Learning to See: Wittgenstein and Perception in Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line

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Abstract

This paper reflects on Ludwig Wittgenstein's influence on the work of filmmaker Terrence Malick. After calling attention to the connection between the American director and the Austrian philosopher, I note central components of Wittgenstein's philosophical aims, particularly highlighting his comments on "aspect change," his methodology of difficulty, and his linking of the ethical and aesthetic as "transcendental." With these insights in hand, and following recent scholarship on Malick's cinematic ethics, the paper examines Malick's 1998 film *The Thin Red Line* as an exemplary case for considering Malick as a filmmaker fundamentally concerned with ways of *seeing* the world. The analysis of this theme in the film centers on the alternative perspectives of Sergeant Welsh and Private Witt. In closing, this paper examines the ethical ends of these opposing visions and the way Malick's depiction of them allows one to see them *as* perspectives.

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Introduction

Scholarly attention to the films of Terrence Malick is replete with analyses of Malick's philosophical influences and style.[1] Many of these reflections tend to center the importance of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger for the Texas-based filmmaker. This attention is well earned: Malick studied Heidegger as an undergraduate philosophy concentrator at Harvard and as a graduate student at Oxford before translating Heidegger's *Vom Wesen des Grundes* in 1969.[2] Since Malick's former teacher, Stanley Cavell, observed these elements in his pupil, offering a Heideggerian "fragmentary reading" of Malick's *Days of Heaven*,[3] scholars studying the artist's work have regarded the philosophical Malick as primarily a Heideggerian filmmaker.[4] Such readings are often quite generative and reveal a great philosophical depth at the heart of Malick's filmmaking. I do not question the merit of these interpretations but will instead offer an analysis of Malick—with particular attention to *The Thin Red Line*—which moves Heidegger out of focus to better make out the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein on the American filmmaker. By noting Malick's early interest in Wittgenstein, some aspects of his filmmaking become salient and available for reflection which are occluded when Heidegger dominates the hermeneutical frame.

This article launches its investigation of Malick from the assumption that Wittgenstein offers a uniquely insightful vantage with which to examine the

idiosyncratic sense of *attention* to the world Malick has developed in his films. The term "world" was the focus of Malick's never-completed dissertation—examining Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger—under Gilbert Ryle at Oxford. Malick's "Translator's Introduction" to Heidegger's *The Essence of Reasons* suggests "world" be understood as "a pervasive interpretation or point of view which we bring to the things" in our experience.[5] This language is misleading, however, as "interpretation" makes us think that another perspective is available to us. World, for Heidegger, is not the totality of what exists or the individually or socially determined perspectives and interpretations we bring to bear on what does exist. Rather, Malick understands Heidegger's world as our frame of intelligibility for understanding the facts and things which make up our reality, "that which gives them measure and purpose and validity in our schemes."[6] It is not mere personal or cultural interpretation but the background conditions of thought and experience that allow for anything to come to awareness and significance for us at all.

For Malick, Heidegger's term world is related to the later Wittgenstein's use of the phrase "forms of life."[7] Like "world," the forms of life in which we participate—including all we say and do—are the "bedrock" that marks our limit of explanation.[8] We can only make sense of experience, or have experiences at all, from within our frame of meaning available to us within the forms of life we inhabit. Heidegger's "world" and Wittgenstein's "forms of life" are difficult concepts, existing not as propositions that correspond to states of affairs, as statements *about*

things and facts,[9] but as general concepts for understanding how we—as *Dasein* for Heidegger and language users for Wittgenstein—can make meaningful sense of our circumstances and experiences. These concepts elucidate the limiting and framing ground upon which facts about the world are plotted as well as the very means by and in which those facts can be known. This discussion of Malick's intended topic of a dissertation in the "Translator's Introduction" offers a glimpse into his interest in the very boundaries and conditions of intelligibility.

