CHAPTER 4

There's Something about Malick

From Contemplative Style to Ethics of Transformation

Up until now, I tried to steer clear from any in-depth discussions of individual films, for the sake of the bigger picture: to formulate and distinguish from one another the basic types of transformational ethics that emerge from the project of film as philosophy. However, many film philosophers see the project as having little to gain from general theoretical claims. For them, to establish whether and how films contribute to philosophy indeed requires careful, detailed analyses of individual films. Notable in this regard is Stephen Mulhall's (2008: 129 ff.) plea for a 'priority of the particular': rather than deal in global claims about the nature of film as philosophy, he says, we need to look at how particular films do particular things of philosophical value (cf. Sinnerbrink 2011a: 122–123; Wartenberg 2007: 31, 133–134). So where would be a good particular place to start?

Whenever the question of philosophically prone film directors comes up, it is most often Terrence Malick who emerges as *the* quintessential maker of philosophical films (see Sinnerbrink 2011a: 180; Neer 2011; Rybin 2012: xiv). Philosophers simply love to write about Malick.[1] This holds especially true, as will soon become clear, for philosophers with an interest in the idea(l) of films doing philosophy. For these philosophers, quite evidently, *there's something about* Malick. And to ask *what* that something is, and how in different instances philosophers *respond to it*, will bring more concreteness to the bigger picture of transformational ethics in film as philosophy that I have been sketching so far.

So even though this chapter deals with a particular filmmaker and a selection of his films, rest assured that my overall agenda still remains a meta-critical

1 I do not allege that everyone will necessarily agree with my designation of Malick as *the* philosopher's favorite. But, at least, a host of philosophical articles, edited volumes and books – over the past fifteen years in particular – attests to my point. See Sinnerbrink (2019), Rybin (2012), Tucker and Kendall (2011), and Davies (2008a) for but a few notable examples of philosophy books dedicated to Malick's cinema. Also see Patterson (2007b), an influential common reference in this circle. That being said, the likes of Von Trier, Lynch, Tarkovsky, Akerman, and Hitchcock can of course also qualify as 'philosophers' favorites', and do so on their own distinctive terms.

one. I am analyzing philosophical discourse on Malick, with a special focus on the film-philosophical analyses of Malick's 'contemplative style', as I recapitulate it. Of course, in what follows, I am much less interested in arriving at a definitive picture of Malick's (contemplative) style than I am in tracing the ethical functions that philosophers ascribe to the filmmaker's style when they mark it as 'contemplative'. The contemplative-philosophical work that Malick's films are claimed to do includes by now familiar-sounding transformational effects: philosophers suggest that, in moving viewers to contemplation, his films also potentially transform them to greater awareness, openness, and connection. These ethical conclusions that they persistently reach about Malick, I maintain, tell as much about the project and pre-interpretive interests of film as philosophy itself. Apart from raising methodological questions about interpreting style, my meta-analysis of Malick's philosophical reception puts under the magnifying glass, even more clearly than before, the extent to which film as philosophy is an ethically vested, value-laden exercise. If anything, I contend, the motive of personal transformation at work within the project of film as philosophy intensifies in the context of Malick's *particular* contemplative style.

1 "I've got style!" – A Prelude

As I have noted, (film) philosophers exhibit an undeniable eagerness to express their thoughts about Malick – a zeal perhaps only exceeded by an equally devoted horde of Malick-haters on the web. Yet every now and then these two camps exhibit a surprising convergence of interests. It is for this reason that a customer review of *The New World* (2005) caught my attention:

> This has got to be one of the most boring movies ever made … I could just picture the director of this awful abortion of cinema sitting with a self-satisfied smile on his face, saying 'Who needs dialogue or a story? I can put in random images of rocks and trees for 2 and a half hours instead! Who needs substance? I've got style!'.
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> *Amazon* Review by JONATHAN JONESON, 24 May 2006

So why are philosophers so fascinated by Malick? As I aim to show, one major source of this fascination – and of some viewers' frustration, evidently – is the often overwhelming preeminence of Malick's distinctive *style*. Malick continues to be a mainstay of philosophers' attempts at marrying film and philosophy; and recent appraisals of Malick's work, especially, make issues of 'style' or 'form' – for want of a better term – of key importance to this pursuit.

Although I am aware of the potential difficulties raised by the term 'style', from my meta-perspective I simply wish to capture a general shift in the attention of film philosophers, which has become less concentrated on (often Heidegger-inspired) narrative-thematic readings of Malick's films, and more on the potential philosophical virtues of the cinematic techniques and their patterning that Malick's 'contemplative style' presents his audience with.[2] This shift in attention seems to express a more general urge in the film as philosophy debate to formulate how films can do philosophy in 'uniquely cinematic' ways: it is a matter of "getting beyond thematics and taking seriously the look and sound of his films", as Richard Neer (2011) puts it.

One can argue that Malick also entices this shift, inasmuch as his style is often said to be so obvious, abundant, even excessive. If, like the reviewer cited above, one understands 'style' as particular pictorial and sonic expressions of narrative 'substance', one can say that Malick's stylistic hallmarks tend to have *a life of their own*. Be it interjections of nature imagery, streams of voice-over reflections or a camera wandering where it wishes, these elements typically have little narrative motivation or stand in ambiguous relation to events that occur on screen. As a result, philosophers are made to respond to Malick's style. And for many commentators this is precisely the point: the philosophical substance of Malick's films *is* his style. But what, then, about Malick's style makes it so inviting to philosophers – especially those engaged with the project of film as philosophy – to attribute value to things like 'random images of rocks and trees'?

2 'Contemplative Style', Philosophy, Transformation

Malick's expositors have settled into a cosy lexicon for detailing his distinctive appeal by describing his cinema as 'poetic', 'lyrical', 'romantic', 'visionary', 'mythical' or even 'metaphysical'.[3] Yet virtually any appraisal of his work, whether philosophical or film critical, also includes observations of its *reflective*, *ruminative*, and *meditative* qualities. Even though these features may have

2 I therefore have no reason here to take up the long history of the fiercely discussed notion of 'style', which can be traced in a host of directions – whether Russian Formalism (such as *Poetica Kino*, the famous 1927 anthology edited by Boris Eikhenbaum), French New Wave criticism (like Alexandre Astruc's auteurist notion of the *caméra-stylo*) or, more recently, Neoformalism (notably the 'historical poetics' of David Bordwell).

3 See Hannah Patterson's introduction to *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America* (2007a) for a sample of this discourse of which she provides an overview.

received less attention than others, film philosophers have latched onto it with enthusiasm. Not to be outdone for lyricism, they describe Malick's way of filmmaking in terms of "contemplative reverie" (Rybin 2011: 34), "meditative filmthinking" (Frampton 2006a: 193), "mesmerizing philosophical meditation" (Sinnerbrink 2011d: 180), and even "prayerfulness" (Pippin 2013: 274). Such philosophical formulations of Malick's 'contemplative style', as I label it, goes as far back as Stanley Cavell, who linked Malick's films to Heidegger's meditations of Being, and suggested that Malick himself had found in film a way to transpose "thoughts for our meditation" (1979: xv).

Of what interest is this view of Malick's style to the idea of film as philosophy? Since philosophy involves acts of contemplation, the connection between contemplative style and philosophy is, quite understandably, one that is easily drawn. What is more, a style that viewers experience as 'contemplative' – however you want to construe it – presents itself as an attractive invitation for philosopher-theorists to explore the nature of thought in, through or of film. Philosophers are therefore keen to use a 'contemplative cinema', such as Malick's, as a testing ground for the premise that films can enact uniquely cinematic forms of philosophical reflection. Of course, in the case of Malick, this proposition is made all the more alluring by the great deal of mythologizing around the figure of 'Terrence Malick', and particularly his status as 'ex-philosopher', which I get to later on.[4]

A few clarifications are in order. Seeing that the notion of 'contemplation' entails a diversity of possible subjective acts and procedures, I must assume the existence of a corresponding diversity of possible 'contemplative styles'. Consider the obvious stylistic differences, for example, between Malick's work and contemporary Slow Cinema, a type of cinema that is likewise associated with contemplative aspirations. The so-called 'slow films' of filmmakers like Tsai Ming-liang, Lav Diaz and Lisandro Alonso exude a characteristic quietude that just as often prompts commentators to celebrate their 'contemplative' or 'meditative' qualities. Yet, although there are similarities between Malick's oeuvre and Slow Cinema (e.g. the importance of rural or natural settings), the differences between the two are substantial. Slow Cinema, roughly speaking, indulges in long takes, static shots and patient camera movements. It generally also avoids music, revels in silence and thereby draws attention to what would otherwise be unnoticed sounds in the diegetic background. Malick's

4 This is suggested by the treatment of other 'contemplative' filmmakers, the likes of Yasujirô Ozu, Andrei Tarkovsky, or Hou Hsiao-hsien, who have not garnered the amount of attention from philosophers that Malick has.

work, in contrast, is much more inclined to sequences of impressionistic imagery on the basis of rhythmic editing and roaming camera movements. Though Malick's narrative pacing may be slow, his films certainly do not play out in static scenes and compositions. Moreover, many of his extended and visually striking sequences are accompanied by streams of voice-over ruminations, usually coupled with equally prominent music scores with, for instance, epiphanic orchestral music.

The notion of Malick's own 'contemplative style', however, is used here in a consciously general way. Each of Malick's films exhibits singular qualities that cannot be covered by this blanket term. It may well be, therefore, that some of Malick's films have specific contemplative modalities that are absent in others – think of the diverse kinds of first-person voice-over that he uses, for example[5] – which raises the question of whether there might be more than one contemplative style at work within Malick's oeuvre. But these concessions still do not rule out the feasibility of a more general conception of Malick's contemplative style. As many commentators recognize, Malick displays pronounced stylistic hallmarks that persist throughout his filmmaking career. Moreover, his work has evolved in a manner that increasingly highlights these hallmarks. The 'late Malick'[6] has increasingly pursued the kind of abstraction that exposes the features most essential to his style, for example, his sublime images of nature, the voice-over narration, prominent camera movements as well as music scores. He seems evermore intent on "distilling his appeal to its most rudimentary elements" which, according to one account, includes "whispery voiceover narration, roaming camerawork and an unending collage of lush images" (Kohn 2015). This increasing distillation of his style is so palpable that some critics have described Malick's more recent efforts – such as *To the Wonder* (2012) and *Knight of Cups* (2015) – as exercises in self-parody (e.g. Bradshaw 2012; Kohn 2015).

So to which stylistic elements, according to Malick's philosophical audience, do philosophers attribute the oft-cited contemplative-philosophical appeal of his films? Relevant literature presents us with a range of likely candidates; and any one philosophical reading of Malick usually addresses more than one

5 Whereas the interior voices in Malick's first two films are *single*, *female* and speak in *past tense*, Malick's third feature features *multiple*, *male* voices that speak in *present tense* (Chion 2004: 53). The former device thus raises more of a retrospective, nostalgic contemplative experience, whereas the latter offers a sense of rumination based in the "timeless present" (Chion 2004: 53).

