

Look Out Through My Eyes: The Enchantments of Terrence Malick

Eric Repphun

I remember my mother when she was dyin.' She was all shrunk up and grey. I asked her if she was afraid. She just shook her head. I was afraid to touch the death I see in her. I couldn't find anything beautiful or uplifting about her going back to God. I heard people talk about immortality, but I ain't seen it. I wonder how it'd be when I died, what it would be like to know that this breath, now, was the last one you was ever going to draw. I just hope I can meet it the same way she did, with the same calm. 'Cause that's where it's hidden, this immortality I hadn't seen.
Private Witt, from *The Thin Red Line*.¹

In contemporary cinema, the American director Terrence Malick remains an enigmatic figure, one of those rare, singular filmmakers whose work is instantly recognizable and utterly inimitable. In a celebrated career that has spanned more than thirty years, Malick has directed only four feature films – *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* – but each is remarkable in its own way. His narrative style is poetic, his films are diffuse, his perspective omnipresent. His films are at the same time dreamlike and confrontational. His aesthetic is challenging; in the words of John Orr, “an aesthetic that gives pleasure without eliminating judgement, which demands judgement without eliminating pleasure.”² Malick's restless cameras serve to distance the viewer from the action while his continuous use of voiceover allow the viewer into the interior monologues of the people on the screen, creating a disconcerting mix of intimacy and coldness that once led the critic Roger Ebert to write, “The actors ... are making one movie, and the director is making another. This leads to an almost hallucinatory sense of displacement.”³

Malick's enigmatic style should by no means come as a surprise. He was a Rhodes Scholar, a journalist, a teacher of philosophy at MIT, and a published translator of Martin Heidegger before ever picking up a camera. Malick's films reflect his fascination with human ontology to the point that Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy have pointed to his work as “Heideggerian cinema,” and to *Days of Heaven* as a “stunning and evocative portrait of the beauty and fragility of earthy existence.”⁴ There is no denying that Heidegger's unease over the nature of technology and its ever-increasing presence in human life underscores Malick's films. His films are hard to pin down, something that is only heightened by his legendary reticence to discuss his work. To understand Malick, we have to look elsewhere for guidance; he gives no interviews, believing instead that his work can and should speak for itself. Here, I will be turning to Paul Schrader's classic book *Transcendental Style in Film* and to the concepts of disenchantment and re-enchantment in order to offer a reading of Malick's work as a director, in particular his last two films, and to place these films within the contemporary religious landscape.

Disenchantment

As Malick himself did with *Badlands* in 1973, we must begin with disenchantment, which comes to us from Max Weber's foundational sociology of religion, in particular from his master narrative of rationalization or the “disenchantment of the world,” a phrase he himself borrowed from Friedrich Schiller. Rationalization, very basically, describes the rise of instrumental rationality over and above value rationality within human society, the rise of an order that

¹ Terrence Malick: *The Thin Red Line*, 20th Century Fox, 1998.

² John Orr: 'Terrence Malick and Arthur Penn: The Western Re-Myth,' in Hannah Patterson (ed.), *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, London, Wallflower Press, 2003, 67.

³ Roger Ebert: 'The Thin Red Line,' *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 8 January 1999. Available online at: <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19990108/REVIEWS/901080302/1023>, last accessed 07/04/2009.

⁴ Marc Furstenau and Leslie McAvoy: 'Terrence Malick's Heideggerian Cinema: War and the Question of Being in *The Thin Red Line*,' in Hannah Patterson (ed.), *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, London, Wallflower Press, 2003, 175.

constitutes the progressive erosion of magic from the world. In pre-historic cultures, where Weber locates the seminal, and in his view, purest, form of religion, the uses of magic were profoundly this-worldly, and were the responsibility of charismatic practitioners whose power was dependent upon what Weber called “spirits,” which were “neither soul, demon, nor god, but something indeterminate, material yet invisible, non-personal and yet somehow endowed with volition.”⁵ Weber also considered magic to be ethical, “among the most important formative influences on conduct,”⁶ and its loss was thus the loss of an important ethical compass. Indeed, Weber’s theory, which charts the course of religion from this magical milieu to the early twentieth century, is largely concerned with loss.

Nicholas Gane does a particularly fine job in summarizing Weber’s argument:

the transition to modernity is driven by a process of cultural rationalization, one in which ultimate values rationalize and *devalue themselves*, and are replaced increasingly by the pursuit of materialistic, mundane ends. This process of devaluation or *disenchantment*, gives rise to a condition of cultural nihilism in which the intrinsic value or meaning of values or actions are subordinated increasingly to a “rational” quest for efficiency and control.⁷

This recalls forcibly Nietzsche’s oft-quoted description of European nihilism: “What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking: ‘why?’ finds no answer.”⁸ For Weber, there was similarly little to celebrate about the rise of rationalization, which he described by employing the metaphor of an ‘iron cage.’ Weber writes, with words that resonate uncomfortably today, “For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said, ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.’”⁹

Though his essays on science and politics as vocations offered what he saw as resistance to rationalization, Weber himself never suggested the possibility of re-enchantment. His writing, for the most part, shows disenchantment as an inevitable, irreversible process. Though it is impossible from our current perspective to accept uncritically the unbroken linearity of Weber’s narrative, his theories continue to resonate. Postmodern thought in particular – and here one need only think of the seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment*¹⁰ – has found considerable use for the concept of disenchantment, which provides a structure and a vocabulary with which to understand and explore the perceived failures and frailties of the modern world. The introduction of the concept of re-enchantment adds a necessary dialectical movement to Weber’s theory and extends the possibility of using his theories into the postmodern context.

