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Film, Philosophy, and Terrence Malick's 'The New World'

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Terrence Malick, director of *The New World* and a handful of other fine movies, isn't in it for the fame. He avoids interviews, keeps public appearances to a minimum, and doesn't like to have his picture taken.

But it's harder for a filmmaker to dodge publicity than it is for, say, a novelist like Thomas Pynchon, also famed for an aversion to cameras. About five clicks on the Internet brought me to a gallery of online Malick photos showing the shy celebrity as a teenager, then a fledgling movie director, and now an *éminence grise* of independent cinema.

One picture is labeled "the ubiquitous Malick photo." So much for the cloistered auteur as master of his own public image.

While it's interesting to look at these, I can't help sympathizing with Malick's wish for privacy. That ubiquitous photo — snapped in 1998, when his World War II movie *The Thin Red Line* was in production — is a standard-issue shot (big smile, casual clothes, earphones draped around neck), conveying no hint of what makes this director different from countless others who've obediently said "cheese" for studio photographers.

While there may be a whiff of aloofness in Malick's disdain for the publicity fray, it's possible that he just doesn't want to distract attention from his work. He also has an egalitarian streak, refusing interviews on the principle that "he's not different from anyone else," as a New Line Cinema executive put it.

New Line is releasing *The New World*, and the company would surely be happier if Malick were willing to promote it by

glad-handing journalists the way less-reclusive directors do. Such marketing work is considered especially important when a film might have trouble "finding its audience" without some extra pushes. *The New World* is such a film.

The story itself is commercial enough, revolving around Colonial-era myths that have enthralled Americans for ages. The main characters are John Smith, the 17th-century English explorer, and Pocahontas, the American Indian adolescent who becomes his lover.

The movie chronicles their deepening intimacy in the context of Jamestown's gradual evolution from a frontier outpost to a burgeoning North American town. It also shows Smith's flight from Pocahontas when adventures beckon in other climes, her subsequent marriage to the tobacco pioneer John Rolfe, and her eventual visit with Rolfe to England, where they and their young son are greeted as exotic celebrities from afar.

This frequently heroic, often bittersweet material has paid Hollywood dividends more than once over the years. But true to his reputation, Malick hasn't handled the story with big-time ticket sales in mind.

While spectators will find the love scenes and battle sequences they expect in historical sagas, they'll also find a loosely strung-together structure and a dearth of dramatic climaxes. The cast isn't quite illustrious, featuring Colin Farrell as Smith, the teenager Q'orianka Kilcher as Pocahontas, and Christian Bale as Rolfe, who doesn't enter the picture until it's two-thirds over. The film has so little dialogue that it has been likened to a silent movie. And sometimes the screen goes blank simply because the director's sense of visual rhythm calls for it.

All of which must be giving New Line the jitters. Malick's previous epic, *The Thin Red Line*, failed to recoup its \$52-million budget during its first run despite seven Academy Award nominations and many good reviews; it had to vie in the Oscar and box-office races with other World War II fare, including *Saving Private Ryan*.

The New World is less expensive (at \$40-million) than The Thin Red Line, but a considerably harder sell. Malick's uncompromising style is one reason. And aside from the animated Pocahontas, released by Disney in 1995, it is unlikely that there's ever been a swell of demand for films set in Jamestown some 400 years ago.

As a deeply committed filmmaker with a taste for epic formats and correspondingly high budgets, Malick needs his movies to reach a wide audience. That makes his insistence on personal privacy — at the cost of rapport with actual and potential fans — all the more striking.

Yet it is clear that Malick's commitment to cinema has little to do with crafting entertainment for the millions. In addition to The New World, he has directed only three features: Badlands, a 1973 melodrama about serial killers on the road; Days of Heaven, a melancholy romance released in 1978; and The Thin Red Line, based on James Jones's eponymous 1962 novel. Each contains Malick's distinctive trademarks: sumptuous images of the natural world, a great deal of voice-over monologue, and an unashamed interest in such grand issues as the purpose of life and the meaning (if any) of death. Pay attention to the resonant layers of image, word, sound, and music that weave through these movies, and you'd think you were communing with a philosopher.

You are.

Although biographical details about Malick are as hard to come by as his photo, some aspects of his personal and intellectual history have made it into the public record. They are, to put it mildly, not typical of movie directors.

Born in Texas in 1943, he earned a philosophy degree at Harvard College, graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1965. His honors thesis, on Heidegger's theory of knowledge, was overseen by Stanley Cavell, whose books on cinema (including The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, his major theoretical work) are the most influential by any American philosopher.