6 The 'late Malick', following critic Jon Baskin (2013), refers to the sequence of films that Malick released after his twenty year absence from filmmaking in 1998.

of these elements at a time. I therefore find it useful to structure this survey on the basis of a basic distinction between *stylistic devices* (concrete filmic techniques) and *stylistic effects* (kinds of experiences associated with a filmic technique). On the more concrete level of stylistic devices, firstly, commentators typically identify Malick's contemplative style by the following elements, roughly in order of salience:

1) *Photography of landscape and nature*: Critchley (2005); Silberman (2007); Davies (2008b); Sinnerbrink (2011d); Rybin (2011: 14–18); Tucker (2011); Walden (2011: 206–209); Lehtimäki (2012); and Pippin (2013).
2) *First person voice-over monologues*: Polan (2004: 273–274); Bersani and Dutoit (2004: 124–178); Davies (2008b: 57–62); Kendall (2011: 150); Rybin (2011); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014).
3) *Juxtapositions of image and sound*: Bersani and Dutoit (2004: 124–178); Chion (2004: 12–13); Polan (2004: 273–274); Davies (2008b: 57–62); Plantinga (2010); Kendall (2011: 149–152); Neer (2011); Rybin (2011) Walden (2011: 197); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014).
4) *Discontinuous editing*: Chion (2004: 12–13); Polan (2004: 272); Davies (2008b: 573–574); Rybin (2011: 15); and Pippin (2013: 250, 269).
5) *Repetition of devices*: Bersani and Dutoit (2004: 151–153); Macdonald (2008: 90–98); Kendall (2011: 161–162); Neer (2011); and Sinnerbrink (2011d: 191–192).
6) *Prominent music scores*: Clewis (2006: 29); Kendall (2011: 150, 163); Neer (2011); and Sinnerbrink (2011d: 187–192).
7) *Camera movements*: Coplan (2008: 75–79); Rybin (2011: 17–18); and Virvidaki (2014: 30–31).
8) *Episodic, elliptical narratives*: Martin (2006); Coplan (2008: 70–74); and Kendall (2011: 152).

Philosophers connect the above stylistic devices with a variety of less concrete stylistic effects. The connection is not always clear, since commentators are prone to conflate stylistic devices with the experiential effects that they attribute to them. But there is no getting away from the two distinct dimensions of style that are at stake in their evaluations: analysts propose different profiles of stylistic effects by deriving them from a particular selection and interpretation of stylistic devices. In fact, the general claim that Malick's style is 'contemplative' is itself a global, *higher-order effect* that commentators, in turn, derive from whatever intermediary stylistic effects they detect.

My rough rubric of possible stylistic effects ranges from local perceptual or cognitive effects to the overall aesthetic effects that analysts may detect. I shall not try to order or rank them here. When it comes to Malick, philosophers typically emphasize the following stylistic effects:

1) '*Elliptical*', '*fragmented*' or '*impressionistic*' aesthetic experiences: Coplan (2008: 70–74); Rybin (2011); and Antunes (2014).
2) Experiences of '*incongruity*', '*ambiguity*' or '*disorientation*': Bersani and Dutoit (2004); Polan (2004: 274); Coplan (2008: 71); Davies (2008b: 48–49, 59–60); Plantinga (2010); Kendall (2011); Neer (2011); Rybin (2011: 25, 37–38); Walden (2011: 197); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014: 27).
3) '*Questioning*' or '*interrogative*' modes of presenting the world: Furstenau and MacAvoy (2007); and Pippin (2013: 269–272).
4) Experiences of '*awe*', '*wonder*' or '*sublimity*': Clewis (2006); Silberman (2007: 170–175); Sinnerbrink (2011d); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014: 29).
5) Expressions of '*perspectives*', '*points of view*' or '*ways of seeing*': Bersani and Dutoit (2004: 158–178); Yates (2006); Davies (2008b: 50–56); Macdonald (2008); Manning (2011); Sinnerbrink (2011d); Walden (2011); Pippin (2013: 273, 275); and Virvidaki (2014: 29–31).

To get to the crux of how philosophers interpret Malick's style – that is, to trace the philosophical and ethical value that they attach to it – is mostly a matter of discerning the *stylistic effects* that they identify. My reasoning is as follows: Firstly, it is mostly the perceived stylistic effects that show us what exactly the analyst understands by the 'contemplative' nature of the style. The notion is of course a highly pliable one: so the respective effects of being 'impressionistic', raising 'ambiguity', or evoking 'wonder', for example, entail rather distinct notions of how the films are 'contemplative' and, thereby, of what philosophical use they are.

Secondly, diverse stylistic effects also imply distinct forms of contemplative engagement on the part of the viewer. The philosophers who approach Malick's films-as-philosophy constantly resort to the assumption that his contemplative style draws the viewer into a reciprocating posture of philosophical contemplation. In short: Malick's contemplative style is thought to do a certain *contemplative work*, meaning that it elicits from the viewer a related process of reflection or conscious experience. But, again, this work may be construed as having to deal with the 'impressionistic', the 'ambiguous', or the 'wonderful' – each of which implies a distinct contemplative procedure on the part of the viewer.

Thirdly and lastly, it is this contemplative work that is time and again suggested to also have ethically significant effects on the viewer. The various contemplative effects of Malick's style, as philosophers see it, can establish for viewers a *contemplative mode* of self-transformation; the supposed contemplative work of the style thus facilitates ethical work on the self. To be sure, Malick's expositors 'fill in' this contemplative mode of the viewer in different

ways, as they rely on diversely construed ensembles of stylistic devices and their effects. Each such ensemble therefore represents a more specific *method*, on the part of the film, whereby Malick's cinematic style is understood to enlist and guide the viewer's contemplations to some end of personal transformation – whether an enhanced state of contemplation, concentration, or the like.

Now we begin to see why a contemplative style fosters just as much interest in transformational ethics. Although there is a natural affinity between contemplation and doing philosophy, the same can be said of contemplation and transformational ethics: performing contemplative techniques forms an integral part of many practices of transformation. The appeal that a contemplative style holds for the idea of film doing philosophy thus easily extends to and includes considerations of its ethical significance.

Expositions of 'the philosophical' and 'contemplative' in Malick's style invariably lead to value-laden interpretations, in which stylistic devices are tied to certain effects and, together, are made to fit certain ethical ends. Philosophical commentary cannot really avoid such interpretations of style. Yet the presuppositions that go into philosophical dealings with film style, and the ethical implications that follow them, often go unrecognized and deserve to be critically formulated. However, before delving into the details, we first need to make an important detour.

3 Seeking Transformational Ethics in Malick: Contributing Factors

While Malick's style is my chief concern, it *alone* cannot fully account for the philosophical and ethical attractiveness of his work. Before getting to the role of style in philosophical readings Malick's work, therefore, we first need to consider two additional matters: (*a*) the ethically-inflected *narrative interests* of Malick and (*b*) the substantial *authorial persona*, 'Terrence Malick', that has developed around the filmmaker. Both these factors should be kept in mind as also contributing to the kind of philosophical readings that his films receive and, importantly, the ethical commitments that those readings exhibit.

3.1 *Personal Transformation in Malick's Narratives*

The recognition that Malick's films are 'contemplative' is as much a recognition of their deep-thinking narrative appeal as it is of their style. Malick has an enduring interest in themes of the grand, philosophical kind that almost descend into cliché – nature, human identity, the problem of evil, and the meaning of life. As of late, Malick has also addressed questions of God, the spiritual, and transcendence, as theologically inclined commentators are keen

to point out.[7] The combination of his philosophical and theological inclinations is perhaps best captured by Malick's continual recourse to Christian mythological tropes. Creation, paradise, the fall of humankind, innocence and its loss have been central narrative motifs from the outset of his career.

I do not want to dwell here on the thematics of Malick's narratives as material for philosophical reflection. There is enough literature that makes a good job of this.[8] The point that I do wish to drive home, however, is the prominence that these narratives give to transformational ethics as their subject matter. Most of Malick's characteristic philosophical themes in fact concern issues of personal transformation. I offer a few salient examples relevant to my analyses later in this chapter:

3.1.1 Identity, Meaning, Transcendence

Malick's central protagonists, as Hannah Patterson (2007a: 1) observes, are in a characteristic state of search – whether "for a different kind of life, a sense of self, a reason for being, or a spiritual presence in the world". It would be wrong to label these characters out-and-out transformationalists. Yet their searchings for identity, meaning, or transcendence nevertheless take the form of a quest for personal transformation. These characters put on display their ethical self-work, that of making the self available to the possibility, at least – for better or worse – of achieving sense, a sense of self, a sense of what lies beyond. This self-work usually finds expression through a pronounced contemplative mode in Malick's characters. There is, for example, the naive *self-dialogue and rationalizations* of the female leads (who serve as the narrators) in *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978); the existential *self-questioning and interrogation* of soldiers in *The Thin Red Line*; or Pocahontas' (Q'orianka Kilcher) *devotional postures* of wonderment and praise towards Nature in *The New World*.

3.1.2 Characters as Transformationalist Figures

Sometimes the typical searching Malickian character, engaged only in implicit personal transformation, does find itself magnified into a full-blown transformationalist. The most striking case hereof is Private Witt (Jim Caviezel), a pivotal character in most philosophical readings of *The Thin Red Line*. Witt offers much for us to construe him as such: he prefers a simple existence with an indigenous island tribe while on AWOL from his military company;

7 See Barnett (2013), Baskin (2013), Leithart (2013), Handley (2014), Young (2015), Barnett and Elliston (2016), Hamilton (2016), Robbins (2016), and Sinnerbrink (2016b).

8 See Morrison and Schur (2003), Patterson (2007b), Davies (2008a), Michaels (2009), Tucker and Kendall (2011), and Rybin (2012).

he ruminates about life after death; he entertains metaphysical visions (like "I've seen another world") that conflicts with the pessimistic views of his First Sergeant (Sean Penn); and, in the end, he sacrifices himself to save the lives of his fellow troops.

Yet 'Witt as transformationalist' can look very different from one reading to the next, depending on how commentators tailor him to their particular philosophical needs. Simon Critchley (2005: 136), for example, speculates that the "essential solitude to Witt's character" (which was already evident in the original novel) must have appealed to Malick, who in the adaptation "transforms him into a much more angelic, self-questioning, philosophical figure". Witt's ascetic disposition thus seems to motivate Critchley's view of the character as "the questioner, the contemplator, the mystic, perhaps even the holy fool", who "views all things and persons with an impassive constancy, and sees beauty and goodness in all things" (2005: 141). With this impassive constancy, Critchley celebrates Witt as something of a Stoic icon, which fits nicely with his claim that 'calm' (which itself can be a transformational value) is the key to understanding this film. In the case of Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit (2004: 147–151, 153–154), interestingly, a substantially different picture of Witt's transformationalist aspirations emerges. For them, Witt is not a calmly withdrawn or detached figure. As I will still show, they seek out in *The Thin Red Line* a transformation that diminishes individual subjectivity – hence, in contrast to the misguided solitude of other characters, Witt is taken to represent commitment to the transformational values of openness and connectedness, as exemplified by "the remarkable clarity and openness of his look" (2004: 151).