Re-enchantment(s)

What, then, is re-enchantment? The concept has emerged in part from the mass of theoretical and speculative work that has developed since it has become increasingly clear that the classic secularization thesis – that modernity *necessarily* displaces religion – has failed to anticipate or explain the confused religious situation in the modern world. Strictly speaking in Weberian terms, re-enchantment would mean the opposite of disenchantment; the return of magic to everyday life or the return to a value-driven rationality; however, the word has been used in a myriad of different ways. There are common elements within much of this diverse range of writing, including the reclaiming of synthesis from modern atomization, the revaluation of nature, the revaluing of all manner of pre-modern forms of knowing, and a related reassessment of some of the dominant cultural narratives of the present.

⁵ Nicholas Gane: *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory: Rationalization versus Re-enchantment*, New York, Palgrave, 2002, 16.

⁶ Max Weber: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Unwin University Books, 1930, 27.

⁷ Gane, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Will to Power*, Walter Kauffmann and R. J. Hollingdale (trans.), New York, Vintage, 1967, 9.

⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 182.

¹⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

There is a good deal of agreement among the astonishingly varied works on re-enchantment that re-enchantment is a possibility only in the postmodern age. It is predicated on rationalization as it has played out in modernity and on the postmodern challenges to the Enlightenment understanding of the world. The theologian Graham Ward writes:

In the work of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud the self-determining consciousness, the rational subject, is already being displaced. Even modernity possessed moments when ambiguity was respected. Nevertheless, it is the re-evaluation of ambivalence, mystery, excess and aporia that they adhere to, are constituted by and disrupt the rational, that lies behind the re-enchantment of the world.¹¹

Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman gives what is perhaps the best single definition of what re-enchantment has come to mean:

Postmodernity, one may say as well, brings 're-enchantment' of the world after the protracted and earnest, though in the end inconclusive, modern struggle to dis-enchant it (or, more exactly, the resistance to disenchantment hardly ever put to sleep, was all along the "postmodern thorn" in the body of modernity). The mistrust of human spontaneity, of drives, impulses and inclinations resistant to prediction and rational justification, has been all but replaced by the mistrust of unemotional, calculating reason. Dignity has been returned to emotions; legitimacy to the 'inexplicable,' nay *irrational*, sympathies and loyalties which cannot 'explain themselves' in terms of their purpose ... The postmodern world is one in which *mystery* is no more a barely tolerated alien awaiting a deportation order.¹²

The word re-enchantment has been used in connection to topics as diverse as Kantian virtue¹³ and the cultural practices of buying second-hand clothing.¹⁴ Its use has been attached to the role of Dickens and Thackeray in 19th century England.¹⁵ It has been used in connection with a Whitehead-esque process philosophy of religion.¹⁶ It has been used in many places to describe a non-positivist postmodern science. One of the more rigorous and sustained academic discussion of the idea to date is Christopher Partridge's two-volume *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, which equates re-enchantment with that swirling, confused mass of religious and quasi-religious ideas commonly – and misleadingly – called "spirituality."¹⁷

There are some other points of contact and similarity. Many of the works on re-enchantment refer to the same sources: Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, Alfred North Whitehead, Carl Jung, Teilhard de Chardin, and John Keats all make frequent appearances in books on re-enchantment, as does a generalized, atomized form of Buddhism, often personified by the Dalai Lama. Indeed, in a popular, apologetic book, Jeffrey Paine calls the flourishing of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States 're-enchantment.'¹⁸ A number of writers also tie the concept of re-enchantment to specific religious traditions. In this usage, industrial capitalist

¹¹ Graham Ward: *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1996, 132.

¹² Zygmunt Bauman: *Postmodern Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1993, 33.

¹³ Scott M. Roulter: *Kantian Virtue at the Intersection of Politics and Nature: The Vale of Soul-Making*, vol. 7, North American Kant Society Studies in Philosophy, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2004.

¹⁴ Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe: *Second-Hand Cultures*, Oxford, Berg, 2003.

¹⁵ David Payne: *The Reenchantment of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, and Serialization*, New York, Palgrave, 2005.

¹⁶ David Ray Griffin: *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001.