Besides the direct reference to Wittgenstein in his introduction, Malick weighs the accusations of "nonsense" leveled against Heidegger, one of the central concepts of the early Wittgenstein.[10] In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein famously distinguished between propositions—understood as pictures of a state of affairs in the world, or statements about what is the case—and what he called nonsense (*unsinn*). While there is a great deal of scholarly debate over the status of nonsense,[11] we should note that Wittgenstein saw his own work in the *Tractatus* not as standard propositions but as "elucidations" to be utilized and overcome.[12] Wittgenstein's elucidations of the logical structure of language—communicated via these pseudo-propositions which seek to show the logic of facts—resonate with what Malick sees in Heidegger. Heidegger, as some of his critics assert, is not speaking mere nonsense and is uninterested in "making a case."[13] In Malick's view, Heidegger is engaged in a similar project of elucidation rather than theory building. Malick sees both philosophers as concerned with

rendering conspicuous the ever-present yet overlooked ways in which anything is intelligible at all. Following a hermeneutic style he saw modelled in Cavell,[14] Malick's reading of Heidegger is shaped by his understanding of Wittgenstein.

My intention in setting the sole published piece of Malick's philosophical writing before our attention is not to read Malick himself as offering a code for unlocking the Wittgensteinian mysteries of his films. I do not intend to slip on what Simon Critchley noted as the "hermeneutic banana skin" of forcing Malick into a philosophical outfit for which he is ill-suited.[15] There is no "philosophical master text"[16] or Wittgensteinian theory with which I will mine the depths of *The Thin Red Line*. Attending to Wittgenstein's concepts as "theories" which Malick takes up would mean moving too quickly near Critchley's slippery floor sign as well as risking our footing with Wittgenstein himself, for whom philosophical reflections can be understood as a practice or a method rather than as theses or a body of doctrine. Wittgenstein claimed to offer no theories. "Philosophy," he wrote, "is not a body of doctrine but an activity."[17] He considered theorizing about the world the wrong sort of task with which philosophers too often became confused. Rather, he sought to demonstrate a way of approaching life and its seemingly intractable questions. Philosophy, then, is an activity that transforms the way we see and pay attention to the world by clarifying our confusions about it and elucidating the existence of conditions that make experience possible. His goal, explicitly stated in

the penultimate lines of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, was to get his readers to "see the world aright."[18]

Below, I will show that Malick is similarly concerned with a project of training one's way of paying attention and seeing the world. After noting how Malick resonates with Wittgenstein, this article reads Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) as an exemplary case for considering Malick as a filmmaker fundamentally concerned with ways of *seeing* the world. Much of the analysis of this theme in the film centers on the alternative perspectives of Sergeant Welsh and Private Witt. Malick's depiction of these opposing visions, and their ethical implications, allows his viewers to see them *as* perspectives and, thus, to more clearly see their own ways of attending.

Wittgenstein and Malick on Seeing

While Wittgenstein's thinking evolved during his life, this question of cultivating a mode of attention and prompting his readers to see the world in a different way remained one of his central concerns. If philosophy is an activity that "consists essentially of elucidations,"[19] then it must be in the service of rendering our language, our world, ourselves, and other perspicuous.[20] This is why Wittgenstein understood philosophy as not simply a work of clarification but "more a working on oneself."[21] Before Wittgenstein can get his reader to notice the right things in

the right way, he works to denaturalize their ways of paying attention. He wants to show his readers how they see the world from within a form of life and according to a certain picture, which casts experience in a certain hue. In other words, we—i.e., language users—notice certain things rather than others and notice these things in ways particular to our forms of life. Wittgenstein explicitly thematizes this idea, writing, "I observe a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness in another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience "noticing an aspect."[22] He uses the famous example of a drawing that can be seen as either a rabbit or a duck, depending on what and how one notices.[23] In identifying this feature of perception, Wittgenstein notes a central paradox, "The expression of a change of aspect is an expression of a *new* perception and, at the same time, an expression of an unchanged perception."[24] No new parts are perceived, but each part is perceived differently. The change in one's way of seeing is instantaneous and cannot quite properly be referred to as an interpretation.[25] One simply sees the duck and then, in a flash, the rabbit appears. Wittgenstein is here concerned with the ways certain features become salient, "the lighting up of an aspect,"[26] in such a way as to cause a change in how one organizes one's perception of the whole. The sum total of the parts of the object of perception does not change, yet a new whole is seen.