3.1.3 Nature

The prominence of nature in Malick's films is a great example of how a narrative theme, one with obvious philosophical relevance, can double up as a motivating context for transformational ethics. Again I make my point with *The Thin Red Line* in mind, although it should hold equally well for his other films. The meanings that analysts attach to nature in *The Thin Red Line* always support their underlying ethical claims about Malick's style, which I demonstrate later on. Their widely diverging conceptions of nature therefore each attracts a fitting ethical-transformational stance.[9] A *cruel* or merely *indifferent nature*, for example, implies the ethical need to foster appropriately human values (such as 'calm') both in response to, and despite of, nature (e.g. Critchley

9 For a helpful outline of typical interpretations of nature in Malick's films see David Davies (2008: 572–574).

2005). A *Romantic, spiritual nature*, on the other hand, could promise self-actualization or transcendence through a life that is fundamentally aligned with the natural (e.g. Peebles 2007). Or, as a last example: nature conceived within a radically *materialist worldview* brings to attention our essential continuity with the material universe and, thereby, can motivate an ethic of liberating self-negation (e.g. Bersani & Dutoit 2004; Macdonald 2008). Such competing interpretations of nature thus provide distinct rationales for the various ethical interests that analysts exhibit in dealing with Malick's style.

3.1.4 Unity

Some narrative themes, lastly, invite more direct transposition into actual goals of personal transformation. Malick's interest in the theme of unity (whether with respect to family bonds, social community, military comradery, shared humanity, etc.), for example, have been taken as grounds for considering how his films relate to the realization of *unity* as transformational value. Analysts thus pick up on a particular theme as indicative of a 'higher' transformational value that they take to be beckoning. Stacy Peebles (2007: 161) illustrates this maneuver by noting, in *The Thin Red Line*, that Malick translates the war film trope of the "grudging but productive comradeship" into "a more spiritual concern with universal unity". The film encourages this perspective, she says, with repeated family metaphors in dialogue and with various audio-visual allusions to connection and oneness.

As these examples suggest, what seem to be prominent 'philosophical' themes in Malick's narratives have just as much ethical relevance when taken through the lens of personal transformation. Insofar as they are approached as philosophical themes, therefore, they provide a context that encourages ethical-transformational tendencies in philosophical evaluations of Malick's style.

3.2 *Transformationalism in Malick's Authorial Image*

The generally acknowledged intellectual gravitas of Terrence Malick's films is not on account of his films alone. People's perceptions of the persona of 'Terrence Malick', as the contemplative creator behind the films, also play a considerable part in the attraction that philosophers feel toward his work. One major reason for this attraction – which has been noted to the point of tedium – is that Malick himself was a professional philosopher. He studied philosophy under Stanley Cavell at Harvard University, lectured at MIT and also translated into English Martin Heidegger's *The Essence of Reasons* (1969). This has prompted many to pursue existential-philosophical and phenomenological threads in his films. A great deal of Malick's 'authorial' image, therefore, is based on knowledge of the filmmaker's earlier philosophical activities.

But those who take seriously the idea of a genuinely cinematic form of philosophy like to concentrate more on the fact that Malick *left* professional philosophy for a career in filmmaking. This biographical detail indeed establishes a convenient narrative to support this line of thought. Richard Neer (2011), to mention an example, observes that Malick "threw it all over to become a filmmaker" and did so because, "to this director, film can do things that professional philosophy cannot". The assumption here is that Malick found in the cinematic image something that surpasses the abilities of philosophical discourse.[10] This perceived rejection of philosophy in favor of filmmaking has therefore been especially attractive to philosophers of the 'cinematic thinking' paradigm: for them, Malick's films exemplify a distinctly cinematic thinking that cannot be reduced to the conceptual and verbal means of reflection in traditional philosophy. Of course, the notion that Malick chose filmmaking as the 'more appropriate' vehicle for his intellectual pursuits is at best a crude speculation. But this impression no doubt develops in allegiance with the philosophical agenda of wanting to approach Malick's films as substantial cinematic contemplations.

Constructions of Malick's intellectual motivations are furthermore fueled by the filmmaker's legendary reticence. After the release of his *Days of Heaven*, Malick retreated into what has become a much publicized 'twenty year hiatus' during which he disappeared from the public radar. In 1998, Malick made a much anticipated return with the release of *The Thin Red Line*. Yet, since this comeback, Malick has persistently shunned any public exposure – be it press interviews, photographs or official appearances at events. The reticent, enigmatic Malick is particularly obstinate about not speaking about his films (see Kendall & Tucker 2011: 3–4). This silence, not surprisingly, has resulted in a great deal of mythologizing and gradually earned him the title of 'reclusive genius' (e.g. Furstenau & MacAvoy 2007: 179).

These facts and perceptions all give a decidedly transformationalist 'shape' to Malick's authorial image. Such an image is always based on an interactive process whereby the author co-constitutes his image in tandem with various other mediating agents – be it critics, journalists, or even philosophers (Meizoz 2010: 84–85). In Malick's case his refusal to have a public image itself greatly contributes to a very definite and influential image. And central to this image are basic *ascetic* gestures: to *withhold oneself*, to *keep silent*, to *withdraw* from the public attention that normally goes with a topflight filmmaking career.

10 Of course, this is not the only way in which Malick's turn to filmmaking has been construed. Another recurrent opinion is that film offers Malick a medium more suited to pursuing his interests in Heideggerian philosophy (e.g. Furstenau & MacAvoy 2007).

The media, in turn, did its part to embellish these gestures with the kind of tropes that sell magazines – the notions that 'Malick rejects fame', that 'he disappeared for twenty years for some mysterious reason', and, of course, that he is a privacy-hoarding 'recluse'.[11]

These resultant ascetic features of Malick's image are typically construed in ways that further endorse the contemplative aura of the filmmaker persona and, by extension, his films. Ascetic gestures easily evoke various related conceptions of contemplative activity with deep roots in Western culture. The ascetic topos of seeking social solitude, for example, endows Malick with inherited Romantic notions of the reflective artistic genius who craves *seclusion* for living his calling. This is moreover couched in the much older association between a life of serious contemplation and the need to *retreat* from the ordinary every day – as we for instance find in the religious model of a monk or hermit. Such culturally embedded connections serve to further bolster the contemplative weight that we expect from the products that the 'recluse' releases to the public.

Malick's *silence* is perhaps the most decisive aspect of his ascetic posturing. While Malick's twenty-year-hush is of the more extreme kind, it fits into the more generally established topos of the writer or artist who refuses to interpret his own work. This topos is typically taken as a measure of care, on the part of the artist, not to pre-empt or reduce the possible meanings of his art. It is moreover seen as motivated by the related belief that art is, and should be approached as, autonomous. This is indeed the sentiment behind what has become a ubiquitous Malick catchphrase, shared by fans and scholars alike: 'his films speak for themselves' (e.g. Tucker & Kendall 2011: 4; Neer 2011).

This absence of authorial clarification sits well with the implicit 'interpretative ascetics' of bold film-philosophical positions, as detailed in my discussion of preparatory ethics in the previous chapter. Recall, from the previous chapter, Simon Critchley's (highly idealistic) cautioning against the use of philosophical 'meta' or 'pre-texts' when we deal with Malick's films (2005: 138–139). The filmmaker who ascetically *refrains from speaking* about his films thus presents himself as a model for the equivalent interpretative attitude that the film philosopher is often admonished to adopt: not to presumptively *speak to* or *on behalf of* the film, but to in a sense 'remain silent' and allow the film to speak. In addition, Malick's ascetic gesture of silence serves as an implicit

11 The publicity surrounding his twenty-year hiatus, especially, solidified the kind of hermetic mystique that surrounds Malick. Michael Nordine (2013) gives a refreshing take on the dynamics behind this publicity and offers some much-needed debunking of the most endearing myths about Malick.

endorsement of bold philosophical readings that furthermore look to pit the feats of the cinematic image against the supposed deficiencies of the word (e.g. Bersani & Dutoit 2004: 124–177). According to this view, which will come up later on, Malick's films have philosophical value as cinematic reflections that are somehow liberated from the limitations of verbal (philosophical) discourse; and the intentional silence of the filmmaker stands in helpful support of this assumption.

Another prominent image of the filmmaker is that of the 'mystic', the figure who busies himself with "the ineffable through parabolic narratives and gorgeous shots of nature" (Neer 2011). Malick the mystic fits comfortably into the picture that I have sketched up to this point: it feeds on the poetic and spiritual impulses in Malick's work; it is consistent with his general image as a contemplative, since contemplative activities typically provide a basis for mystical experiences; plus mystical preoccupations are consonant with what people would expect from an ostensive ascetic loner. If anything, it is the mystical aspirations attached to Malick's image that most easily rouses ethical-transformational expectations in interpreters of his work. As Hannah Patterson affirms, for instance, of Malick the 'poetic visionary': "through the very nature of his poetic vision Malick is ultimately an artist who reawakens and restores our sense of mystery and philosophical rumination" (2007a: 2).

With these remarks I hope to have given a sense of how Malick's undeniable authorial image – thriving on topoi of contemplation, asceticism, and mysticism – supports the observed reflective nature of his films and elicits the kind of transformational issues that scholars pose with respect to them. But, of course: as much as Malick the 'philosopher', 'poet', or 'mystic' might encourage such ethical interests, his image as filmmaker can only have its effect in relation to interpretations prompted by his actual *films*. So let us now turn to Malick's film style and the contemplative, ethical effects that his interpreters believe it achieves.

4 From Contemplative Style to Ethics of Transformation: Three Cases

For the sake of streamlining my meta-analysis of Malick's style, I single out the three stylistic elements that are most prominent in philosophical writing on the filmmaker. They are (*a*) Malick's cinematographic depictions of nature, (*b*) his uses of voice-over and (*c*) the effects of shifting, multiple perspectives. My aim is to sketch how analysts deal with these elements in terms of their relations to other stylistic features, the philosophical-contemplative

work that they do and, most of all, the transformational effects that they afford. Essentially, I'm tracking down the transformational ethics that philosophers adopt in dealing with Malick's style. And, in order to do so, I distill and develop their ethical positions by way of a few key parameters: the supposed *method* whereby the films elicit a *contemplative mode* of transformation; the personal *domain* upon which transformation is said to be exercised (e.g. thoughts, attention, affects, perceptions or 'ways of seeing'); and the implied transformational *value* (or *state*) that is thereby realized (e.g. attention, openness or connection).

For practical reasons I limit my inquiry in this section to what may be called Malick's two 'mid-career films': *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *The New World* (2005). As the kind of films with "a rich afterlife amongst professors of philosophy" (Baskin 2010: online), these two works have by far attracted the most explicitly philosophical commentary and analysis – thus making them ideally suited to my purposes. Moreover, by this mid-stage in his career, after his so-called twenty year hiatus, Malick has fully matured into the key stylistic traits that are of concern here.

4.1 *Cinematographic Presentations of Nature*

It comes as no surprise that Malick's photography of nature and landscape is frequently singled out as essential to his philosophical appeal. Many, if not most, accounts of Malick's style coalesce around the filmmaker's enduring fascination with nature. It certainly is true that he draws our visual attention to nature. This is not only by virtue of its photographed beauty or richness, but also its often cited disjunctive composition through editing – what the uninitiated may experience as a 'slide show'-effect.[12] A common refrain among commentators is that Malick's punctuating cutaways to nature are unmotivated by plot and only loosely connected to character and established diegesis (e.g. Davies 2009: 573–574; Rybin 2011: 15; Pippin 2013: 250, 269; Polan 2004: 272). Because of this striking and free-floating salience, "images of nature seem to provide an additional semantic level that plays against both the narrative and the other semantic elements" (Davies 2009: 574). Considered from this angle, Malick's contemplative cinema becomes a *meditation on nature*. I present readings by Simon Critchley, Robert Silberman and Robert Pippin as instructive instances of this approach to Malick's style.