¹⁷ Christopher Partridge: *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. 1, *Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, London, T & T Clark International, 2004.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Paine: *Re-Enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West*, London, W. W. Norton and Company, 2004.

modernity is represented as the disenchanting other to the enchantments of religion. Alister McGrath's *The Re-enchantment of Nature* argues for a reevaluation of nature along distinctly confessional Christian lines.¹⁹ In a similar manner, the anthology *The Re-Enchantment of Political Science* argues that a Christian stance is a proper one for pursuing political science in the postmodern age, which has revived the possibility of "situated theorizing."²⁰ Avihu Zakai writes of the American Puritan preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards: "Against the de-Christianization of history and the de-divinization of the historical process, as evidenced in the various Enlightenment historical accounts, Edwards looked for the re-enthronement of God as the author and Lord of history, the re-enchantment of the historical world."²¹ Here we find a common contradiction in the use of the word re-enchantment and Weber's theory of disenchantment, which he argued culminated in the Puritan colonies, in which Edwards was a prominent figure. Weber, for example, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, writes, "The great historic process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world ... came here to its logical conclusion ... The God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system."²²

Ward, as part of the Radical Orthodoxy movement in theology, understands re-enchantment as a superficial phenomenon, one not to be confused with genuine religiosity. He writes:

"Religion" is lending a certain magical, mystical polish to contemporary forms of customized transcendence ... The religious is used rhetorically in the creation of illusions of transcendence, to help simulate euphoria in transporting events ... So we have, on the one hand, a re-enchantment of the world in which religion provides a symbolic capital, empty of content and yet pre-eminently consumable – like caffeine-free, sugar-free Coke. On the other, we have strong theological commitments increasingly confident about voicing, and voicing aggressively, their moral and spiritual difference.²³

There is at the heart of re-enchantment an often uncritical and classically Romantic reevaluation of pre-scientific ways of knowing and pre-modern cultures. The Australian writer David Tacey, in a good, if hyperbolic, example of this sort of thinking, writes in his book *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* which includes a chapter on Aboriginal reconciliation: "But spirituality is not beyond our grasp; in fact, it is the normal way of being. In tribal and indigenous societies, spirituality is an entirely natural mode of being in the world, and it is still available to modern people as well, if we can open ourselves to this dimension of experience."²⁴ We can see further evidence of this valuation in the growing numbers of sober, educated people who now consider themselves pagans and Druids. Someone has gone so far as to build a new Stonehenge on New Zealand's North Island, which is, they claim, "intended to inspire New Zealanders to explore and experience for themselves how technologies of ancient times were used and can still be used to give practical and detailed information on the seasons, time, and navigation."²⁵

Given this collision of Romanticism and scientific rationalism, it is perhaps not surprising that there is a whole subset of books on re-enchantment that deal with the re-enchantment of the sciences. This can be traced back at least as far as to Morris Berman's seminal 1981 book, simply entitled *The Reenchantment of the World*. For Berman, what is needed is a return to

¹⁹ Alister McGrath: *The Re-Enchantment of Nature: Science, Religion and the Human Sense of Wonder*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2002.

²⁰ Thomas W. Heilke and Ashley Woodiwiss (eds.): *The Re-Enchantment of Political Science: Christian Scholars Engage Their Discipline*, Boulder, CO, Lexington Books, 2001.

²¹ Avihu Zakai: *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, xiv.

²² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 105-118.

²³ Graham Ward: *True Religion*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, 132-139.

²⁴ David Tacey: *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*, Sydney, Harper Collins Publishers, 2000, 18.

²⁵ Stonehenge Aotearoa website: Available at <http://www.astronomynz.org.nz/stonehenge/>, last accessed 07/04/2009.

the enchanted world that existed before the Scientific Revolution though a “participating consciousness,” a holistic way of thinking that integrates what he calls “mind” or “soul” with the whole of the cosmos. Berman centres his re-enchantment on the argument that the common narratives of science as a neutral, objective way of understanding fails to capture the truth of the situation. Berman argues that modern science is, for all of its claims to objectivity, merely another profoundly *interested* epistemology. In the spirit of Thomas Kuhn, he writes, “The success of the mechanical world view cannot be attributed to any inherent validity it might possess, but (partly) to the powerful political and religious attack on the Hermetic tradition by the reigning European elites.”²⁶ Berman’s book is deeply concerned with the revaluation of the arts of alchemy, one of the primary targets of many early scientific writers. The most recent in a series of books to take up Berman’s project, Ervin Laszlo’s *Science and the Reenchantment of the Cosmos* (which had a counterpart in the surprise hit film *What the Bleep Do We Know?*) argues, “At the cutting edge of contemporary science a remarkable insight is surfacing: the universe, with all things in it, is a quasi-living, coherent whole. All things in it are connected.”²⁷ Laszlo argues that there exists a “strange space-and time-transcending connection”²⁸ in nature that was centuries ago described in Hindu cosmology as the Akasha, the “most fundamental of the five elements of the cosmos.”²⁹ He argues that this new scientific understanding is really a re-discovery of “an intuitive insight... present is all the great cosmologies.”³⁰ This idea, that new discoveries are essentially a reclaiming of old knowledge, is implicit in most of the work on re-enchantment and is a key to its legitimization.