Philosophers interested in film have begun to articulate the importance of Wittgenstein's work on "seeing aspects" for discussions of cinema. For instance,

Kate Rennebohm, in an argument about Wittgenstein's own scattered comments on the effect that cinematic experience has on contemporary ways of thinking, draws a direct link between Wittgenstein's ethics, aspect change, and the possibilities of film.[27] As the goal of Wittgenstein's philosophy was to bring about a transformation in seeing the world, his study of aspect-change can be seen as a kind of micro-investigation into the units of perception alteration. By placing the inconspicuous instance of changing the way one sees something as simple as a hastily written grapheme or a drawing which might be a duck or a rabbit, Wittgenstein reveals the psychological and philosophical complexities of the simplest acts of perception. If, as Rennebohm observes, clarification "is an ethical end in itself,"[28] then developing a description of this phenomenon of noticing is a deeply ethical task. Similarly, filmmaking, which both prompts one to notice in a different way and depicts richly divergent ways of "seeing-as," can foster a shift in attention. Filmmakers like Malick, who encourage this sort of attentional intensity, clarity, and agility, push their audiences toward seeing the world anew where parts are transformed in the light of a greater whole.

Wittgenstein is also interested in how ethical considerations are subject to a similar kind of seeing-as. The unity between the aesthetic and the ethical is a central theme in his writings, most potently expressed in the *Tractatus* when he writes, "Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same."[29] For Wittgenstein ethics and aesthetics, and value in general, are beyond mere propositional facts about states of

affairs within the world and are thus "transcendental."[30] The essential point to glean from this insight for our purposes is to see that to change the way one sees the world—the result of a kind of "work on oneself"—is both an aesthetic and ethical alteration. The early Wittgenstein sought to show how value lies in the way we take up a stance toward the world of facts. Thus, changing one's way of seeing the world is the result of aesthetic and ethical insight.

One of the links between Wittgenstein and Malick is that they both see this task of changing one's vision as seriously arduous. Following resolute readings of Wittgenstein,[31] Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé advances a picture of the philosopher as "conscripting readers into a course of indirect interpretive training."[32] Uninterested in stating theories about the world or offering neat philosophical answers, Wittgenstein's task is largely about cultivating a disposition, or mode of attention, in his readers. According to this reading, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, famously cryptic and challenging, is difficult on two distinct levels. First, the literary, artistic, and formal features of the text presents a distinctive challenge to its readers. Wittgenstein's prose and organization of the Tractarian propositions, proceeding like a series of rungs on a ladder and full of seemingly simple language that reveals complicated depths, demands a certain kind of attention from the viewer. Reaching clarity is a matter of struggle. Yet this is in service to a higher clarity. Wittgenstein "call[s] on attentive readers to put our own moral imagination to the task of figuring out how to respond to the text's initial provocation by setting ourselves to the work

of trying to rise to its strenuous demand that we go on to transform our ways of seeing, living, and using language."[33] The formal difficulty works in tandem with the difficult content to encourage a deeper shift in one's disposition and entire way of seeing one's world and experience. By wrestling with his language, readers can pass through the anteroom of Wittgenstein's thought before coming face-to-face with an awareness of their own confused and limited ways of seeing the world.

Like Wittgenstein's philosophical writings, Malick's films demand something of their viewers and train them to see the world anew. Spotting the grandeur in the mundane and majestic, Malick forces his audience to notice in a certain way and with a significant intensity. He is unafraid of revealing the beautiful glory or the terrible squalor of life, human or otherwise. The intimacy of the seemingly just-for-you, whispering voice-overs; the cinematic eye revealing the natural world in all its strangeness; and the unconventional narrative structures are all used to demand and redirect the attention of Malick's audience.

Robert Pippin has noted how Malick's *The Thin Red Line* is particularly successful in cultivating a way of seeing. He writes that in this film, Malick "forces our attention" onto certain scenes and natural objects while disrupting our narrative expectations with reflective voice-overs.[34] Malick's unique cinematic language is powerfully on display here to shape the ways his viewers see. For instance, just prior to the first battle scene of the film, two soldiers are sent up the hill to try to find the until-then silent enemy. While their comrades stay low in the tall grass

further down the hill, the timid soldiers must be goaded by several enthusiastic, silent hand-motions from Second Lieutenant Whyte, played by Jared Leto, to be encouraged farther ahead of the rest of the battalion. Shortly after they begin their low-walking maneuver, three successive pings rattle off and their bodies drop. Up until then, we could only hear the soldiers breathing and the sounds of the insects and birds. As a binocular-onlooking Captain and nearby junior commissioned officer are visibly shaken, but before chaos ensues, calm music is layered over the natural sounds. Slowly, the sounds of the animals fade out and the music grows far more ominous. Only then does the killing begin with fury.