Malick went to the University of Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship,

which he chose not to complete, reportedly because his wish to trace conceptions of "world" in Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein didn't seem "philosophical" enough to his Oxford supervisor. Back in the United States, Malick taught philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and wrote articles for Newsweek, The New Yorker, and Life.

Malick reached a crossroads in 1969, publishing a significant philosophical book — a translation of Heidegger's essay *The Essence of Reasons* — and being accepted by the American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Film Studies, then in its first year. He decided to enroll, earning his M.F.A. there and making such helpful movie-world contacts as Jack Nicholson and the agent Mike Medavoy, who found freelance script-doctoring work for him.

After starting his directorial career with *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, both of which fared better with critics than at the box office, Malick vanished from public view for some 20 years (living in Paris and Texas, by some accounts) before re-emerging to make *The Thin Red Line* in the late 1990s. With that movie and now *The New World*, he stands as a last Mohican of the personal-epic mode pioneered in the 1970s by the likes of Francis Ford Coppola (*Apocalypse Now*) and Michael Cimino (*The Deer Hunter*), who had the resourcefulness to obtain — and the audacity to risk — many millions of other people's dollars on highly intuitive, even eccentric visions.

At first glance, it appears that Malick made a comprehensive career decision when he chose film school over philosophy. But opting for the movies didn't mean forgetting his scholarly pursuits. Malick's intensely idiosyncratic pictures are philosophical to their bones, exploring an ambitious set of ideas in terms at once cinematically concrete and intellectually abstract.

The New World is no exception. It's being promoted as a romance ("First and foremost we've created a love story," the producer, Sarah Green, told a reporter) and as an "elegy" and "celebration" of the American past, to quote New Line's publicity. Yet while the film does portray Smith and Pocahontas as lovers, its leisurely

pace and discontinuous style work against the emotional impact that most romantic movies strive for. As history it's even more dubious, starting with the fact that — as most historians agree — Pocahontas and Smith weren't lovers at all, just a friendly couple. The "romance" apparently derived from Smith's tendency to write about his adventures in exaggerated, self-aggrandizing terms.

If neither conventional love-story passion nor historical veracity interested Malick, why has he been so committed to this particular subject since the late 1970s, when he started on the screenplay? And why has he filmed it with such meticulous attention to detail, shooting for months on authentic-looking locations with few artificial lights and almost none of the digital enhancement common in movies today?

The answers lie in Malick's philosophy. He's fascinated with the world of nature, and he sees the personalities and behaviors of his characters as phenomena no less "natural" than the environments surrounding them. *The New World* affords him a perfect opportunity to examine contrasts between the notion of a timeless harmony with nature, represented by American Indian society, and the post-Enlightenment ideal of taming and harnessing nature to accomplish humanly determined goals, as the English colonists do.

Malick doesn't just ponder the contradiction between harmonizing with and prevailing over nature. He explores it within the very fabric of his film, testing whether cinema itself can function as an organic part of the natural world. He thus questions the widely held assumption that film's essential purpose is to capture and record reality (therefore "dominating" nature) rather than to blend with reality in a seamless, harmonious whole.

That assumption has been questioned by film theorists, including the hugely influential French critic André Bazin, who argued in the 1940s that material objects are physically linked with their photographed images by the particles of light that travel between them when a picture is taken. That doesn't apply to computer-driven techniques, of course, and it's revealing that Malick bucks the contemporary trend toward heavy use of digitally manipulated

imagery (employed in documentaries like *March of the Penguins* as well as fantasy and sci-fi films) by using it only once in *The New World* — to show a Carolina parakeet that couldn't be filmed "live" because its species is now extinct.

Malick also shies away from tripods, Steadicams, and other devices that give conventional movies a synthetic visual stability. He prefers hand-held cameras affected by the moment-to-moment jolts and wobbles of actual, spontaneous movement through real-world space. He even took the unusual step of shooting some *New World* sequences on 65mm film, which is costly but provides a wider surface and therefore a crisper, richer image than standard 35mm stock.

That might seem a mere technical detail, but it's another sign of Malick's effort to unify the natural and the cinematic — an effort with an almost mystical ring, intimating that an extra-large layer of film emulsion might absorb not just the light but also the mysterious essence of people, places, and things. Bazin, who saw photographic "tracings" as clues to hidden spiritual realities, would surely be cheering Malick on.