Malick as Heir to the Transcendental Style

I would argue that re-enchantment, like disenchantment, is always already a matter of the religious, and I would further argue that Terrence Malick is one of the great contemporary artists whose work both represents and participates in the process of re-enchantment. Malick’s work is often discussed in religious terms and there are good reasons to approach his films from a religious standpoint, as we approach him here from the standpoint of re-enchantment. Hannah Patterson writes, “The central protagonists in Terrence Malick’s films are caught up in, or driven by, a search: for a different kind of life, a sense of self, a reason for being, or a spiritual presence in the world... characters are taken out the everydayness; their subsequent journeys form the films’ narrative impetus and existential inquiry.”³¹ Similarly, Ron Mottram identifies Malick’s central concern as a “struggle for wholeness, redemption and transcendence ... at the heart of ...his films is an Edenic yearning to recapture a lost wholeness of being, an idyllic state of integration with the natural and good both within and without ourselves”,³² and Geoff Andrew writes that Malick’s images “speak of a fascination with – and, perhaps, a faith in – the transcendent.”³³

In 1972 Paul Schrader, a young film student who would go on to become a director and the screenwriter of *Taxi Driver* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, described what he saw as a developing transcendental style in film, and in his slim volume, *Transcendental Style in Film*, are hidden clues that can help us to situate Malick in the tradition of transcendental films. Schrader’s understanding of transcendence, which is heavily influenced by the work of Rudolph Otto, is based on a fundamental rupture between humans and their worlds, be it the world of family or the world at large. For Schrader, this style of “spiritual universality” was exemplified in the works of the French director Robert Bresson and by the Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu, and to a lesser extent by Carl Dreyer. A transcendent film is, in Schrader’s words, “not necessarily typified by Joan at the stake, Christ on the Mount, or St Francis

²⁶ Morris Berman: *The Reenchantment of the World*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981, 112.

²⁷ Ervin Laszlo: *Science and the Reenchantment of the Cosmos: The Rise of the Integral Vision of Reality*, Rochester, VT, Inner Traditions, 2006, 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

³¹ Hannah Patterson: ‘Introduction: Poetic Visions of America,’ in Hannah Patterson (ed.), *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, London, Wallflower Press, 2003, 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 13-14.

³³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 2.

among the flowers; it is not necessarily suffering, preaching, or good will among men. It is only *necessarily* a style.”³⁴

This style hinges on a three-part movement of narrative. The first is the *everyday*, or “a meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplace of everyday living ... The everyday celebrates the bare threshold of existence; it meticulously sets up the straw man of day-to-day reality.”³⁵ Elsewhere, Michael Bird argues that the “intense realism,” the dirt and toil of Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest*, one of Schrader’s most important examples of transcendental style, is what “enables” the film “to express the spiritual.”³⁶ In the film, it is through the brute physicality of everyday life, captured in excruciating detail by Bresson’s cold, analytic camera, that we are led to understand the spiritual suffering and isolation of the young curé of Ambricourt. It is in these same mundane details we find the building blocks for Malick’s re-enchantment. Like Ozu and Bresson, Malick’s films are filled with painstaking representations of everyday living in the harshest of places, from the battlefield to the ramparts of a colonial fort. The critic Peter Travers tellingly wrote of Malick’s *The New World*: “In rendering the sound and spirit of that home in exquisite detail, Malick brings his film very close to a state of grace.”³⁷

The second move in this transcendental narrative involves the introduction of “an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action.”³⁸ Schrader calls this *disparity*, decisive moments of “spiritual density” and it is not the resolution of that disparity but rather its transcendence that leads us to *stasis*, the final stage, which he describes as, “a frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity but transcends it.”³⁹ Schrader posits this moment of stasis as a religious universal: “Complete stasis, or frozen motion, is the trademark of religious art in every culture. It establishes an image of a second reality which can stand beside the ordinary reality; it represents the Wholly Other.”⁴⁰ To take one example, Bresson ends *Diary of a Country Priest* on a transcendental note with a voiceover account of the death of the young curé, who dies unloved but ultimately undefeated, told over the stark image of a shadow of a cross against a white background: “He motioned that he wanted his rosary, which I found in his pants’ pocket. From then on he held it pressed against his chest. He seemed to recover some strength ... He then said, very distinctly, if extremely slowly, these exact words: ‘What does it matter? All is grace.’”⁴¹

Summing up Ozu’s films, Schrader writes something we can adopt without modification when approaching Malick: “In effect, he accepts a construct such as this: there exists a deep ground of compassion and awareness which man and nature can touch intermittently. This, of course, is the Transcendent.”⁴² Likewise, André Bazin writes of *Diary of a Country Priest*, “The transcendence of the ... Bresson universe is not the transcendence of destiny as the ancients understood it, nor yet the transcendence of Racinian passion, but the transcendence of grace which is something each of us is free to refuse.”⁴³ This form of transcendence is deeply ironic and unquestionably postmodern, and we can see it in Malick’s films. Like Bresson, who lamented the rising secularization and industrialization of Europe and Ozu, who grappled endlessly with the Westernizing of Japan following the Second World War, in this irony Malick’s films are studies in loss, elegies for a vanished world.

³⁴ Paul Schrader: *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1972, 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-41.

³⁶ Michael Bird: ‘Film as Hierophany,’ in John R. May and Michael Bird (ed.), *Religion and Film*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1982, 19.

³⁷ Travers, Peter Travers: ‘The New World,’ *Rolling Stone*, 15 December, 2005. Available online at http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/6217902/review/8957099/the_new_world, last accessed 07/04/2009.

³⁸ Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Robert Bresson: *Diary of a Country Priest*, Union Générale Cinématographique, 1951. This is taken from the Criterion Edition English subtitles.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴³ André Bazin: *What is Cinema?* Vol. I, Hugh Gray (trans.), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, 134.