In the same scene, Malick plays with the lighting to accent and heighten the tension of the slow advance of Charlie Company. Just after these first two soldiers are killed and the music begins, Malick frames a wide shot of the shimmering, tall grass as a slow-moving sun comes out from behind the clouds. Audiences might only then realize that it had been slightly cloudy until this chromatic revelation of brilliant golden and green stalks appears in full focus. Only after the sun has emerged are viewers pulled to a different experience of the film as the anxiety-inducing climb gives way to the more gruesome and bedlam-filled horrors of war. While audiences and soldiers alike have drowned out the sounds of the animals, the sun's emergence at that moment between quiet and pandemonium makes apparent that the natural world will not let either set of us go. It reminds us of nature's indifference to human affairs. Throughout the film, Malick works on the way we

see the natural world by playing with these dual themes of the destruction of nature and its self-assertion despite our mistreatment. So, while human attention can lose awareness of the reality of the natural world, we are still beholden to it.[35]

In addition to sound and lighting effects, Malick's shot selection utilizes the visual medium's potential to capture the way human attention produces a certain perspective of nature. Some soldiers lying in the grass are confronted with unfamiliar and beautiful plant life while others must make room for a dangerous looking snake. As the soldiers of Charlie company walk through the jungle, the camera mostly tracks them at eye-level. Moving with the soldiers, the camera is embedded in the natural scenery offering viewers a subjective immersion in the perspective of the combatants. Viewers move with the marches through the jungles, fields, hills, and swamps as leaves and branches impede the lens just as they do the soldiers. Malick takes us on a walk amidst the soldiers and does not use dramatic aerial shots of these scenes, as if refusing to give them some grander significance. He occasionally positions the camera at a low-angle into the trees and hills, allowing us to consider the terrain's sublimity and indifference to the machinations of war. However, this is only temporary as even the plants and trees soon become targets of the violence. During one fog-covered battle, a particularly aggressive and muscular soldier—who earlier in the film had screamed at the door of the boat, demanding to be let out to kill—seems to shoot at the trees themselves. While we could read this as fear at an assault from soldiers overhead in the jungle canopy, we

could more likely say that the jungle itself has become an object for destruction amidst the mayhem of killing.

The set pieces of the film also cultivate an attentional agility between destruction of and indifference on behalf of the natural world. After a peaceful opening sequence in a Melanesian village, our first indication of war—other than two seemingly gentle and peaceful AWOL American soldiers—is the arrival of an American patrol boat. After the AWOL soldiers run from the sight of the boat, the next shot is of a far larger warship billowing black smoke and standing out amidst the natural imagery of island mountains, sea, and sky. After the first ten minutes of the film set in what appears a kind of beachside paradise of huts and wooden canoes complete with *a capella* Christian hymns, viewers are snapped to an attention of the realities of the war through this image of industrial power.

We can note that the very intention of the American soldiers' campaign is to take over and utilize the airfield the Japanese had built on the island. The industry of human death drives euphemistic development that subordinates and destroys the natural world around it. But Malick's blunt depiction of the human view of the island can be seen as a more brutal and extreme depiction of an attitude towards nature embedded in the practices of our daily forms of human life. An emphasis on consumption, calculation, and the thoughtless use of resources and tools are points we might expect from a Heideggerian reading of the film. But we should observe that Malick, like Wittgenstein, is a skilful persuader and pedagogue using analogy

and image to train others to see human life anew. Here, as the colonial project of war invades the space of what is seen as an inert world of insignificance to human affairs, Malick reveals the strangeness of how we pay attention and invites us into an alternative way to notice. Through his skillful use of sound, lighting, and composition as well as an attention to human views of nature, something present in all his other films, Malick reconfigures our way of seeing. Through these techniques, he calls into question what it is in our human lens that tends towards such a propensity to subjugate and dominate.

While I will discuss the content of the voice-overs below in an analysis of the film's plot and dialogue, it is worth noting that the technique of voice-over is a Malick trademark in attention training. Characters in *The Thin Red Line* offer personal, spiritual, and philosophical narration over the shots of the island and the humans living and fighting there. Sometimes Malick harmonizes the manner and content of the narration with what is in the camera's lens. At other times he juxtaposes the intensity of the sequences with the calm and pensive tone of the reflecting voice. Malick is always calling his viewers more deeply into the world of the film, using the whispered and philosophical voice-overs as reasons for those watching to lean forward to focus.