12 "If I wanted to watch a slide show, I would have just watched my cable box's screen saver. It was Boring to the last moment, and you never really know what was really happening" (*Amazon* Review of *To the Wonder* by 'Klebrchelp', 23 November 2013).

4.1.1 Simon Critchley: Calm in the Presence of Nature

Critchley's (2005) well-known reading of *The Thin Red Line* – an influential exemplar for film as philosophy – is a good place to start. He argues that the metaphysical issues raised in the film are framed and answered by a pervasive 'experience of calm', which he sees as the key to Malick's art. This, clearly, is an interpreted stylistic effect. And Critchley largely bases this effect on stylistic devices that put *nature* on display. He notes, for example, the 'beautiful indifference' of nature imagery that repeatedly punctuates human drama and suffering. At the moment of private Witt's death, for instance, the film abruptly cuts to soaring trees that remain unaffected by the tragedy below. In Malick's visual presentation, Critchley (2005: 147) describes, "one has the sense of things simply being looked at, just being what they are – trees, water, birds, dogs, crocodiles or whatever. Things simply are, and are not molded to a human purpose". But the apparent philosophical appeal of this calm, impassive nature is as much a transformational one: Critchley finds that the film's calmness becomes also the viewer's calmness. As he puts it, "There is a calm at the heart of Malick's art, a calmness to his cinematic eye, a calmness that is also communicated by his films, that *becomes the mood of his audience*: after watching *The Thin Red Line* we feel calm" (2005: 147 [emphasis added]).

In this way, Critchley poses a transformational relevance for nature-related devices: they exercise a transformation within the *domains* of affect and emotion, as the 'experience of calm', their supposed effect, prefigures the state of calmness that the viewer attains. Yet this claimed affective state seems to suggest a deeper ethical terminal: the normative ideal, or *value*, in question here is a transformation toward *openness* (cf. Sinnerbrink 2006: 33–34). This is in the sense that the 'neverthelessness' of nature, as rendered by the film, is understood to prompt an ethical posture of *acceptance* and *letting things be*. Although Critchley (2005: 138–139) takes issue with reading Malick through established philosophical 'pre-texts', Sinnerbrink (2006: 33) rightly notes Critchley's struggle to get away from Heidegger in his ethical conclusions. Critchley's account boils down to a Heideggerian ethic of 'releasement', even if he does not call it by the name.

Critchley's reading of Malick announces two important issues for the rest of my analysis. The first is that nature, as theme, is a constant and significant reference point for the ethical-transformational potential that philosophers find in Malick's films. Assumptions about 'the nature of nature' are especially relevant when philosophers address a nature-related device in Malick's style. Such diverse assumptions govern the kinds of effects as well as the ethical importance that such a device is said to have. Critchley's account assumes that *The Thin Red Line* puts on display an *indifferent*, *unenchanted* nature in

which *things simply are*. This follows from what he takes to be Malick's own "naturalistic conception of nature" (2005: 146). In this view, the film adopts the contemplative method of leading the viewer to see human drama and suffering relative to the backdrop of this (version of) nature. The implied ethics of transformation here hinges, as we will repeatedly see, on how the film can align the viewer with a certain *awareness of nature*. This, again, shows the film's 'experience of calm' to be a secondary matter. We may read Critchley as saying that calm is the only proper response to an indifferent nature (see Davies 2009: 5). But surely the primary claim is this: that Malick's style first brings us to *recognize* a 'neverthelessness' to nature, thereby allowing for our experience of calm.

All of this ties in with a second, wider issue that emerges in Critchley's essay: assumptions about what makes film (do) philosophy play a decisive role in how philosophers evaluate Malick's style. When it comes to Malick, philosophers are *not* typically inspired by a motive of Knowledge, as I described it in Chapter 1. Barring the rare exception – like the claim that Malick "presents a dialectical analysis with his camera" (Manning 2011: 172) – philosophers do not see his films as offering us forms of knowledge, such as illustrations, arguments or thought experiments.[13] It appears that Malick's exuberance of style and his narrative abstraction much rather encourage a motive of Subjectivity: many philosophers, that is, locate Malick's philosophical worth with the movements of thought or experience that his films set off, be it acts of wonder, questioning or simply an experience of calm.

However, Critchley, we have seen, resorts also to the option of Nature, another motive that features strongly in film-philosophical discourse on Malick, often in combination with that of Subjectivity. To claim Nature as a condition for film as philosophy is to ascribe the philosophical achievement of a film to it having some ontological connection with reality: films can disclose the world, they can make things present, they can convey the nature of things. For Critchley, the philosophical value of Malick's presentations of nature is precisely that – it *makes nature present*. We should, of course, not confuse the three separate matters that are at stake here: Nature as condition for films to do philosophy; visual depictions of nature as a stylistic device; and nature as a prominent theme. Yet Critchley's case makes it evident how these

13 Critchley in fact raises this very point, explicitly opposing forms of Knowledge as condition for film as philosophy. In Critchley's words: "a consideration of Malick's art demands that we take seriously the idea that film is less an illustration of philosophical ideas and theories – let's call that a philoso-fugal reading – and more a form of philosophizing, of reflection, reasoning and argument" (2005: 139).

notions inform one another. The position that film as philosophy involves 'making nature present' obviously prioritizes, for him and others like him, elements of style that explicitly relate to the natural environment. (Philosophers who pose a Subjectivity motive, in contrast, give more attention to the role of subjectively inflected devices, like voice-over.) And the Nature motive in film as philosophy will inevitably involve certain interpretations of nature as a philosophical theme: the irony in the seeming neutrality of saying *The Thin Red Line* presents things 'just being the way they are' is that Critchley still makes decided assumptions about the 'indifferent nature' that is said to be on display.

4.1.2 Robert Silberman: Nature as a Challenge to Imagination

Robert Silberman (2007), unlike Critchley, detects a great deal more *enchantment* in the nature of Malick's nature. It is perhaps because of this that Silberman envisages another domain for the device's transformative work – not that of affective response, but, interestingly, the viewer's *imagination*.

Silberman argues that representations of nature and landscape in *The Thin Red Line* form the main device through which Malick expresses his views. He likens it to a "philosophical proving ground" for testing the ideas that the film's characters express (2007: 170). Here it is noteworthy that Silberman, like many others, sides with the perspective of Private Witt, whom he takes to represent the film's spiritual point of view. (As we shall see, the supposed priority of Witt's perspective remains a point of contention among commentators.) Even though his ideas are made explicit through voice-over and dialogue, they are ultimately couched in a broader visual outlook: Silberman claims that the film's final monologue, for instance, is backed up by "luminous visuals" that "provide an unmediated, nonverbal argument for the radiant splendour of the world and the victory of a faith in spirit" (2007: 174). So while Private Witt challenges our sensibilities by saying that there exists 'another world' in the midst of war and death, it is actually Malick's extravagantly rich depictions of nature that drives this point home. The ethical upshot of this, for Silberman, is that the film "poses a challenge to our powers of imagination" (2007: 173). Yet this conclusion only follows, in this case, from the sort of *spiritual sublimity* as the *effect* that he sees in Malick's treatment of nature. In Silberman's account, therefore, the film's contemplative method consists of bringing the viewer to "a spiritual version of landscape": it uses verbal devices to name the issue of "another world", but employs visuals of landscape to give us a sense of what this may actually be (2007: 173). Its transformational work consists of *cultivating our artistic imagination*, thus enabling a vision of the world that is open to possibilities of renewal and redemption.

4.1.3 Robert Pippin: Interrogative Attention

Robert Pippin (2013), in turn, examines *The Thin Red Line* in terms of what he designates as the film's 'interrogative mode'. He sees this as a particular contemplative effect, channeled through two devices: the moving pictures of nature in combination with the voice-over monologues. The former express an 'aesthetic interrogation', which is in counterpoint to the 'discursive interrogation' of the latter. On the basis of their overlapping functions Pippin is able to discern 'meditative' qualities in each of these devices (e.g. 2013: 249–250, 269). Yet, as far as transformational effect goes, Pippin is mostly interested in Malick's almost 'devout' concentration on the natural world. He explains it as such:

> [B]oth the presence of the non-plot-driven photographs and the seriousness, even solemnity of the attention to such objects (often heightened by the musical score) create a general expectation of a different kind of attention from the viewer, and the seriousness of the tone suggests much more than mere atmospherics. The effect of the sort of framing, attentiveness, and lingering over the living things is to alter what we are actually to be attending to. It is not merely the objects we see when framed this way but rather, given the lingering attention of the camera, if one can put it this way, the objects in the light of such attention, photographed as if seen in a mode of interrogative attention that, by its very intensity and independence from the plot, detaches the objects from any normal intercourse with viewers and allows some other dimension of meaningfulness (or some different sort of question about life) to emerge visually, and so requires some other stance or attitude to be possible with regard to such a presence. To a large extent that suggested stance is similar in tone to the voice-overs: intensely interrogative and unresolved. (2013: 269)

From this it is clear that Pippin detects in Malick's images of nature a freedom and intensity that prompts in viewers a modification of their *attention*. He thus illustrates how something like attention – or awareness, in more typical transformationalist parlance – can double up as both the *domain* and *value* of an ethic of transformation: Malick's treatment of nature both has *an effect on* our attention and helps create an *ideal mode* of 'interrogative' attention, as supposedly modeled by the film's own attentiveness.

Yet one may still ask of this attentive mode, 'attention *to what*?' Presumably, there must be an overseeing value or ideal that qualifies the nature of this focused attention, but this remains ineffable. The most that Pippin divulges is to describe it as a "sense of ontological attention" that can disclose for us an

intuitive and pre-discursive dimension of meaning in things (2013: 270–271). Yet he adds that this dimension of meaning "also somehow announces its own unavailability for any determinate thinking, as if something is also being withheld or hidden from such discursive intelligibility" (2013: 271). His inability to formulate what we actually get from the film suggests that Pippin also follows a Nature-led approach to film as philosophy: this motive typically emphasizes that film can present language-transcending traces of the 'real' that runs up against the insufficiency of discursive knowledge (and philosophy of the like) to come to terms with it. Pippin's commitment to this position also shows in his claim that our transformed 'ontological attention' entails an attention to ontological questions of 'Being', in a grander philosophical sense: "we see not the mere beings", he says, "but see them in the light of the question of what it is for them to be at all" (Pippin 2013: 270).

The quote above also points to an interesting contemplative *method* that Pippin attributes to Malick's style. He may be rather fuzzy about actual *ends* of transformation, but is quite explicit on how the film establishes a *mode* of potential transformation. Pippin identifies a range of devices that negate meaning-making. And while he does not call it by this name, he attributes to them *effects of ambiguity*: "the viewer has to struggle to find some point of orientation", he says, and experiences a "sense of being lost" (2013: 249). Various elements in *The Thin Red Line* are said to contribute to this kind of effect: (*a*) its general 'de-emphasis' of narrative meaning (2013: 267); (*b*) how it initially raises war movie genre expectations only to frustrate them (2013: 249); (*c*) contrasting yet interlocking relations between images and voice-over (2013: 249–250); and (*d*) the 'independence' of nature imagery from any clear narrative motivation (2013: 269). Yet the point, for Pippin, is the contemplative work that the resultant ambiguity performs: it *forces our attention* on the film's two main interrogative devices, nature photography and voice-overs (2013: 265, 267, 269). The inherent method here is one of 'withholding' certain features, thereby creating ambiguity, in order to amplify the effect of others:

> In the way negative theology is held to be itself a mode of knowledge about God, Malick's negation of narrative and character conventions and patterns of intelligibility, we might say, forces us to see things about dramatic events and the characters and the visual images in a distinct way, in a kind of fresh strangeness, a strangeness echoed in the photography of nature. (Pippin 2013: 265)

It is thus by subtraction – an implicit *ascetic method*, if you like, which withholds certainty of meaning from the viewer – that Malick is said to pave the way for

the film's contemplative mode of transformation. As is often the case, however, the link between this contemplative *mode* (*drawing* our attention) and the expected transformational *effect* (*transforming* our attention) remains tenuous. Our attention drawn to images of nature does not entail that all of us will necessarily see them in the 'fresh strangeness' that Pippin hopes for. Nevertheless, Pippen's hope does underscore the typical ethical-transformational interests that accompany interpretations of nature in Malick's films.