In more specific terms, Malick and Ozu share a distinct stylistic visual and narrative element. Like Ozu, Malick leans heavily on what Schrader calls “codas,” which are mostly static shots inserted into the action that act as interpolations of silence and stillness. Ozu used images of passing trains, of city streets, temples and mountains as codas. Schrader writes:

Like the traditional Zen artist, Ozu directs silences and voids. Silence and emptiness are active ingredients in Ozu’s films ... his films are structured between action and emptiness ... between scene and coda ... In Western art one would naturally assume that the codas are inserted to give weight to the paragraphs, but for Ozu, as for Zen, it is precisely the opposite: the dialogue gives meaning to the silence, the action to the still life.⁴⁴

Though his films are far more fluid than Ozu’s, the same is true of Malick’s films, which are formally reliant on such codas, usually images of nature – trees and running water are common – inserted even in the middle of intense battle sequences. Malick’s film thus operate in a fashion much like that of Ozu, or Zen art in general and it can be said that Malick’s films fall into this tradition of transcendental films, a transcendence I am describing here also as re-enchantment.

All Things Shining: Terrence Malick and Re-enchantment

Malick’s first film as director, *Badlands* (1973) is based very loosely on the story of Charles Starkweather, who at nineteen went on a killing spree in the American Midwest with his fourteen-year-old girlfriend in the winter of 1958, crimes for which Starkweather was later executed. The film is a challenging look at the disenchanting, nihilistic, celebrity-obsessed culture of post-war America. We find in Kit and Holly, the film’s young killers, predecessors to the whole era of “blank fiction” and with Kit, we see the seeds of Bret Easton Ellis’s famed American psychopath Patrick Bateman, among many others. Though remarkably assured for a debut film, it is with his next film that Malick truly established his unique, enigmatic style.

Days of Heaven was released in 1978, at the tail end of what many consider to be the most important and artistically successful period in Hollywood history. The story, again, is a simple one, set directly before the First World War. Bill and Abby, young lovers on the run after Bill kills a heartless factory foreman, flee west from Chicago on the railroads with Bill’s younger sister Linda, who provides the film’s voiceover. In one of many biblical allusions – and *Days of Heaven* is the most visibly religious of Malick’s films – Bill and Abby pose as brother and sister, like Abram and Sarai in the Book of Genesis. They run into trouble when the dying farmer they work for falls for Abby and proposes marriage. Thinking he will soon die, Bill talks Abby into the union and moves with Linda into the main farmhouse, where things take a tragic turn.

Malick, working closely with the great cinematographer Nestor Almendros, who won the Oscar for his work, fashioned a unique way of shooting the film designed to mimic both silent films and early twentieth century photojournalism, in particular that of Walker Evans. “In North America the air is more transparent and the light more violent ... Traditionally, cinematographers solve this problem by filling up the shaded area with arc lights,” Almendros writes, “Rather than compensating, Malick and I thought it would be better to expose for the shade, which would make the sky come out overexposed, burned-out, and not at all blue.”⁴⁵ The film could not have been made without the latest advances in wide-aperture lenses and small, lightweight cameras, which allowed Malick to shoot exclusively with natural light, something he has done ever since, carrying this uniquely naturalistic aesthetic with him into coming years.

Days of Heaven was a notoriously difficult shoot and it would be 1998 before Malick would direct another film.⁴⁶ Malick’s next film, *The Thin Red Line*, remains his masterpiece. This is the war film as a meditation on death and the fundamental problems of being human. It is also

⁴⁴ Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 28-29.

⁴⁵ Nestor Almendros: ‘Days of Heaven (Terrence Malick – 1976),’ in John Orr and Olga Taxidou (ed.), *Post-War Cinema and Modernity: A Film Reader*, New York, New York University Press, 2001, 235.

⁴⁶ For a detailed insider’s description of Malick’s conflicts with his Hollywood union crew, see Almendros, *op. cit.*

one of the few popular narratives to portray the native peoples of the Solomon Islands, where many decisive battles of the Pacific were fought. The inclusion of a pre-modern culture provides the key to understanding the film. The film opens with Private Witt, an American soldier gone AWOL, living a simple existence in a native village before being captured and given punitive duty as a stretcher-bearer. For Witt, the village is the key to his life, and eventually to his death. For him, it is literally another world, an enchanted other to the world of the heavily mechanized war. Witt wears his brush with an enchanted world like armour during his horrific drift through the battlefields. If there is a hero in this staunchly pacifist film, it is Witt, who at the close of the film sacrifices himself to save his platoon. Malick gives Witt an opposite with the nihilistic but still compassionate Sergeant Welsh. In a sense, the whole of the film can be seen as an extended argument between the two men, an argument enacted both in actions and in sporadic conversations:

WELSH: In this world, a man himself ain't nothin'. And there ain't no world but this one.

WITT: You're wrong there, Top. I seen another world. Sometimes I think it was just my imagination.

WELSH: Well, then you seen things I never will ... If you were smart, you'd take care of yourself. There's nothing you can do for anybody else. Runnin' into a burning house where nobody can be saved. What difference you think you can make, one single man in all this madness? If you die, it's gonna be for nothin'. There's not some other world out there where everything's gonna be okay. There's just this one, just this rock...