This sort of work on the attention of his audience is part of the reason some have noticed a particular mode of "cinematic ethics" in Malick's films.[36] Moving beyond debates about if and how film can do philosophy, Robert Sinnerbrink has

argued that Malick's films can best be seen as art interested in "evoking ethical experience, taken in an expansive sense."[37] Sinnerbrink's account, though, is not interested in traditional ethical questions but is a kind of metaethical description of the way cinematic ethics "proceeds via the aesthetic experience, emotional engagement, and cognitive understanding that cinema so richly provides."[38] We might say that, due to the medium, Malick films work on one's vision in a more robust sense than explicitly philosophical or ethical writings. Both Wittgenstein and Malick seem aware of the limitations of traditional philosophical writing to promote ethical transformation. Wittgenstein played with the form of philosophical reflection—often drawing pictures, writing aphoristically, and refusing argument in favor of thought experiments; Malick left academic philosophy and opted for a filmic approach which could more powerfully knead his viewers' vision in a certain direction.

Malick demands and directs his audience's attention with considerable potency and skill, inviting viewers into an ethical experience of the kind described by Wittgenstein.[39] By engrossing viewers in the cinematic worlds he creates, Malick pulls one's attention away from oneself and onto scenes which call into question dominant ways of seeing the world around us. Bringing us face-to-face with the horrors of war and soldiers asking philosophical questions of a world charged with the beauty and terror of sublimity, Malick's cinematic language

succeeds by immersing his audiences in the often paradoxical subjective experiences of his characters.

With this framing, we can see how Malick's idiosyncratic style works on his audience's attention in at least two key ways. First, Malick is concerned with attention understood as total focus. The weight and difficulty of *The Thin Red Line*, in particular, demands complete engrossment. This is not a film to be watched with a distracted mind. Pippin observes the challenge of placing the voices of the narrators, describing the attribution of the philosophical commentary that peppers the film as "uniquely disorienting."[40] This confusion plagues popular and scholarly audiences alike[41] and can only be remedied through repeated viewings and pure focus. For Malick, there is a moral dimension to this clear-eyed, single-minded attention. We might say that paying attention is a good in itself. The cultivation of total focus, like the working through of difficulty for Wittgenstein, is an ethical task.

Second, as Pippin reminds us, the attention Malick cultivates points to particular objects in our field of experience allowing certain aspects to, as Wittgenstein would say, light up. Even in the midst of the brutality of combat, for imstance, Charlie Company soldiers are often distracted by the natural world around them. Grass shimmering in the wind, foreign flora encountered for the first time, or snakes slithering across the battlefield all demand notice. On these occasions, the soldiers' attention is revealed to be malleable and directable away

from the carnage that surrounds them. The meditative voiceovers also often contrast with the scenes which they overlay, allowing for unexpected features to "light up," in Wittgenstein's terminology. Additionally, Malick disrupts the expectations that viewers bring to the genre of Hollywood war films. Pippin writes that "genre conventions create expectations and suggest explanations that are then undermined, refused, left open, made to seem irrelevant, made mysterious, or even ironized."[42] Malick rejects stale genre scripts, recognizing the fluidity required to tell the kind of war story in which he is interested. Despite being a star-studded war film, *The Thin Red Line* troubles popular ways of paying attention to narrative, seemingly encouraging a "sense of being lost" in the film.[43] Who is speaking? Where are the shots coming from? Who are the heroes? Is this loss of life for the greater good? Playing on the narrative expectations of popular audiences, Malick pushes the genre to new places and offers a masterclass in the training of attention of both kinds.

The Thin Red Line of Perception

What is in a name? Malick's titles are often helpful in noting the attentional posture he hopes his audience will take—consider briefly how the titles *A Hidden Life*, *The New World*, and *The Tree of Life* each capture a broad yet core feature of these films, respectively. Priming his viewers to notice certain aspects of the film, Malick can better guide their seeing along the way. His 2019 *A Hidden Life*, for instance,

tells the story of Austrian farmer Franz Jägerstätter's refusal to heed his conscription into the Nazi army during WWII.[44] Jägerstätter's moral stand is seen by others as a pointless action, unable to have any actual effect. In trying to convince him to betray his conscience, the judge in charge of sentencing Jägerstätter asks him, "Do you imagine that anything you do will change the course of this war? That anyone outside this court will ever hear of you? No one will be changed. The world will go on as before. You'll vanish." A hidden life indeed.