4.2 *Voice-Over*

Let us turn to what is certainly Malick's most recognizable stylistic device, the case of his extended voice-over monologues. It is easy enough to see how his highly distinctive use of the device makes critics speak of a contemplative cinema: his voice-overs give voice to characters' inner contemplations. Malick refuses to spoon-feed his audience through dialogue, opting instead to verbalize the meditative free association through which his characters try to make sense of the world. These reflections also provide an obvious resource for philosophical interpretations of his films. In Malick's matured work, especially, voice-overs are of an increasingly interrogative nature that articulates metaphysical issues like death, transcendence, and the meaning of life. The voice-over adds a separate "contentful element", as Davies (2009 575–576) puts it, that brings a philosophical focus to depicted events that would otherwise not have been there.

Malick's meditative voice-overs, to be sure, attract just as many connections with transformational ethics as it does with contemplation *per se*. This is not only a matter of what is said, but also how the voice-over is deployed within particular narratives. If a voice-over monologue belongs to a character portrayed in the film, it creates a sense of an ethical self that reflectively engages with its own life and experiences. The retrospective voice-overs of Malick's first two films, for example, convey someone who is distanced from her life as she evaluates it from some future state. In the present tense monologues of Malick's later work, characters increasingly address and interrogate themselves. These later voice-overs, moreover, tend to play out in contexts where they also typify inner prayers or confessions. As a result, commentators such as Furstenau and MacAvoy (2007: 187) find it easy to equate Malick's use of voice-over with the 'inwardness' of characters' reflections. Yet it is not only about what happens but also how it happens: the typical Malick voice-over has a quietly reciting, 'whispery' quality that adds to its sense of private introspection, sometimes amid scurrying activity and other people talking. The impression of the voice's distant, removed interiority is sometimes further enhanced by muted diegetic sound. So, since people commonly perform such

forms of self-reflection, or self-dialogue, as a *technique* of personal transformation, Malick's voice-overs can be taken as staging for us precisely that. This connotation of self-transformation is evident, for instance, in the observation that Malick's voice-overs "suggest a striving for self-understanding" (Rybin 2011: 28).

Malick's use of voice-overs is of importance to philosophers who locate the potential of film to do philosophy within a general condition of Subjectivity – this device, after all, "represent[s] the subjectivity" of characters and "provide[s] a psychological thickness that would otherwise be lacking" (Davies 2008: 577). The simplest claim, in this regard, would be to say that the represented thoughts of characters stimulate and guide the viewers' philosophical self-reflections. This, however, assumes a simple, unaccounted-for complicity between the voice-over and what the viewer thinks (e.g. Critchley 2005: 137).

Instead, most commentators who express an interest in the voice-over locate its contemplative-philosophical appeal in its interplay with other stylistic devices and the combined effects that they yield. A recurring claim is that Malick's voice-overs (telling) stand in stark contrast to events on screen (showing):[14] at best the relationship between the two is allusive or ironic; at worst the connection remains entirely enigmatic.[15] The disparity between the devices of showing and telling is interpreted as a deliberate attempt at creating *effects of incongruity* and *ambiguity*, which is taken to spur the viewer to heightened meaning-making and reflection. Carl Plantinga (2010), for example, narrows the contemplative pull of such incongruity-effects down to the domain of *affect*. He argues that *The Thin Red Line* does not develop a unified structure of feeling, as is conventionally the case, but one marked by affective counterpoint – the film constantly juxtaposes "differently valanced, affect-laden representations" that result in "affective incongruity" (2010: 98). And since there are cognitive implications to emotions and affects, as Plantinga reminds us, such mismatches invite speculation about their meaning. Our experience of affective disunity therefore cues emotions like wonder and curiosity, as well as the acts of rumination that accompany them (2010: 93, 95). The implied transformational value of this stylistic design is what Plantinga labels as encouraging "a contemplative mode of film viewing" (2010: 93).

14 See, for example, Bersani and Dutoit (2004: 134–135, 143), Davies (2008: 58–61), Kendall (2011: 150), Neer (2011), Pippin (2013: 249–250), Rybin (2011: 28), Virvidaki (2014: 26) and Walden (2011: 197).

15 The theoretical dichotomy of showing versus telling is well entrenched in film studies and beyond. For a well-known overview of theories of film narration in terms of the dichotomy, see Bordwell (1985: 3–26).

Plantinga's analysis poses a transformation of *heightened* reflection – *contemplation itself*, quite simply, becomes the transformational *value*. Other philosophers, who roughly follow the same line of thought, detail more specific outcomes. Steven Rybin and David Davies both see Malick's voice-overs as helping realize a value of *enhanced awareness*.

4.2.1 Steven Rybin: Self-Reflection and Voicing Meaning

Steven Rybin (2011), to begin with, locates the philosophical functions of Malick's films in the general disparity that he finds between the voice and the visual world. He sees Malick's characters as 'striving' (a term he adopts from Heidegger), heroically, to voice meaning *over and against* the 'sensually dispersive' and 'inexhaustible' film worlds that they are subject to.

This requires some unraveling. Rybin's claim of a 'sensually dispersive design' is his version of what is often cited as the '*impressionistic*', '*elliptical*' or '*fragmented*' effect of Malick's style. And he derives this effect from how Malick depicts his 'film world', which again comes down to Malick's free-floating *depictions of nature*. As is the case with earlier mentioned commentators, Rybin refers to a "dispersive array of natural imagery" which he characterizes as "discontinuous", "non-causal" and "unmotivated within the diegesis" (2011: 15). Rybin therefore sees in Malick's voice-overs a striving to give meaning (telling) and hold together these disparate impressions (showing) of an ultimately inexhaustible nature (cf. 2011: 30). He explains:

> These characters are not, strictly speaking, philosophers, but in their struggle to shape meaning out of the shards of light, sound, movement, and beauty to which they are subject, they, no less than the viewer, voice their own creative interpretations of Malick's fictional worlds. (Rybin 2011: 13)

Viewers, as this quote suggests, are just as much confronted by the 'sensually dispersive' effect of Malick's film worlds. They are thereby drawn into their *own* process of meaning-making, within the greater process of accompanying characters who voice *their* meanings (2012: xii, xv; 2011: 14).[16] With this, Rybin,

16 The uncomplicated complicity posed between the viewer and the character, 'alongside' whom thoughtful viewers are encouraged to make meaning, is troublesome – and Rybin does little to account for it (see 2011: 13–14; 2012: xv). The closest that he comes is to note that the cinematic encounter is inherently relational (2012: xiii); and to note in passing that "Malick's cinema insists upon a degree of empathetic commitment to the fictional lives dramatized" (2012: xvii).

also, looks at effects of *ambiguity* as the *method* whereby Malick's style draws viewers into a contemplative mode: this is because viewers have to contend with visual impressions of a world that is not readily intelligible and impressions which remain inconclusive; and, moreover, they have to evaluate these visuals in light of the meanings articulated through the voice-over. This process culminates in a particular *value* of *awareness*: it may instill in us a greater awareness of what Rybin describes as the 'phenomenological fact' of our own striving for meaning (2011: 30, 38). Part of this awareness is the ethically significant recognition, as Heidegger would have it, of the limitations inherent to our interpretations of the world.

As is often the case with Subjectivity-inspired approaches, this instance of film as philosophy thus becomes for the viewer an exercise in *self-reflection*. Rybin basically says that Malick's style fosters a greater awareness of our *own experience* (of striving for meaning). We may see this as acquiring *knowledge of the self* – we gain insight into our own condition as meaning-making subjects, who "can never reach a point where nature's mystery is foreclosed [...] by human experience" (2011: 30). And this self-awareness can extend to improving *insight into our existing knowledge*, seeing that Malick's film worlds "challenge viewers to reflect upon the ideas brought to, and inspired by, each viewing" (2011: 28). Rybin says of Malick's characters that their introspective voice-overs suggest an attempt at "self-understanding" (2011: 28). This notion, it turns out, captures much of the transformational value that he imagines for the viewer.

The motive of Subjectivity that Rybin entertains also incorporates into itself a motive of Nature. The philosophical crux of Malick's style, for Rybin, lies in how a subjectivizing device – first person voice-over – runs up against the bewildering visual presence of the film world. He details the latter, for instance, as "an autonomous presence that opens up an interpretive question for both the character and the viewer" (2011: 16). This again raises the by now familiar theme that film can present a world that eclipses our experience and refuses to succumb to any final knowledge thereof. Yet Rybin, to his credit, still hangs on to the philosophical relevance of Subjectivity in Malick's films – and thus affirms voice-over as the device that carries it. It is worth noting that Rybin accords equal significance to voice-overs – in an irremovable, inconclusive tension with presentations of nature – and treats them as raising genuine subjective responses to the world, worthy of consideration. In contrast, analysts led by a Nature-motive can be rather dismissive of Malick's voice-overs and effectively judge them to be beside the point, as we shall see. These analysts, it will become clear, are interested in personal transformation that aligns our awareness with the world 'outside' ourselves. In Rybin's account, however, we

find the exact opposite: our experience of Malick's film worlds leads us right back to an awareness of the meaning-seeking self.

4.2.2 David Davies: Self-Reflection and Embodied Agency

I now turn to David Davies (2008b), who extracts from Malick's style an overall disparity involving the voice-over. He argues that *The Thin Red Line* uses voice-over to the effect of creating a contrast between the characters' reflective thinking and their depicted actions – the latter of which he accepts to be of an essentially embodied nature, seeing that Malick's opaque characters respond to the world in a "less deliberatively mediated way" (2008b: 55). Davies' commitment to Subjectivity as a condition for film as philosophy is clear: the philosophical possibilities of Malick's cinema reside in how it presents different "inflections of our cognitive engagement with the world" (2008b: 50). And Davies' emphasis on modes of embodied experience indicates that he, too, attends to a motive of Nature, albeit with a different accent: it concerns not nature, as 'world', which stands over and against the reflective subject, but nature as an inherent part of the sensing subject.[17]

Davies' account sets the device of voice-over monologues against images that convey the tactile, visceral qualities of the characters' embodied engagement with nature; hence he does not focus on images of nature *per se*. He bases the supposed haptic effects of the imagery on a few related features: depictions of actual hands and touching; photography that accentuates the textures and tangible qualities of things; and a moving camera that visibly brushes against its natural surroundings (2008b: 56). For Davies, these are all gestures of the spontaneous, embodied manner in which the characters respond to the world.