WITT: You care about me, don't ya Sarge? I always felt like you did. Why do you always make yourself out like a rock? One day, I can come up and talk to you. By the next day, it's like we never even met ... You ever get lonely?

WELSH: Only around people ... Still believin' in the beautiful light, now are ya? How do you do that? You're a magician to me.

WITT: I still see a spark in you.⁴⁷

There is nothing in any of Malick's films that speaks louder of the folly of disenchanting modernity than when Welch crouches over Witt's hastily-dug grave at the close of the film and asks "Where's your spark now?" However, Witt's death, and the apparent end to his argument with Welsh, is something more than a simple extinction. Paul Coates writes of Witt in *Cinema, Religion and the Romantic Legacy*:

It is... as if for Malick the availability to the audience of the most intimate personal memory dimly prefigures a final condition of reconciliation within creation: everyone an ember of the same flame. Cinema, which transmits the human image into an afterlife, becomes a metaphor for the resurrection. Its poignancy and ache reflect *both* the distance built into the closest embrace, the very closeness of which tantalizes with the dream of a oneness it withholds as well as suggesting, *and* the separations of metaphor from reality and image from object. Malick's film dreams of time regained and transfigured within a glorified body.⁴⁸

Early in the film, Witt muses: "maybe men all got one big soul" and Malick indeed seems to suggest that Witt survives – or is resurrected – in some fashion, following images of his death with a joyous shot of him swimming with some naked native children. He also has the film's last word, delivering the final voiceover over images of his platoon leaving the island on which they had been fighting: "Oh, my soul, be in me now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining." In his sacrifice, and in his continued belief in the enchantments he has seen, Witt offers us some hope of transcendence and closes a circle opened by his initial voice-over, pondering his mother's death, quoted in the epigraph. Witt meets his own death with just the calm he imagines and, at least in his own mind, achieves immortality.

⁴⁷ This conversation is taken from three different scenes, spread over much of the length of the film.

⁴⁸ Paul Coates: *Cinema, Religion, and the Romantic Legacy*, Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2003, 180.

Turning to other matters, we see in Malick's films a renewed and renegotiated valuation of nature, something that forms an integral part of much of the discourse on re-enchantment. In *Days of Heaven*, Malick takes pains to show the impact of large-scale farming on the environment; indeed, it is the farmer's disregard of the natural world that proves to be his downfall, which Malick stages as a biblical plague of locusts and an apocalyptic fire. Malick uses his codas as a way to underline the importance of the natural world, unforgettably using a lingering shot of a dying bird with a broken wing in *The Thin Red Line* to show the costs of war. Witt is here again Malick's exemplar. Stacey Peebles Power writes:

for Witt, and also Malick, nature and spirituality are inextricably intertwined. Witt is capable of pausing even in the midst of chaos and contemplating the shape of a leaf or the trajectory of a drop of water ... He exists comfortably and serenely in nature, and strives to actualize the spiritual connection he feels with his fellow soldiers as well as the native children of the area and captured Japanese men.⁴⁹

Another important facet of re-enchantment is a concern with synthesis, with the unification, or an imagined *re*-unification of body and spirit, of humanity and nature, of science and religion, and of art and everyday living. Again, we can see a concern for such unity in Malick's techniques. His editing and use of voice-over both serve to meld the present into the past, interior and exterior, the one into the many, and the body and the mind. In *The Thin Red Line* in particular, Malick creates a unified vision of the world to intimate his ultimate concern, that war destroys not just men, but the world as a whole. Early scenes of Witt in the native village combine past and present, memory and reality in a seamless whole, all framed with his musings on death.

Like *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World* (2005) is concerned with exploring the rift between enchanted and disenchanting worlds, this time told primarily through two respective cultures' relationship with nature. The film is based, with highly varied degrees of fidelity, on the story of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America in 1607. The film, in fact, was shot a mere ten kilometres from the site of the original Jamestown colony. The film focuses first on colonist John Smith, a mercenary and writer who is captured by a group of Native American warriors and taken hostage in their village. He becomes friendly with a young princess named Pocahontas, who saves him from execution at her father's hands, in a scene that is, in David Price's words, "in all probability, the most often told tale in American history, inspiring drama, novels, paintings, statuary, and films."⁵⁰ Though Malick makes his film into a ravishing love story, the reality of Smith and Pocahontas' relationship has remained ambiguous in the four hundred years since Smith wrote his memoirs, still our only access to the historical events themselves.⁵¹ Displaying the reticence of his times, Smith tells us little about their relationship, but the larger narrative is well known: Smith is returned to the budding Jamestown settlement to find the men sick and starving. The colonists survive the harsh winter only because of gifts of food from Pocahontas' people, a gift the settlers would later repay by running the Algonquin off their land and burning their villages and crops, something Malick shows in heartbreaking detail in the film. Pocahontas is kidnapped by the English and turned into a proper English lady in Jamestown. Eventually, she marries an English tobacco farmer named John Rolfe, gives birth to a child, and travels to England to meet with the Queen, only to die shortly thereafter.