Named after the 1962 James Jones novel upon which it is based, however, the meaning of the title *The Thin Red Line* is relatively little discussed. Pippin claims the book title is "about the 'thin red line' between life and death."[45] Yet the two epigraphs that open the book read:

> "Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that,
> An' Tommy, 'ow's your soul?
> But it's 'Thin red line of 'eroes,'
> When the drums begin to roll—
> —KIPLING
>
> There's only a thin red line between the sane and the mad.
> —OLD MIDDLEWESTERN SAYING"[46]

It is unsurprising that Malick would leave the novel's title in place, but we are left to wonder if he shares the same intentions as Jones. Is Malick pointing his audience's eye to the insanity of war or its heroic, ironic, and nationalist nature?[47] Is Malick offering a title card priming his viewers to reflect on mortality like Pippin

seems to think? Malick's style means the title remains ambiguous and underdetermined.

The interpretation this essay advances is that the eponymous thin red line is best understood as a line of perception. While the context of the film certainly allows one to understand the line as that which separates life and death or sanity and madness, by recalling our Wittgensteinian observations about the way in which "aspect seeing" means shifting one's understanding of the whole, we can justifiably say that the film is primarily structured around oppositions in seeing the world. The characters offer opposing perspectives on life, death, valor, care for one's comrades, respect for one's enemies, piety towards human meaning systems, and a host of other themes. Malick draws lines in the sand along which characters group on one side or the other. The way in which one organizes one's experience, the way one pays attention, comes to determine the meaning one ascribes to the whole. Here, the sum parts of the world—the totality of facts[48]—remain the same yet are cast in strikingly different hues depending on the stance one takes toward these facts.

Interpreters of *The Thin Red Line* like Critchley and Pippin have noted how the film is organized around central character relationships composed of pairs with opposing ways of seeing things. Critchley takes the three primary relationships to be between (1) Colonel Tall and Captain Staros, (2) Private Bell and his wife Marty, and (3) Sergeant Welsh and Private Witt, with each relationship ordered around

debates over loyalty, love, and truth, respectively. Pippin highlights the first and third of these pairs. My take on these readings sees the relational pairs as matters concerning what and how one notices; the debates in question are a matter of which aspects are salient for the characters in question. To describe this, I will focus on the relationship between Welsh, played by Sean Penn, and Witt, portrayed by Jim Caviezel. It is in this dynamic that Malick offers the clearest articulation of difference in attentional disposition.

We are first introduced to the relationship between these characters when Witt is reunited with Charlie Company after his time AWOL in a Melanesian village. Welsh, First Sergeant of C-Company, is responsible for disciplining Witt. Their discussion, which covers Witt's foolishness and his punishment of having to be a stretcher-bearer in the upcoming campaign, culminates with Welsh telling Witt, "There ain't no world but this one." Witt disagrees saying that he has "seen another world," although, "sometimes I think it was just my imagination." The scene ends with Welsh conceding, "Well, then you've seen things I never will." Instead of fully unpacking this scene, I would simply like to note that the matter of disagreement between this primary pairing of the film is centrally about a way to see. The two clearly know each other well and have served together for some time. The things that make up their experience are the same. Yet, their takes on these facts, their ways of approaching them, are at such odds that they truly seem to be

participating in different worlds. They occupy different sides of a thin line, dictating their perception of their experience.

Shortly after this scene, While Witt is in the brig, one of Witt's fellow soldiers tells him that Sergeant Welsh "hates [Witt] worse than poison." Witt responds by saying "I've never felt he hated me. Because I don't hate him." Witt's vision of the world mirrors his own experience of it. He looks out and is unable to see any hate from Welsh because Witt himself bears no hate for his sergeant. Witt does not see what his fellow soldier sees because he is not tuned to notice in that way. Right after this exchange Witt lights a match and says "I love Charlie Company. They're my people." He stares at the match and seems to wonder at the flame. He loves his comrades and finds the world to be full of meaning and significance. Welsh, though, seems blocked from such a vision.