Davies, however, recognizes that Malick's voice-over reflections, even though standing apart from the characters' actions, represent a mode of human engagement in its own right. As Davies sees it, Malick's style thus urges the viewer to contemplation by staging two separate modes of human agency, side by side. The discursive thoughts in the voice-over do not motivate a character's actions, nor do they explain a character's motivations for acting. But they do show how the characters reflect on their embodied engagements with the world (2008b: 60; cf. Manning 2011: 166). Again, the claimed philosophical payoff of such a juxtaposition coincides with a transformative exploration of the self: Davies argues that this stylistic arrangement makes viewers more aware of the distinctness of *human* embodied agency as it stands apart from

17 In terms of approaches to film as philosophy, Davies' specific emphasis on embodied experience puts him in the company of Vivian Sobchack, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

the rest of the natural world. Like Rybin, Davies poses a certain *awareness*, as transformational value, which is directed at (*our own*) *experience*. By pairing the characters' visceral actions with voiced thoughts, *The Thin Red Line* thus affords a *self-reflective insight* regarding the richness and complexity of this experience, which Davies describes as delicately poised in a balance between our embodied agency and our rational response (2008b: 61).

4.3 *Perspective-Effects*

In my third and final case, I consider a perhaps more elusive feature of Malick's cinema, although it is a feature that is often invoked. Here the focus is directed not at any stylistic device, strictly, but at a more broadly perceived *effect* – what I roughly group together as the postulated 'perspective-effects' of Malick's style. Philosophers are keen to explain Malick's approach to film, not only in terms of '*perspectives*' (e.g. Macdonald 2008: 91–93; Manning 2011: 172; Sinnerbrink 2011d: 180–182), but also by using related notions such as '*points of view*' (e.g. Yates 2006; Coplan 2008: 72; Virvidaki 2014: 29, 31); '*ways of seeing*' (e.g. Bersani & Dutoit 2004: 158–160; Davies 2008: 50–53, 61–62; Pippin 2013: 273, 275); and '*worldviews*' or '*ways of knowing*' (e.g. Walden 2011: 197–198). It has to be said that these terms are not used with great clarity. They are often applied interchangeably, with a casual disregard for the difference between their literal and figurative meanings or, for that matter, whether they refer to subjective perception or knowledge. As a result, the highly accommodating concept of 'perspective' can be related to just about any stylistic device conceivable: analysts single out, for example, Malick's cinematographic presentations of nature and voice-over, as we have seen, but also dialogues, juxtaposed elements, point of view shots, close-ups, notable camera movements and prominent music scores: a variety of devices is taken to express 'perspective'.

Besides this, the narratives of *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*, alone, provide ample material for adducing this effect. *The Thin Red Line*, for instance, explicitly raises the question of diverse perspectives as one of its central themes. This is especially evident in the confrontation between the spiritual worldview of Private Witt ("I've seen another world") and the sober materialist outlook of Sergeant Welsh ("there ain't no world but this one"), backed up by a cinematography which highlights the 'upwards' orientation of the one and the 'downwards' orientation of the other (see Plantinga 2010: 94–97; Rybin 2011: 28–29). Opposing perspectives therefore reflexively interpret and interrogate one another.

From this angle, then, the thoughtful aura of Malick's style comes from the strong sense of perspective – and, indeed, the *competing* perspectives and *shifts in* perspective – that he is said to establish. As one should expect,

the ethical value of this stylistic effect is typically connected to the transformational domain of the viewer's own 'perspective'. Critic Jon Baskin's (2010) reflections on this connection are paradigmatic. He proceeds from the understanding that Malick's cinema foregrounds 'perspective' and 'problems of seeing' and therefore finds that it puts the transformational demand on viewers 'to see in a new way'. He pinpoints a 'visual ethic' in what he calls Malick's 'education' of our perceptions: namely, for us to take on Malick's overarching cinematic perspective that can reconcile opposing realities by showing us their common root.

4.3.1 Whose Perspective?

This however raises the question of who or what exemplifies the ideal, 'higher' perspective of Malick's films. There are, after all, many perspectives at play – not only those of characters, but the metaphysical perspectives of 'Spirit' or nature, that of the filmmaker, and that of the contentious entity that Baskin and others call 'the camera'.

When it comes to character perspectives, assessments of Private Witt in *The Thin Red Line* is particularly instructive. It is fairly obvious that this "more angelic, self-questioning, philosophical figure" stands out from the crowd (Critchley 2005: 136). Yet analysts (Baskin among them) take this as a reason to accept that Witt's is the privileged and indeed the model perspective of the film. Stacey Peebles (2007: 157), for instance, notes that "though Malick enters the consciousness of other characters in the film, he always returns to Witt, and the film's images are invariably framed the way that Witt would see them – quiet, calm and untainted".[18] A recurring claim, therefore, is that Witt sees the world as 'Malick's camera' shows it – and thus personifies (embodies, if you will) the educating, larger perspective of the film (and, by implication, the filmmaker).

But the supposed priority of Witt's perspective is by no means a settled issue. Furstenau and MacAvoy (2007: 189), quite on the contrary, find that the film does not endorse any perspective. Pippin (2013: 167–168, 273), likewise, observes that no point of view trumps another and, rightly, warns against making a character's view representative of the film or its maker. And Iain Macdonald (2008: 108n20) goes entirely against the stream by singling out Welsh's materialism as a 'correction' of Witt's perspective. These interpretative divergences give some much needed food for thought: why should Witt's

18 Also see Bersani and Dutoit (2004: 158–160, 163–164), Silberman (2007: 173–174), Davies (2008: 51–54, 61–62), and Plantinga (2010: 95–97).

'ethic', whichever way you want to understand it, be *the* means to deal with the hardships of war? Welsh's view that one survives by making oneself a 'rock' can be equally legitimate, if not more tenable. For this opposing camp, therefore, Private Witt's way of seeing things is simply one among many.

The refusal to privilege any character's perspective has a notable implication: it endorses the idea that Malick achieves some *larger* perspective that is taken to educate the viewer. One option is to see a higher perspective in the concurrence of conflicting perspectives, whereby the viewer can holistically consider different sides at once. Russell Manning (2011: 170–175) argues that this form of 'dialectic argument' in Malick's cinematic philosophy privileges the viewer's point of view to acquire a 'higher unity of thought'. Alternatively, one can attribute a perspective-transcending perspective to the visual exploits of 'Malick's camera', as Steven Rybin for instance does. "Because Malick's camera sees the world from a different perspective", he says, "it always remains at one remove from the meanings its characters ascribe to their experiences" (2011: 37). And through this autonomy of the camera, cinema becomes a different way of seeing, relative to human perception (2011: 18). Yet another option is to define Malick's overarching perspective as one of a metaphysical, spiritual realm. Katarina Virvidaki (2014) points to ambivalent applications of voice-over and camerawork in *The Thin Red Line* which, she says, create the feel of a dynamic, depersonalized perspective. This ethereal effect of a "point of view that transcends the limits of empirical, naturalistic understanding" is said to carry affective meaning, rendering for the viewer an experience of wonder (2014: 28–29).

However, if one wishes to pose a source for a 'higher' perspective in Malick's cinema, there is a much more palpable candidate: the vast presence of *nature*. In what follows, I will consider three philosophical readings of Malick which focus on perspective-effects relating to the theme of nature – that of Robert Sinnerbrink, Iain Macdonald and the widely cited analysis by Bersani and Dutoit. My purpose is to bring my meta-analyses full circle, as we have already seen how nature prominently features in analyses of Malick's work.

4.3.2 Robert Sinnerbrink: The Perspective of Nature

Robert Sinnerbrink (2011d) describes the philosophical ambition of *The New World* as an attempt at letting us experience an 'impossible' point of view. With this, Sinnerbrink attributes to the film a particularly elusive instance of what I call a perspective-effect, one that he connects to a few related perspectives – historical, mythical, and metaphysical. To begin with, Sinnerbrink argues that the film relates the imagined experience of the foundation of colonial America – a meeting of colonists and natives, the Old World and The

New – which involves the "intensively subjective reflection" of two contrasting points of view (2011d: 181). Then, Malick knowingly looks upon this encounter, says Sinnerbrink, with the 'romantic naivety' of poetic myth, not historical fact. But a further significant component of the film's 'impossible point of view', Sinnerbrink continues, is that the film seeks to present a metaphysical perspective in which nature itself becomes something of an acting subject. As an observation on Malick's style, Sinnerbrink does not dwell here on particular devices and concentrates more on experiential effects like *awe* and *wonder* (2011d: 182).[19] Yet it is worth noting that this sublimity of nature's perspective, as Sinnerbrink interprets it, consists of nature being "elemental", acting as "that which underlies and supports any form of historical human community" (2011d: 192).

The 'mesmerizing philosophical meditation' that Sinnerbrink attributes to Malick – the contemplative method, as I see it – hinges on the putting together of this 'impossible' melting pot of perspectives: it encompasses historical cultures, myths, and nature. Yet it is clear that, for Sinnerbrink, nature provides the decisive point of view, breaking the impasse of perspectives, so to speak. Nature is revealed as a participant in and among opposing historical perspectives, showing itself as that which they have in common. For this reason, Sinnerbrink argues, *The New World* is a poetic retrieval of both the possibility of reconciling cultures and "the possibility of a 'New World' in which human dependence upon nature is acknowledged as the basis of any enduring intercultural or historical reconciliation" (2011d: 183).

So what ethical value does this particular perspective-effect hold for the viewer? Sinnerbrink, as we have seen in earlier chapters, associates film as philosophy with an inherent power to transform. *The New World*, as affective experience, thus affords the same kind of provocations to thought that Sinnerbrink claims of other films. But he finds in its poetic disclosure of nature's 'perspective' also more particular value: it can reveal to viewers *new ways of relating to nature*. Most notable is Sinnerbrink's claim that it brings us to an acknowledgment (read: awareness) of our deeper *unity* with nature; a unity that underlies and can overcome our cultural-historical oppositions (2011d: 190, 192).

Sinnerbrink thus implicitly conceives an interlocking chain of transformational values: he poses that the film encourages *awareness*, an awareness *of nature*, the content of which is our essential *unity with* nature. I take the value of unity to be crucial here: it not only bridges this reading and those

19 In addition to what he calls the 'visual symphony' of nature imagery, Sinnerbrink does single out Malick's repeated use of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* overture as a further means of nature's self-expression (2011d: 191).

presented below, but also registers as a theme across different levels of the film, as Sinnerbrink's allegorical interpretation indeed also has it. This line of interpretation is roughly as follows. On one level, the film thematizes a reconciliation of cultures, a union, of which the marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe (Christian Bale) becomes a metonymic symbol. Then there is the reconciliation with nature – also referred to as a 'discovery' and 'recollection' – which Sinnerbrink suggests is the condition for 'marrying' the perspectives of these two worlds, the Old and the New. This reconciliation is precisely the experience of transformation that Pocahontas undergoes at the end of the film: her awareness is restored, and she spiritually reconnects to ('Mother') nature. Different instances of 'coming together' (of individuals, of worlds) therefore resonate with 'unity' as transformational value – which characterizes Pocahontas' transformation, and which Sinnerbrink, finally, extends to the viewer's own awareness of nature.