Techniques like those mark Malick as a sort of cinematic alchemist, hoping to unveil occluded connections between physical and metaphysical realms. Related to this is his great affection for voice-overs, from the drawling narrations of *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* to the intricate webs of internal monologue woven through the soundtracks of *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*.

Conventional movies use voice-overs to explain plot events or reveal the psychology of characters. Malick employs them for philosophical purposes, implying that language is the bedrock of all thought and activity. "Everyday language is a part of the human organism," wrote Wittgenstein in 1921, "and is no less complicated than it." Malick makes an aesthetically powerful case for that contention in every one of his films, subordinating the social dimensions of dramatic dialogue to the meditative dimensions of unspoken inner speech.

Besides being a philosopher and (arguably) an alchemist of film, Malick might be called a theologian as well. His films incorporate a broadly pantheistic vision in which a sort of divine spirit suffuses the ordered, integrated whole that our limited mentalities divide into natural and human domains.

Malick is curious about the origins as well as the attributes of that whole, and on many levels *The New World* is a cinematic creation story, using an American legend to explore the idea that all stages of existence — birth, growth, maturity, death — are entwined with one another in cultural histories and individual lives. Even the music score expresses this: The film's first shots are accompanied by a passage from Wagner's overture to *Das Rheingold*, wherein the ripples and ridges of a single minimalist-style chord conjure up the gradual journey from a river's dark, primordial depths to the sunlit, smoothly flowing surface reflecting the sweeping realms above.

In some respects, Malick is a dualist and a skeptic, wondering if forces of creation and destruction are forever battling each other in the world — if we humans are subject to "not one power but two," as the character named Private Witt in *The Thin Red Line* phrases it. Both of Malick's big-scale sagas tell of violent, sometimes deadly struggle involving denizens of an Eden-like land and "civilized" interlopers with utterly different agendas.

In the end, though, these epics reflect an optimistic belief (with an almost gnostic tinge) that the cosmos is ultimately harmonious, in the all-embracing realm of spirit if not the circumscribed one of materiality. "Darkness and light, strife and love," muses Witt, "are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh, my soul ... look out through my eyes. Look at the things you made, all things shining." *The New World* again suggests that all things, properly perceived, partake of cosmic harmony — as when a matronly English guardian exhorts Pocahontas to face life's tribulations like a tree, always reaching for the light even after vital branches have been stripped away.

In the works of most filmmakers, the sorts of issues I've been discussing would be subtexts and undertones, if they were present

at all. But in Malick's work they are the primary text, and moviegoers looking for easier pleasures — tight plotting, strong psychology, pithy dialogue — are in for disappointment.

The noncommercial slant and deeply personal preoccupations of Malick's cinema make him hard (and maybe undesirable) to imitate. Although he has been a filmmaker for more than three decades, his only real disciple is the relatively little-known David Gordon Green, whose *George Washington* (2000) and *Undertow* (2004) are openly influenced by Malick's poetic imagery and leisurely, allusive storytelling.

That means that Malick's main legacy, aside from his own pictures, may be less as an "influence" than as an increasingly active producer of movies directed by others. In the eventful year of 2004 he produced both *Undertow* and Hans Petter Moland's drama *The Beautiful Country*, about a Vietnamese man searching for his American father. His current producing projects include Michael Apted's historical thriller *Amazing Grace*, about an English abolitionist in the 18th century; Carlos Carrera's drama *The Marfa Lights*, about two young men exploring a possibly paranormal phenomenon; and Robert Redford's action movie *Aloft*, based on Alan Tennant's book about adventurers tracking a peregrine falcon.

That is a busy schedule, proving that if Malick's movie-directing pace hasn't exactly been fiery (four features in 32 years) it's just because he likes operating at his own deliberate speed. Like a handful of other radically original American filmmakers, from the prolific Robert Altman to the decidedly unprolific Stanley Kubrick — perhaps the figure Malick resembles most — he has managed to play the film industry's game (telling stories with appealing stars) just cooperatively enough to pay for a (very limited) number of (extremely risky) productions that he finds truly, philosophically compelling.

The bottom line is that, from all appearances, intellectual interests have far more importance for Malick than practical considerations of career momentum and Hollywood street cred. While the complexities and conundrums of his work cannot be neatly

clarified with quotations from his favorite thinkers, Wittgenstein's observation that "the world and life are one" could be his guiding motto. Like that philosopher, Malick is concerned less with the psychological self (crucial to conventional fiction) than with the "philosophical self," defined by Wittgenstein as "the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world — not a part of it."

Few film directors give much thought to where the limit of the world might lie. Malick makes movies about it.

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