⁴⁹ Stacey Peebles Power: 'The Other World of War: Terrence Malick's Adaptation of *The Thin Red Line*,' in Hannah Patterson (ed.), *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, London, Wallflower Press, 2003, 153.

⁵⁰ David Price: *Love and Hate in Jamestown: John Smith, Pocahontas, and the Heart of a New Nation*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, 67-68. For the sake of convenience, I will be referring to the young princess as Pocahontas, though she is never named in the film and was also known, at various times, as Matoaka, Amonute, and Rebecca Rolfe.

⁵¹ There has been a great deal of controversy, dating back as far as 1867, about the accuracy of Smith's recollections and interpretations about his experiences, in particular the ritual killing he narrowly avoided, but recent scholarship has gone some way toward rehabilitating his accounts. Price writes, "Overall, there is no compelling reason to believe that the events ... were anything other than what Smith perceived them to be." *Ibid.*, 245.

The film trades almost entirely on the collision of Smith's disenchanting world and his lover's enchanted world. Like in Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* or Ozu's *Tokyo Story*, it is in the keenly observed details of the everyday lives of the two groups that we find the film's meaning. In the film, the Algonquin village, Werowocomoco, meticulously re-created from the most current historical research, practically jumps off of the screen. Malick makes it both a lived-in home for his strikingly rendered Algonquin and a place very much in harmony with its particular place in nature. The village is interpenetrated with trees; indeed, many of the most arresting images of the Algonquin take place in, under and around trees or in or around water. The everyday life Malick shows is also permeated with religious practices, small acts of thanksgiving often framed within and around the natural world. Pocahontas' voiceover is permeated with a similar synthesis of religious practice and nature: "Mother, where do you live? In the sky? The clouds? The sea? Show me your face, give me a sign. We rise. We rise."⁵²

Smith is conflicted about his time in the village, evident in his voiceover: "There is only this; all else is unreal," which he refutes later in Jamestown: "It was a dream, now I am awake." Smith, watching over Jamestown after witnessing an argument between two men over the day of the year – an inescapable metaphor for modern quantification – gives us this: "damnation is like this... the company is of misery and death, a hell." In the film, Jamestown is all dirt, mud and confusion. The men spend their time squabbling over the minutia of English law and digging for gold while they slowly starve. The soundtrack is dominated by the sounds of dogs barking and the incessant buzzing of insects rather than the birdsong and running water that accompanies the interlude in Werowocomoco. The shots of Jamestown are often framed as images of confinement, from inside of buildings looking out. In stark contrast to the Algonquin village, Jamestown is a place out of place; a harsh, angular shambles built on English standards, not to suit the place in which it is built. The only trees we see in the village have been cut down and refigured as houses and battlements. We see Smith himself stripping trees for firewood. Unlike *The Thin Red Line's* Private Witt, who saw the enchantments of the people around him, the colonists are shown forcibly bringing the instruments of their disenchanting culture into this world, which is new only to them. Malick further underlines the disharmony of the English and the natural world by showing their failed attempts at farming and with lingering shots late in the film of the artificially controlled geometry of an opulent English garden.

Smith never seems to forget what he has seen and experienced in the enchanted world but, unlike Witt, he offers no perspective of transcendence. Rather he fades from the narrative to reappear only for few moments towards the end of the film, to little consequence (this is a typical fate for characters in a Malick film, who, violating the conventions of filmic narrative continuity, simply appear and reappear according to the needs of the story). If there is any suggestion of transcendence of the disparity of the newborn modern world in *The New World*, it can perhaps be found in Pocahontas' dying moments, which Malick takes directly from historical accounts. With his beloved wife dying in England, Rolfe tells us in his voiceover, "She gently reminded me that all must die. 'Tis enough that you, our child, should live." Her death, like that of Witt, is followed by a montage of images from the natural world. Both films thus end with a note of ambiguity that suggests some possibility for transcendence through the enchantments of both pre-modern cultures and the natural world.

Re-enchanting and Renegotiating History

Concomitant to the revaluation of pre-modern ways of living in re-enchantment is the move to re-assess the dominant cultural narratives of modernity, a hallmark of the postmodern age. Malick, though his work has been described as "ferociously American," has spent his career questioning key American mythologies. Almendros once wrote, "Though Malick is very much an American, his culture is universal, and he is familiar with European philosophy, literature, painting, and music."⁵³

⁵² *The New World* was released to theatres in several versions of differing lengths. This analysis is based on the 135 minute DVD release.

⁵³ Almendros, *op. cit.*, 246.

In *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, Malick re-evaluates the master narratives of American westward expansion, so familiar to moviegoers from the long tradition of Westerns. He seeks to dismantle the romantic image of the “Wild West” as a place of individuality, nobility, and traditional American values and replaces these images with a gritty, more realistic world of poverty, backbreaking labour, and empty spaces haunted by troubled, dangerous loners. In a similar fashion, *The Thin Red Line* systematically dismantles the mythos of the Second World War as the “good war”. At a crucial juncture in the film, the voiceover intimates: “War doesn’t ennoble men. It turns them into dogs, poisons the soul.” Released only months after Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*, Malick’s film is parable to Spielberg’s restatement and refurbishing of the mythology of the Second World War. For all of its brutality, *Saving Private Ryan* is a further valorisation of the citizen-soldier with a profoundly conservative vision of the world in its framing images of an elderly Ryan with his family at a Normandy graveyard. What Malick does is confrontational and alienating; he asks the viewer fundamental questions about the morality of all war and does it in a way that is simultaneously beautiful to watch and horrible to contemplate. Where Spielberg seeks to comfort us with a retelling, however graphic, of the greatness of “the greatest generation”, Malick seeks to disquiet us with fundamental questions he never presumes to answer.⁵⁴

With equal boldness, *The New World* attacks the foundational American narrative of Manifest Destiny, incidentally, an important element in the Wild West mythology. Malick has Captain Newport, the leader of the Jamestown colony, expound on the project and destiny of the new world – “our eternal birthright” – to newly arriving colonists, a speech based largely on historical accounts:

Look beyond these gates. Eden lies about us still. We have escaped the old world and its bondage. Let us make a new beginning and create a fresh example for humanity. We are the pioneers of the world, the advance guard sent on through the wilderness to break a new path. In our youth is our strength. In our inexperience, our wisdom. God has given us the Promised Land, a great inheritance. Woe betide if we ever turn our back on him. Let us prepare a land where a man may rise to his true stature, the land of the future, a new kingdom of the spirit.

The images which play behind the end of Newport’s noble speech belie his words. Malick’s camera shows us images of the muddy, barren Jamestown, and, most significantly, an image looking out at the wilds framed through the ramparts of the fort standing like bars in a prison window. This contrast cuts to the heart of the film’s meaning and its interrogation of America’s self-understanding. Critic Manohla Dargis, writing in *The New York Times*, recognises this: “What interests Mr. [sic] Malick is how and why enlightened free men, when presented with new realms of possibility, decided to remake this world in their own image ... like Capt. John Smith ... who marvels at the beauty of a place where ‘the blessings of the earth are bestowed on all’ while Indians [sic] lie bound in his boat, and who claims to love, only to destroy.”⁵⁵ The film, with its bold, unforgiving portrayal of the duplicity of the colonists, takes on the mythos of the Thanksgiving holiday, which is intended as an annual commemoration of the gifts of food to the English but has in recent decades become part of the larger debate on colonialism and a cultural touchstone for anger and debate over the genocide that followed from European settlement in places like Jamestown.

Conclusions and Reflections

The discourse of re-enchantment raises a number of troubling questions that cannot be answered in the present context, though it is essential to bring them to the forefront. Foremost among these is to ask if this reevaluation of pre-modern cultures and epistemologies amounts to anything more than crass nostalgia or an iteration of contemporary Orientalism for which

⁵⁴ There has been a good deal written on the contrasts of the two WWII films. See for example the later chapters in the anthology by Hannah Patterson (ed.): *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, *op. cit.*.

⁵⁵ Manohla Dargis: ‘When Virginia was Eden, and Other Tales of History,’ *The New York Times*, 23 December 2005, available online at <http://movies2.nytimes.com/2005/12/23/movies/23worl.html?ex=1160712000&en=74384ffa862a8c1b&ei=5070>, last accessed 07/04/2009.

we can modify Edward Said's original definition to read, "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the pre-modern' and (most of the time) 'the modern.'"⁵⁶ We must not sidestep the crucial question of whether or not this reevaluation has led to any significant improvements in the often harsh material conditions in which the descendants of peoples like the Algonquin often live today. A second question trades on the inevitable tension between valuing pre-modern cultures and nature and the decidedly modern, technological means used to tell these stories on film. It is useful here to recall Walter Benjamin's claim that mechanical reproduction, epitomized by the development of film, robbed art of its originary, cultic, traditional value and demonstrated that modern humanity's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."⁵⁷ Re-enchantment through technical means, or the use of modern technical standards of knowledge to evaluate pre-modern epistemologies – as when the Stonehenge Aotearoa website claims that "Structures like Stonehenge... were the first computers and formed a cornerstone to the rise of civilization"⁵⁸ – beg the question as to whether such re-enchantment is in fact rather a deepening of disenchantment by the further celebration of technology, technique and the unrivalled importance of empirical observation. Paul Coates writes: "Romanticism, confronting a world it views as disenchanted into mere clockwork by the mechanisms of the Enlightenment, proposes its re-enchantment by a new priest: the poet. It dialectically reacts against yet also reiterates the Enlightenment critique of religion, relocating it outside all churches and assigning god-like attributes to the poet-priest."⁵⁹ Unanswered questions aside, we must count Terrence Malick among the greatest of the poet-priests of re-enchantment.

⁵⁶ The original can be found in Edward Said: *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage, 1979, 2. Dargis references this obliquely and offers Malick some worthy praise despite the necessary shortcomings of his position: "Pocahontas is still irrefutably 'other;' for a filmmaker living 400 years later in another world and different skin, there is no alternative. He is still putting words into her mouth, but with scrupulous tenderness."

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt (ed.) and Harry Zohn (trans.), New York, Schocken Books, 1968, 242.

⁵⁸ Stonehenge Aotearoa website.

⁵⁹ Coates, *op. cit.*, 15.