Thanks to Terrence Malick's reticent personality, most biographical sketches focus on the constantly repeated points I'm about to repeat again here. After studying and briefly teaching philosophy, publishing his translation of a text by Martin Heidegger along the way, Malick enrolled in the brand-new American Film Institute and made cinema his career. His first feature, Badlands, created a critical stir in 1973 with its meticulously crafted story of a Midwestern murder spree perpetrated by a deracinated young couple in the 1950s. His second film, the 1978 melodrama Days of Heaven, also tells of an outlaw couple and uses an offbeat female voiceover to advance and counterpoint the narrative; its reviews were more divided, although it earned a prize for best director at Cannes and four Academy Award nominations.

Two decades of silence then ensued, during which Malick withdrew to work on various projects—a story of psychoanalysis in the nineteenth century, a Jerry Lee Lewis biopic—that never materialized. He returned to the screen in 1998 with a large-scale adaptation of James Jones's 1962 novel The Thin Red Line, a grunt's-eye view of American soldiers in the Guadalcanal campaign of World War II; again box-office returns were disappointing and reviews tended to show more respect for Malick's intentions than excitement over what he'd accomplished. By the time he released The New World in 2005, critical opinion had hardened—he was a cinematic philosopher to some, an insufferable aesthete to others—and everyday moviegoers were less interested than ever in the deliberately paced, audiovisually dense stylistics that have become his trademark. At this writing the release date for his latest picture, Tree of Life, has not been announced.

In the introduction to The Thin Red Line, his volume in Routledge's recently inaugurated Philosophers on Film series, editor David Davies expresses surprise that “there are to date few critical studies” of Malick’s work, considering his “elevated standing in the pantheon of modern directors” (1). Davies goes on to list five studies already published and one in the works, not counting Lloyd Michael's monograph Terrence Malick in the University Press of Illinois Press's valuable Contemporary Film Directors series. It can as well be said that two critical monographs, two edited collections, and a growing number of serious critical essays is a surprisingly large bibliography for a filmmaker with only four films to write about. Then too, the elevation of Malick's standing is not as apparent to everyone as Davies assumes. Andrew Sarris watched Days of Heaven and found “its drama deficient . . . its psychology obscure,” while Gilbert Adair found The Thin Red Line to be “bludgeoned by gorgeousness” and J. Hoberman disparaged The New World as “monumentally slight” (40, 10, 84). Yet equal passion motivates Malick’s defenders, including the writers whose books and essays I’m reviewing here. Most are versatile scholars who go beyond auteurism and cinephilia to discuss areas of aesthetics, philosophy, and intertextuality that are central to Malick’s work.

I’ll begin with Michel Chion, whose (too) rhapsodically written study of The Thin Red Line, translated from the French by Trista Selous, was published in the BFI Modern Classics series in 2004 and became something of a pacesetter in the field. In an unusual move, Chion begins with a few brief questions and propositions that summarize his feelings about the film, and ends with a scene breakdown intended as a viewer’s guide but not meant to prevent us from seeing the film “in all the deliberate confusion of its narration” (74). Between these markers he looks into an array of major issues, of which I’ll single out one as an example of his approach.

In a section called “Paradise in Three Dimensions,” Chion notes that while the dialogue refers more than once to the fact that Guadalcanal is an island, it is visualized as such at only one fleeting moment, on a map displayed to a group of officers. Yet the concept of island is a persistent theme in the film. Sometimes it’s taken up positively, as when First Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn) likens salvation to the idea of making an island for himself, and again in the film’s last shot, which shows the mysteriously resonant image of a coconut shell sprouting a green shoot in the midst of a pool of water on a beach. In general, however, the film complicates and even negates island as a conceptual motif. Chion notes that the camera rarely rises high enough to show the land’s relationship to the encircling
sea, and goes on to observe that in the film’s overall trajectory, the characters “cross first a plain, then a river, then . . . climb higher and higher to reach [a] bunker. But when they get there, Malick avoids any images that might give an impression of dominance in relation to the surrounding space . . . In his work, human beings never conquer space; they only meet other human beings” (48–9). And even then their speech is largely inner speech, unheard by the others around them.

Every man in Malick’s movie is an island, then, enclosed with others on a geographical island whose confining limits can only be transcended by venturing into the water that surrounds it, in which (at both the beginning and ending of the film) people find the “paradisiacal freedom” (50) of moving through three dimensions with no physical or cultural boundaries to hem them in. Those familiar with the novel will find this a significant change of emphasis, since Jones portrays the soldiers very much as an organic unit bound by common hardships, duties, and dangers. In any case, Chion finds the island theme to be positive and negative at once. The film’s famous voiceovers, for example, are “islands of words” that “do not mingle with the surrounding air, as though they were enclosed in the ‘moving box’ that is the human soul.” Yet at the same time, these separate voices constitute a single voice that offers “the modulated meditations of a single collective consciousness. . . . In the logic of the film, it is out of extreme human isolation and insularity . . . that ‘together-ness’ can emerge” (55, 57). These insights do much to illuminate what is arguably Malick’s greatest film to date.

One of the more interesting essays in the new edition of The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America, edited by Hannah Patterson, is Adrian Martin’s contribution, “Approaching the New World,” which starts with the arresting observation that O’Hara Nakla’s character in The New World is named Pocahontas for the first and only time in the film’s principal concerns. Martin goes on to discuss The New World as Malick’s first film to treat love not as infatuation or intoxication but as a full-scale existential event with “transformative, even utopian power” (217), and later he comments on the risks and rewards of the improvisational, almost free-form shooting style that Malick now embraces. Martin’s writing is marred (again) by schoolmarmish sniping at critics less enlightened than he—“One of the worst habits of film commentary . . .” (213), “Studies of a director’s career often impose . . .” (214), “the rush to judgment so typical of contemporary film criticism . . .” (218)—and occasional slips of language, as when critic Vachel Lindsay becomes just Vachel (215). Such blemishes aside, however, this is a stimulating article.

Not surprisingly, various essays in these books explore Heideggerian ideas that recur in Malick’s movies, as when the filmmaker’s philosopher friend Hubert Dreyfuss teams with Camilo Salazar Prince to discuss the phenomenon of “world collapse,” which is the loss not of life but of what gives meaning to one’s life, in “The Thin Red Line: Dying Without Demise, Demise Without Dying,” a distinguished entry in Davies’s collection. A few years ago I argued (in my essay “Film, Philosophy, and Terrence Malick’s New World,” The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 6, 2006) that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s influence on Malick deserves more attention than it has received, since (to mention one of several reasons) both are concerned less with the psychological self (the fulcrum of conventional fiction) than with the “philosophical self,” defined by Wittgenstein as “the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world—not a part of it.” Wittgenstein is hardly mentioned in these volumes, though, so his hour in Malick studies has evidently not come round. I’m also disappointed that none of the books contain meaningful discourse about the imperialist implications coiled within The New World. This isn’t the place for a discussion of colonial ideology vis-à-vis Malick’s aesthetically inflected historiography, but his transcendental view of an ultimately harmonious cosmos is a questionable frame for a fact-based narrative rooted in invasion, violence, and conquest. This increasingly bothers me despite my admiration for other qualities of the film, and when Pocahontas’s matronly English guardian exhorts her to face life’s tribulations like a tree, always reaching for the light even when vital branches have been stripped away, it feels like hopefulness has crowded history off the screen.

Another challenge faced by advocates of The New World is the similarity between its telling of the Pocahontas story

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**BOOK DATA**


David Davies (ed.), *The Thin Red Line*. London: Routledge, 2008. $90.00 cloth; $27.95 paper. 128 pages.


and the version long enshrined by American pop culture, most notoriously in the animated *Pocahontas* released by Walt Disney Pictures in 1995. Iain Macdonald tackles this issue in an essay for Davies’s volume called “Nature and the Will to Power in Terrence Malick’s The New World,” achieving decidedly mixed results. Parallels between the Malick and Disney films abound, as Macdonald conscientiously shows: casting (Christian Bale as John Rolfe, Irene Bedard as Pocahontas’s mother), repeated gestures (hats doffed in Pocahontas’s honor), compositional similarities (close-ups of a compass), and so on. Having adduced this evidence, Macdonald recuperates *The New World* by means of a novel distinction between “unintentional” and “calculated” triteness, hypothesizing that the hokey, hackneyed aspects of Malick’s film are “clues” signaling that his Disneyesque approach is a deliberate artistic and philosophical choice.

Malick’s goal, Macdonald concludes, is “to awaken the viewer to the necessary and inescapable process of nature by the ruse of a self-deconstructing narrative” that reveals a “deeper process” by which “one kind of order yields to another . . . of which it is a part,” demonstrating “human self-understanding . . . to be parasitical upon the obscure becoming of nature or what Nietzsche calls the will to power, that is, the real ‘war’ in the heart of nature” (104–6). I think this description of Malick’s intention makes a valuable point about the layering, interweaving, and thematic intricacy that have become his most imposing signatures. But the notion that Malick set out to make a film so laden with clichés that it ends up “canceling itself out” (105) seems far-fetched, to put it mildly. My own theory (also far-fetched, I admit) is that since narrative isn’t very important to him, he decided to Disney the movie up because that might make it more popular, thereby boosting his credibility in the industry that sustains his career. The war in the heart of Hollywood is also very real.

A necessary condition for worthwhile discourse about Malick is sensitivity to the intertextual threads that play such a strong part in his cinema’s allure. “Calm,” the essay by Simon Critchley in Davies’s collection, develops the idea that the speculations of Private Witt (Jim Caviezel) on death and immortality in Jones’s book and Malick’s film of *The Thin Red Line* repeat the thoughts of protagonist Robert E. Lee Prewitt (pre-Witt) in Jones’s 1951 war novel *From Here to Eternity* (14). Several articles in Patterson’s volume are also praiseworthy in this regard. Robert Silberman’s essay “Terrence Malick, Landscape, and ‘What is the war in the heart of nature?’” traces the nature imagery in *The Thin Red Line* to a cultural “obsession with tropical exoticism” ingrained in everything from Winslow Homer’s painting and James A. Michener’s prose to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical comedy (166). James Wierzbicki’s essay on “Sound as Music in the Films of Terrence Malick” makes many ingenious points about diegetic sound and Camille Saint-Saëns’s music in *Days of Heaven*, although it fails to draw solid conclusions from them. James Morrison’s article “Making Worlds, Making Pictures” compares the England of *The New World* with that of Stanley Kubrick’s 1975 epic *Barry Lyndon* (208–9), among other things, and Stacy Peebles’s essay “The Other World of War” powerfully relates facets of *The Thin Red Line* to the American transcendentalists’ ideas of Nature and the Over-Soul.

Michael’s monograph is especially sensitive to allusiveness and intertextuality, using a telephoto shot of Kit (Martin Sheen) to link *Badlands* with T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Hollow Men” (1925) and connecting Witt’s last voiceover in *The Thin Red Line* with moments in early Renaissance literature when characters continue to ask questions from beyond the grave (31, 73). Michaels also shows how Stephen Crane’s novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) influenced the “contemplation of existential questions and . . . interrogation of nature’s beauty and indifference to man’s fate” in *The Thin Red Line*, and explores ways in which (as Malick has acknowledged) the narration by Linda (Linda Manz) in *Days of Heaven* echoes the eponymous heroes of Mark Twain’s novels *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)—the former in its conventional point of view and eagerness to please, and the latter in its “preternatural sensitivity” and its childlike inability (or refusal) to order experience into customary patterns. He also points out that Linda’s denial of clear-cut human morality—“You just got half devil and half angel in you”—echoes the “dualistic theology” that Huck espouses (under Jim’s influence) when he remarks, “Dey’s two angels hoverin’ roun’ bout him . . . De white one gits him to go right, den de black one sail in en bust it all up” (61, 42, 43). This is not deep philosophy, but it’s pretty much unarguable.

Patterson’s book contains several essays in addition to the items I’ve mentioned, the best of which include Mark Cousins’s refreshingly personal take on *The New World*, John Orr’s look at the movie Western according to Malick and Arthur Penn, and John Streamas’s excellent analysis of *The Thin Red Line* and the so-called Greatest Generation, a phrase I wish I’d never have to hear again. The heartening message I take away from these books is that some of the most gifted film scholars around are increasingly attracted to Malick’s cinema. I await the next crop with whetted appetite.

David Sterritt, chief book critic of *Film Quarterly* and adjunct professor at Columbia University, wrote the program essay for the Criterion Collection’s recent DVD release of *The Thin Red Line*. 