Whereas Sinnerbrink seems set on retaining a *spiritual* dimension to nature's 'perspective', Iain Macdonald as well as Bersani and Dutoit proceed from forthright *materialist* commitments – the former a self-confessed Nietzschean, the latter patently Deleuzian. Yet their shared interest in perspective-effects, which all of them relate to nature, brings them to similar if not the same ethical conclusions.

4.3.3 Iain Macdonald: A Deconstruction of Perspectives

Macdonald (2008), like Sinnerbrink, addresses matters of perspective in *The New World*. He sees the essential philosophical act of *The New World* as one of 'deconstructing' the dichotomy of cultural perspectives that the film puts forward. I should add that this 'deconstruction' relies on affirming nature (and a materialist conception thereof at that) as the absolute perspective that holds the film together. This view itself could in fact do with some deconstruction, yet Macdonald's Nietzschean presuppositions[20] preclude him from doing so. He simply announces that Malick's central philosophical concern is his interest in nature (and, more specifically, the nature of human nature) and points to a couple of devices that evidently lead viewers to this deeper ground. He notes, for example, that Malick draws out similar features in the *voice-over reflections* of Pocahontas and John Smith (Colin Farrell) (Macdonald 2008: 93). Although they

20 Macdonald proposes that we can discern in *The New World* a naturalism that can be articulated beyond Malick's original strictly Heideggerian interests. He thus designates Malick's metaphysics in this instance a 'materialism', "roughly Nietzschean in character, that denies not only cultural essentialism, but also any meaningful distinction between reason and nature" (2008: 94).

have radically different cultural vantage points, they nevertheless repeat the same basic questions:

> [T]he point here is to explore the deeper question of what binds them together in nature [...] At this level, love and cultural difference are relegated to the status of epiphenomena or manifestations of natural processes. (2008: 92)

Malick not only foregrounds similarities in Pocahontas and Smith's reflections, but also reiterates a deeper commonality between their worlds by repeatedly deploying parallel imagery, according to Macdonald. He identifies resemblances in depictions of natural elements and human creations like interior spaces, windows and doorways, all of which serve to bridge, *visually*, what the narrative presents as two different cultures. Because of this, Macdonald argues, "Malick insists that their difference is purely perspectival and that at root they share a common logic, a common reason that engenders their respective worlds and defines their relation to nature" (2008: 93).

The ethical benefit that Macdonald considers to be implied in this deconstruction is by now a familiar one: it "incites the viewer to undertake a change of perspective" (2008: 100). This new perspective is, quite simply, that of nature. *The New World* thus encourages us to see Pocahontas' story as 'the story of nature', to look upon what occurs in the narrative as 'nature itself' (2008: 98–99). Again, this is understood as a bringing to awareness of the essential *unity* that the perspective of nature entails: Macdonald speaks of bringing the viewer to the "indifference and unity of nature that is at the root of what presents itself initially as its opposite" (2008: 100). Macdonald also notes the potential difficulties of this manner of seeing with regard to our viewing habits and cultural expectations – a remark that is typical of transformationalist discourse (see 2008: 99). Hence, he speaks of the viewer having to 'awaken' to the 'deeper process' of nature, as communicated by the film (2008: 105–106).

We should note, however, the markedly different *methods* whereby Macdonald and Sinnerbrink take the 'higher' perspective of nature to emerge. Whereas, for Sinnerbrink, poetic evocation and myth are crucial means by which Malick achieves this effect, Macdonald sees the film's contemplative work as a process of undermining its own clichéd romanticism. Macdonald does make a compelling argument: Malick deliberately resorts to telling the stereotyped love story of Pocahontas, an American foundational myth, as is made famous by the Disney animated film *Pocahontas* (1995, Mike Gabriel & Eric Goldberg). In fact, he highlights various ways in which *The New World* specifically recalls its Disney counterpart: it duplicates certain scenes from the

Disney film; there are numerous compositional allusions to the animated film; and Malick opted to cast two actors (Christian Bale and Irene Bedard) who were voice actors in *Pocahontas* (see Macdonald 2008: 104–105). Yet Macdonald is overly hopeful, I believe, about the effect that he supposes Malick's strategy may have. Macdonald takes for granted that the clichéd romantic content of *The New World* has an estranging effect on viewers (it 'disrupts our habits and expectations'). This, he argues, puts the triteness of the narrative out of play (which includes its opposing cultural perspectives) and thus brings our attention to nature's perspective as the true subject of the film (2008: 104–105). So, as far as Malick's romanticism goes, Sinnerbrink and Macdonald attribute two distinctly contemplative methods to *The New World*. For Sinnerbrink, Malick's 'naive' style helps elicit a mode of contemplation qualified by *endurance* (what I have called a 'contemplative endurance') and it adds to the ambiguity and difficulty of the 'impossible point of view' that the viewer has to contend with (see Sinnerbrink 2011d: 179–183). For Macdonald, Malick's romantic clichés establish a mode of contemplation that relies on a supposed *ascetic negation* (thus a 'contemplative asceticism') – it undermines its own narrative content so that the viewer can instead pay attention to the film's 'deeper' subject. Yet, interestingly, both paths still lead to the same ethical outcome: the viewer gains an awareness of nature.

4.3.4 Bersani & Dutoit: An Erasure of Perspective

This brings me, lastly, to Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's (2004: 124–177) substantive and often quoted essay on *The Thin Red Line*. They provide a fitting synthesis of my meta-survey's findings with regard to Malick's style. In addition to being widely acknowledged, Bersani and Dutoit's path-breaking essay also touches upon many of the topics and issues that have emerged from my analyses thus far. It must be said from the outset that Bersani and Dutoit's position is decidedly anti-subjectivist – and more so than any other account considered here. While they do not flaunt Deleuze's voice, their approach has all the hallmarks that one would expect from Deleuzians. Accordingly, as we will see, they embrace a bold motive of Nature, which takes their ethical interests in *unity*, or *connection*, to an immanentist extreme.

Bersani and Dutoit locate the main philosophical thrust of *The Thin Red Line* in a particular effect of perspective: they call this 'a certain kind of look', one that is 'wholly open', as enacted by the emblematic character of Private Witt. The film launches its 'visual argument', they say, by making us see in and through Witt's eyes (2004: 2, 151, 158). This 'look' therefore relates to two stylistic devices. *Cinematographic presentations of nature*, on the one hand, let us see *through* Witt's eyes. Here Bersani and Dutoit recall the same understanding

of nature that Critchley advances – "images of calm beauty [... that] represent the vast, non-human setting of *The Thin Red Line* as a mostly immobile, indifferent witness to the human agitations within it" (2004: 159). But this is complemented by *close-ups of the face*, which moreover let us see *in* Witt's eyes (2004: 143–146). This device, say Bersani and Dutoit, reveals the character's perspective by showing us how his face registers the world. It is not a subjective perspective, involving psychological expression, but a perspective on the world, one which we see inscribed on the face of the looking subject.[21]

Note, here, that Bersani and Dutoit deliberately downplay the voice-over as a potential source of subjective perspective in the film. This fits into their overall adherence to a motive of Nature, which impels them to privilege *visual presence* over the voice and its discursive content, or more simply: *showing* over telling. They constantly look to trivialize the role of the voice-over in favor of their affirmation of the film's visual arguments. They emphasize, for instance, that the close-up is often unaccompanied by speech (2004: 145); and that private Witt's "remarkable presence" has "little to do with his very general and abstract questions" (2004: 134). We are also told that the content of the voice-overs has "very little intellectual weight" (2004: 132), and that it "fails to be adequate to the film's vision" (2004: 171). This stands in stark contrast to analysts who are led by a Subjectivity motive and the definitive value that they find in Malick's voice-overs. For them, to downplay the significance of the voice-over would be to deny the film the philosophical capacity to fully relate individual human experience – a sphere which Bersani and Dutoit, as will become clear, are quite set on getting away from.

Bersani and Dutoit do, of course, recognize the *interaction* of voice-over and image as the film's principle stylistic maneuver: the film raises verbal questions that are responded to visually, by different ways of looking at the world. But this juxtaposition, they make clear, is "not equal in value" inasmuch as "the film enacts the image's superior inclusiveness over the word" (2004: 143). With this normative evaluation they of course choose not to consider the inverse possibilities of the verbal-visual interaction or combination: that the verbal content, on the contrary, responds to the visual content and thereby defines what we see (see MacCabe 1999). Leaving this aside, Bersani and Dutoit nevertheless recognize that the interplay with the voice-over produces effects of

21 Bersani and Dutoit note Deleuze's description of the close-up as "psychologically non-expressive", in light of which they deem Malick's presentation of faces "a certain mode of registering *the world*" (2004: 143–144 [emphasis added]). His characters are therefore individuated, not on the basis of personality or inner-experience, but "as perspectives on the world" by virtue of "the different worlds we see them registering" (2004: 145–146).

incongruity and *ambiguity*, which is also of interest to many other commentators, as we have seen. They note, for example, how the film ends with the voice of the deceased Witt, who seems to speak for all the men, addressing an unspecified 'you' that suggests a presence both inside and outside of him (2004: 134–135). These complex moments, they say, reiterate the overall ethical work of the film: which is "the reworking of the individual within a new relational ethic" (2004: 135).

This new relational ethic brings us back to the matter of Private Witt's 'look', seeing that the philosophical stakes of this look, for Bersani and Dutoit, are inherently ethical. Witt's look, they say, defines an ethic identical to 'total absorption': it is devoid of subjectivity; it simply connects to the world and locates him within it (e.g. 2004: 160–161, 164–165, 176–177). Two things deserve our attention here. First, I have already raised the difficult issue of who (and what) gets to be the privileged perspective of the film. On this point, Bersani and Dutoit wholeheartedly accept that Witt's 'look' sets the norm by which we should measure both the characters and the overall perspective that the film aspires to. Second, Bersani and Dutoit construe Witt's perspective as one of fundamental involvement with the world – which means that, in essence, we are again under the instruction of a 'perspective of nature'.

Bersani and Dutoit characterize Witt's ethical attitude with a range of time-honored transformational *values*, sometimes adorned in evocative metaphors. And each of these values concerns a deeply embracing stance towards the world. Most evident are the following:

1) *Openness*. The metaphor of Witt's 'absorption' suggests the intrinsic openness that Bersani and Dutoit attribute to the character. This is especially true for his look, which is said to have a "remarkable clarity and openness" (2004: 151). Bersani and Dutoit even take to photographic metaphors, likening characters to 'cameras': whereas the squinting Sergeant Welsh tries to see less, they say that Witt has an "aperture" that is "wide open" (2004: 149).
2) *Receptivity*. Bersani and Dutoit see an "all-inclusive receptiveness" in Witt's look that refuses to impose anything on the world (2004: 169). And again comes the camera metaphor: Witt, say the writers, "indiscriminately registers the world" in what amounts to a "mode of filming" (2004: 169). They go as far as to suggest that Malick's craft imitates Witt's posture of receptive "filming": we see this in the filmmaker's "attempt to avoid projecting a moral or aesthetic identity on the world he films, to allow his camera to be as mildly but thoroughly invaded by objects as Witt's eyes are" (2004: 163).