This theme of seeing the world recurs in a later conversation between the two. After C-Company has successfully taken the ridge for which they fought, Witt and Welsh sit across from one another on the grass. Witt, despite having been restricted to a medical role prior to the frontal assault of the Japanese position atop the hill, had asked to be allowed to fight beside his comrades. Both he and Welsh had performed acts of bravery in the battle, although seemingly operating out of different motivations. In this scene in the calm of twilight after the battle, Witt only says one word while Welsh both predicts Witt's death and waxes philosophical about the meaninglessness of virtue amidst the "madness" of war. He says,

> If you were smart, you'd take care of yourself. There's nothing you can do for anybody else. You're just running into a burning house where nobody can be saved. What difference do you think you can make? One single man in all this madness. If you die, it's gonna be for nothing. There's not some other world out there where everything's gonna be okay. There's just this one. Just this rock.

While earlier Witt was willing to defend his vision of the world, he here sits quietly and listens with a half-smile to Welsh's comments on the meaninglessness of virtue. We might think that it is as if, on the other side of the battle, Witt no longer feels the need to convince others of his way of seeing. He glances up to the night sky before the scene cuts to another twilight image of wild dogs feasting on fallen soldiers.

On a closer look at the final lines of this speech, we might observe that Witt and Welsh may not be as far apart as at first thought. The "world" that Witt had earlier said he had seen is not necessarily "some other world *out there"* (emphasis mine). This is not some metaphysical world of pure forms existing ideally or in the heavens. Witt agrees with Welsh that they do in fact share "this rock."[49] The difference between the two is a matter of their views of that rock. The difference between ways of seeing—in a Wittgensteinian vein that recognizes the ability to "say" facts about the world but only the ability to nonsensically "show" the structure of these facts and the shades in which they are cast—cannot actually be articulated by Witt, so he opts for silence. The two share a rock, but the significance

of this fact is hued in vastly different lights to the two of them and is, in some sense, unspeakable.

This perspective is captured succinctly by a voiceover from Private Train following the final conversation between Welsh and Witt, a scene in which Welsh tells Witt he is like a "magician" for "believing in the beautiful light," and Witt responds to his sergeant that he still sees a "spark" in Welsh. In the voiceover following this conversation, Train says, "One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. And death's got the final word. It's laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory. Feels something smiling through him." This speech is accompanied by images of Welsh walking through the campsite at sundown, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, looking at his comrades. While Witt is shown to be sleeping peacefully, the scene closes with Welsh observing two soldiers unsuccessfully stomping on a campfire; the scene darkens, suggesting it has gotten later, yet the fire remains impervious to the stomps.

The disagreement between the two is not factual in nature. They are not disputing certain empirical facts about the world. This is not a debate which could be resolved with more evidence. Witt cannot convince Welsh of his position as if he were making a case for something verifiable. Their difference, as one of seeing things differently, is not something that can be resolved through appeals to proof. Unresolvable through the kind of debate that kicked off their on-screen relationship,

their difference in perception "run[s] against the boundaries of language."[50] How the two notice within their shared field of experience, how they see the world, distinguishes each from the other. They can each agree on certain empirical facts—that men are dying and that there is a great deal of pain in war—but these mean vastly different things to each. It is the reason one sees "unanswered pain" and the other sees the "glory."

The Ethics of The Other World

Referring to the film's "subjectivised version of this vision of two worlds," Leo Bursani and Ulysse Dutoit caution against a celebration of a world "soaked in blood" "as beautiful and good."[51] They are right to name this naive interpretation and dismiss a romanticized understanding of the perspectival shifts that Malick aims to show. I am not suggesting that Witt is a simple optimist who sees the good in everything and cannot be bothered by the brutality of war. And I am not saying that Malick uses Witt's character to advance some simple moral that explains the film. No character can be said to speak for Malick, and, if they did, they would not have a reductive take about the "beautiful and good." This is a war film, and Malick offers us no rose-colored glasses or a sunny account of the ability to transcend one's world or escape the brutality of life.

Witt himself is far from a cheery idealist who can only see the bright side of life. His strength as a character lies in his ability to see that the "glory" does not crowd out a clear view of the "pain." This way of seeing gives Witt an ethical vantage which his comrades seem to lack. During C-Company's initial assault of Hill 210, Sergeant Keck, in a short but powerful performance by Woody Harrelson, accidentally pulls the pin on his grenade while it is still stuck in his belt, "a fucking recruit trick to pull." