebecca and Rolfe. It is only with Rolfe (farmer and cultivator), rather than Smith (leader and adventurer), that the nuptials between naturalised culture and cultivated nature can be fleetingly realised.

This romantic myth of 'impossible' marriage is what enables Malick to hold open, in a space of poetic wonder, the possibility of a world other than either the Old or the New. This would be a genuinely 'New World' - experienced through Malick's immersive cinema - grounded upon a renewed relationship with the earth, without which the possibility of mutual recognition between worlds degenerates into conflict and domination. This *knowingly* romanticist gesture - proposing an aesthetic mythology in order to heal the breach of reason and feeling, nature and culture - captures the heart of Malick's supposed 'naivety'. *The New World* is a knowingly mythic recasting of the Pocahontas/Rebecca story as a poetic meditation on what marriage between cultures, but also between human culture and nature, might mean.

Consider the extraordinary concluding sequence of the film, following Rebecca's poignant parting from Smith in the English gardens and her emotional reconciliation with Rolfe ("my husband", she whispers). The use here of the "Prelude" to *Das Rheingold* effectively reverses its original mythical meaning in Wagner's opera.^[18] The first time we hear it is at the beginning of the film, accompanied by underwater images of fish and native figures swimming, followed by images of the arrival of the Colonists' ships, much to the amazement of the 'naturals' watching from shore. The second time the Prelude plays is during Smith's idyllic sojourn with the Powhatan, depicting the flowering of love between Pocahontas and Smith, and Smith's profound transformation during his sojourn with her people.

When we hear the *Rheingold* prelude a third time, in the film's concluding sequence, its significance has been subtly transfigured: it is no longer an anthem to wonder and possibility opened up by the nascent encounter between Worlds; it is also broadened beyond the lyrical expression of love and utopian community that Smith experiences with Pocahontas and the Powhatan. These two rather polarised renditions of Wagner's piece are transfigured in this third rendering, which gives sublime musical expression to Pocahontas/Rebecca's acceptance of death, affirmation of life, and reconciling of Old and New Worlds in another, no-longer-human world. This swelling, intensifying musical crescendo suggests nothing less than the self-expression of nature that is here momentarily allowed to 'sing', to bear witness to Pocahontas/Rebecca's spiritual reconciliation and her return to (mother) earth. Wagner's Prelude is transfigured through aesthetic repetition in a manner that mirrors Pocahontas/

Rebecca's own experience of transformation, which is presented, finally, as of a piece with the becoming of nature itself.

In this final sequence, the music signals a process of reconciliation, of homecoming ("Mother, now I know where you live"). The sequence is shown first from the perspective of her child playing in the English gardens (a figure of futurity), looking for his lost or absent mother; it then cuts to Pocahontas/Rebecca's unexpected death at Gravesend, just as she and her family were to return home to Virginia. The moving images of her deathbed parting from Rolfe ("All must die, yet 'tis enough that your child should live") are narrated from a letter Rolfe has written to his son that is to be read by him in the future. As Rebecca's powerful, noble spirit departs in a bounding rush (one of the most sublime images of death in recent cinema), we see a montage of images of Pocahontas/Rebecca's joyous worship of earth, sky, and water; her sublime return to the creaturely life of nature. The music ceases - beyond death - with the film's final images of rushing water and towering treetops swaying in the wind. This sequence fleetingly transforms the film into a sublime song of the earth in which nature itself 'poetises' in a breathtaking moment of mythic possibility.

What can one say about such a sequence? For me, Malick's visual symphony combined with Wagner's overture reveals the transformation of the (Western) desire for conquest and domination, transfigured through love, the overcoming of opposition, and the need to acknowledge a deeper (spiritual) unity with nature. It aesthetically discloses the sublimity of nature understood as elemental earth, that which underlies and supports any form of historical human community. Acknowledging this unity with nature is what makes possible - I would contend - the kind of plural co-existence, or marriage between Worlds, that *The New World* evokes through mythic history and cinematic poetry.

Yet there is still something unsettling about *The New World's* aesthetic mythologizing. In his remarkable fusion of mythic history, subjective reflection, and the self-expression of nature, Malick attempts no less than presenting the experience of an 'impossible' point of view. On the one hand, the film immerses us, with careful verisimilitude, in the imagined *experience* of the historical encounter between colonists and natives. On the other, it immerses us within a mythic rendering of this event, within the ahistorical space of myth. Both perspectives are then contrasted or even integrated with the sublime presence of nature in all its elemental splendour. *The New World* thus exemplifies what Stanley Cavell describes as the defining myth of film: "that nature survives our treatment of it and its loss of enchantment for us, and that community remains possible even when the authority of society is denied us."^[19] Nature is both the deeper ground of cultural reconciliation, and the hidden source of a

utopian community that could found a new world.