3) *Emptiness*. Bersani and Dutoit explain that such pure receptivity requires "a subject divested of subjectivity" (2004: 164). Witt's look, they say, illustrates a subject who owns nothing and has no claims on the world: "Witt approaches the limit of subject without selfhood, ideally an anonymous subject" (2004: 165). While they never call it by this name, they hereby attribute to Witt a classic transformational notion: an *emptying* or *voiding* of the self. They do have many other labels for it – among which is a 'dispersal', 'dissolving' or 'shattering' of individual identity (e.g. 8, 169–170, 177).
4) *Unity with nature*. The values above pave the way for 'connection' as the vital virtue in Witt's demeanor. The implicit agenda here is the negation of individuality. Witt's inherently relational ethic, as Bersani and Dutoit have it, supplants individuality in favor of a basic *continuity* and *oneness* with the world. Other characters, they say, strive for individuality, with "a willful non-connectedness that violates the continuities of being" (2004: 154). Witt, however, excels at just the opposite. For Bersani and Dutoit, his look constitutes a *unity* with the community of all being – hence all the talk of his 'connectedness' and 'participation' that essentially locates him within the very world that he 'absorbs' (2004: 159, 175–176).

But how do Bersani and Dutoit relate these ethical exemplifications to the viewer? The contemplative *method* that they propose in this regard takes a lot for granted: quite simply, Witt's 'look' is a stylistic effect that intrinsically involves the viewer. Since Witt is often, in effect, looking *at us*, Bersani and Dutoit conclude that we, the implicated viewers, are called to collaborate with this look. They explain it as such:

> Malick encourages us to collaborate with Witt's look. We see the objects and the people Witt looks at, but in the close-ups what we see is Witt looking at us [...] Witt's look [...] receives us in the same way it receives the rest of the world. We are, as a result, tacitly summoned to be the world as Witt sees it, and since that world is inseparable from Witt's look, we are also being called upon to share Witt's looking, to adopt his subjectivity in looking at the world. The immense yet beneficent demand being made on us is that we both be the world as Witt, looking at us, receives it, and that we imitate that receptivity [...] when we leave the film and turn again to the world outside it. (2004: 163–164)

The merit of this particular argument is not my immediate concern here. More important is the transformational work that the authors attach to this perspective-effect: it prompts us to emulate the same values of *openness* and

connection that Witt in their view exhibits. On the one hand this asks of us simply "to let the world be" (2004: 164) – an ethical lesson, I have argued, that philosophers who lean towards a Nature motive typically infer. But the strong Deleuzian streak in Bersani and Dutoit simultaneously stresses our having to acknowledge the "inescapable connectedness" through which "*I am* only *in the world*" (2004: 169). So, while the general *domain* of transformation that they propose is that of *subjectivity*, they make the rather grand claim that this is a process by which the individual subject *undoes its own subjectivity*[22] – it loses itself in connection to the world and by disseminating into it.

In this way Bersani and Dutoit's long and often poetical treatment of *The Thin Red Line* leads us back to what has become a familiar place: the notion that Malick's style helps bring home our essential unity or 'connection' to *nature*.[23] It is by staging and inviting an absolute abandonment to *the world* that it encourages the viewer to become a "subject divested of subjectivity" (2004: 164), and thus gain the perspective that is "an erasure of perspective itself" (2004: 146).

5 Some Things about Film as Philosophy: Method, Value, and Assumption

With this meta-critical excursion, I have undertaken what easily fits under the banner of 'meta-hermeneutics' (Korthals Altes 2013, 37–39) – an examination of the interpretative paths that interpreters resort to, which in this case are the paths along which philosophers make sense of Terrence Malick's film style. I have shown that the diverse interpretative 'paths' taken by philosophers, as to the ethics that they imply, lead to much the same 'destination'. The philosophical intentions of the above cases are undoubtedly diverse. But their ethical overtones ring in clear harmony: all the cases converge around a general concern with personal transformation. According to this picture, Malick's cinema affords not only a *contemplative* encounter, but moreover an inherently

22 This claim rests on the normative assumption that subjectivity, and the experience of individuality at that, is something that is *to be evaded* – despite the obvious contradiction that this 'flight', by its very definition, is conditioned by subjectivity. I have already taken up the contradictions and ironies attached to such Deleuzian immanentist claims in Chapter 3.

23 Although, this is 'nature' understood in light of an ontology of radical immanence: the community of all being, human and non-human, in which the opposition between 'inside' and 'outside' is a by-product of the illusory notion of individuality (see 2004: 169–171).

edifying one. This ethical message is most evident in philosophers ascribing to stylistic features the potential to achieve what I call 'transformational effects'. Such effects, we have seen, involve suggested *methods* by which Malick's contemplative style is said to work on some *domain* within the viewer, in accordance with an ethically significant *value* that is thereby actualized.

By all means, one could go into a discussion on the validity of these claims about Malick's work and its effects – but it is not my aim to do so here. My own meta-agenda, rather, is to ask what philosophers' conclusions about Malick, as a local case, suggest about the procedures and presuppositions that go into the general project of film as philosophy.

To start with, the case of Malick affords an opportunity to play devil's advocate around the implicit *methods* of film philosophers. For example: if readers hope to get from these philosophers an exact explanation of *how* the elements of Malick's style link up with particular transformational effects, they will be left disappointed. The connections drawn between elements of style and transformational effects remain speculative and suggestive, even evocative. True, the philosophers in question are not explicitly arguing for such transformational effects. But if you take away from their readings the connections nevertheless implied, little worth saying would remain. We should therefore ask whether their suggested connections between style and effect are in fact tenable. One response to that question could be that these claims are hopelessly idealistic. Can elements of style – say, 'random images of rocks and trees' – *really* achieve the valued effects that philosophers say they can? The implied contemplative methods that are thought to connect style to such effects often take much for granted – if the question is even posed, which is not often the case. Or, another response: perhaps these effects have little to do with Malick's style, and instead come down to the adequacy of the philosopher-viewer's (contemplative, ethical) mindset? In this case, as critically discussed in the previous chapter, the main initiative would come from the preparatory ethics practiced by the viewer – and not Malick's style.

There are also deeper questions to be raised about the whole business of 'drawing connections', before all else. Surely, as I have shown, the sheer range of connections made with various stylistic devices, and the sometimes contradicting interpretations of their effects, testify to the inherent ambivalence of these connections on which philosophers nevertheless base their readings. So do philosophers not slip into a baseless exercise in essentialization, in which favored stylistic devices get tied to (and, ultimately, reduced to) seemingly appropriate effects?

Yet for me to demand from film philosophers to give greater empirical grounding to the style-effect connections that they pose – *à la* the devil's

advocate above – would seem to violate the spirit of the film-philosophical paradigm and the readings considered here. These philosophers are after all busying themselves with interpretations, acts of meaning-making in which suggestion and evocation, perhaps even exaggeration, have a creative role to play alongside argumentation.

I thus wish to pursue a more productive and relevant appraisal: to see the transformational effects that philosophers connect to Malick's style as acts of *value-attribution*, in accordance with the field's broader impulse to value films-as-philosophy for purposes of personal transformation. As I have said earlier, I cannot pretend this transformational impulse is purely a desideratum of the philosophers. The films in question have to play their part. So, much as film philosophers are committed to this ethical interest, we have in Malick films a special set of factors – the attribution of a thoughtful filmmaker persona with existential narrative obsessions; and most of all, it seems, the perceived effects of an evocative contemplative style – that markedly enhance their existing impulse unto transformational ethics.

But why is it that ethics of transformation, specifically, weigh in so strongly on the *kind* of value that philosophers see in films that do philosophy? One factor, as noted in the introduction, is the obvious affinity that exists between philosophy and the aims of self-transformation. Another factor has to do with a growing uneasiness about interpreting the philosophical 'meaning' of films, which is thought to 'impose' philosophy on film. As I see it, the current intellectual milieu dedicated to considerations of ontology, materiality, performativity, embodiment, and affect, leads philosophers to rather affirm what films-as-philosophy *do*; and, more so, what such films do *to* and *for* us (cf. Rodowick 2007: 73; Rybin 2012: xvi). Hence we find, with regard to Malick and beyond, that philosophers now pay more attention to concrete details of style, attendant experiences, and the ethically significant transformations that these may evoke.

The hesitancy that I have about the cases considered here, however, is that the philosophical 'reflections', 'readings' and 'descriptions' of style-and-effect do not sufficiently own up to still being *interpretations* (not of narrative meaning, but of what stylistic devices do), and invested, value-laden interpretations at that. Of course we should not – and, in fact, cannot – do away with acts of interpretation and value-attribution. The problem, rather, is the inattention of film philosophers to their own interpretative strategies and interests, and the way these guide their evaluations, and indeed *valuations*, of film style. Particularly telling instances of this problem are to be found where the ideals of personal transformation get allied with a variety of normative assumptions of what it is (for films) to do philosophy. Such preconceptions of film as

philosophy predispose these analysts to particular judgments of stylistic elements: the kind of transformational value that they find in Malick's style can be traced back to their guiding beliefs about what, in essence, constitutes film as philosophy. We therefore have a particular pre-interpretative interest, pertaining to what film as philosophy should be, that commits philosophers to a specific set of ethical interests, all of which govern the sort of transformational effect that they look for in a film's style.

These implications are well demonstrated by two prominent streams of philosophical interpretation of Malick's cinema that emerged from my analysis. These streams mark two essentially diverse paths along which analysts explain the contemplativeness, and philosophical significance, of Malick's style: one is led by a motive of Subjectivity, emphasizing how his style embodies and elicits reflective thinking (e.g. Rybin, Davies); and the other is led by a motive of Nature, giving priority to the world to which his style gives presence (e.g. Critchley, Bersani & Dutoit). Both groups approach Malick's cinema from two fundamentally different commitments – what may be roughly called a commitment to the 'inside' versus a commitment to the 'outside'.

A range of issues follow from this. To begin with, the respective commitments of the two interpretative streams prompt different prioritizations of stylistic features. Both approaches, for instance, recognize the prominent place of nature in Malick's cinema. However, they differ markedly in their evaluations of the voice-over: whereas the likes of Rybin and Davies give ample attention to the voice-over, and posit a tension between it and Malick's presentations of nature, Bersani and Dutoit, in contrast, either neglect or even explicitly trivialize the role of voice-overs in favor of what is achieved by visual displays (see Bersani & Dutoit 2004: 132, 170–171).

More importantly, such preempted interpretations of style correspond with ethical imperatives that, likewise, cater to the basic philosophical commitments of each approach. Consider, again, Malick's visual motif of nature, a reference point in relation to which each stream formulates its own direction of transformation. The first stream has an overall ethical orientation that *affirms subjectivity*, roughly in accordance with the ethics of 'self-concentration' distinguished in Chapter 3. The second, quite the opposite, hopes for a *negation* or *loss of individual subjectivity*, an ideal common in ethics of 'self-expansion'. This entails that one approach will hold dear certain transformational *values* that the other does not cherish. Nature-led approaches to film as philosophy are undoubtedly drawn to the value of *unity* (with nature), as it typifies the ideal of a dispersed subject who escapes the self through its connectedness to the world. Film philosophers dedicated to a Subjectivity motive instead uphold the distinctness and separation of human experience, which seeks meaning

vis-à-vis nature. Though this position is not labeled as such, it suggests an esteem for precisely the opposite value – a certain *disunity*, which asserts the individual subject. At times, the two camps also happen to treat the same value in fundamentally dissimilar ways. Both streams of interpretation express an interest in the transformational value of *awareness*. But for one group, it is an awareness turned *inwards* – a heightened experience of self – whereas for the other, it is an *outwards* awareness, aimed at reconciling the self's detachment from the world to which it belongs.