This inherently unstable 'song of the earth' is an enthralling combination of historical detail and aesthetic mythology, intimate subjectivity and 'inhuman' nature. The audacity of *The New World's* romanticism is to allow, through cinematic poetry, nature to reveal or disclose itself as a 'subject', as a participant in this mythic history. This is a perspective that requires all of Malick's cinematic art to make meaningful, something we might affectively experience, or that might even provoke us to thought - if only we are open to this possibility.

Viewed from our historical perspective, this romanticism is *untimely*, in Nietzsche's sense; acting against the prejudices of the age in favour of a time to come. Malick's romantic naivety is a refusal of the 'worldliness' that would presume to know the meaning of the historical and cultural conflict between worlds, or indeed between human worlds and the earth upon which they depend. This is signalled explicitly in the extended 'director's cut' of *The New World*, which is prefaced by a quotation from Captain John Smith warning that those who think they have experienced Virginia 'do not understand or know what Virginia is'.

[\[20\]](#) Malick's romantic naivety remains true to Smith's warning against the arrogance of historical worldliness - and Smith should know. Indeed, we still do not know, as Heidegger once observed, what worlds are; let alone how to understand the birth of worlds, or how to foster their flourishing in a manner consonant with the acknowledgment of human plurality and finitude.

Overcoming world-alienation in favour of world-cultivation might be closer to the mark here.

That this is a risky aesthetic undertaking is undeniable, for it conflicts with our shared scepticism towards 'the New'; a scepticism characteristic of our sense of historical disappointment following the collapse of Enlightenment hopes - or what Nietzsche famously called 'European nihilism'. Malick rejuvenates this possibility of experiencing the New - an American sublimity, we might say - through the poetic power of myth. We can experience this mythic history, however, only aesthetically, through cinematic poetry, and then only fleetingly. For all that, Malick's 'song of the earth' remains a poetic affirmation of life and an audacious invitation to wonder. It is an aesthetic challenge to the historical scepticism that would always treat romantic naivety - our openness to the experience of new worlds - as untenable and unworldly.

Endnotes

- [1] Martin Heidegger, "What are poets for?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 91.
- [2] *The New World* exists in three versions: a 150 minute version screened at the 2006 Berlinale and then withdrawn; a 135 minute general international release version; and a recent, extended 'Director's Cut' DVD version (172 minutes), which is perhaps the most 'romantic' version of the film.
- [3] All of Malick's films are set in a mythically inflected historical past: Nebraska/South Dakota in the late 1950s; the Texas Panhandle in 1916; Guadalcanal, the Solomon Islands, in 1942-3, and Jamestown, Virginia/England between 1607 and 1617. *The Tree of Life* (USA 2010) is also set in the 1950s American midwest.
- [4] Simon Critchley, "Calm: on Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*" in *The Thin Red Line*, ed. David Davies (London/New York: Routledge 2009), 12.
- [5] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University press, 1978), xiv-xv.
- [6] Kent Jones, "Acts of God" in *Film Comment*, March/April (2006): 28.
- [7] Amy Taubin, "Birth of a nation" in *Sight and Sound 2* (2006): 45.
- [8] J. Hoberman, "Mr and Mrs Smith", *Village Voice*, 13 December 2005. <http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-12-13/film/mr-and-mrs-smith/> (Accessed September 11, 2009).
- [9] Anthony Lane, "The Other," *The New Yorker*, 23 December 2005, 151.
- [10] Lloyd Michaels notes that the critical response to *The New World* has been "generally disheartening", notably for "the mocking tone that informed several reviews". Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Urbana: University of Illinois press, 2009), 84.
- [11] James Morrison, "Making worlds, making pictures: Terrence Malick's *The New World*" in *Poetic visions of America: The Cinema of Terrence Malick*, 2nd edition, ed. Hannah Patterson (London: Wallflower, 2007), 199.

[12] Iain Macdonald, "Nature and the Will to Power in Terrence Malick's *The New World*" in *The Thin Red Line*, ed. David Davies (London/New York: Routledge 2009), 87-110. Further references to this text appear as page numbers in brackets.

[13] Michaels, *Terrence Malick*, 79 and 85.

[14] James Morrison, "Making worlds, making pictures: Terrence Malick's *The New World*" in *Poetic Visions of America*, 199-211. Further references to this text appear as page numbers in brackets.

[15] See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University press, 1958).

[16] For a critique of the historical distortions in Malick's romantic rendering of the tale see John d'Entremont, *The New World* (movie review), in *The Journal of American History*, vol. 94, no. 3 (December 2007): 1023-1026.

[17] Lloyd Michaels, "The New World", in *Terrence Malick*, 78-99. Further references to this text appear as page numbers in brackets.

[18] This Prelude evokes the moment in *Das Rheingold* "when the mythical character Alberich, a Nibelung dwarf, steals the river Rhine's golden treasure, renouncing love in favor of wealth and power". John d'Entremont, *The New World* (movie review), 1024.

[19] Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 214.

[20] See the quotation that opens this essay.

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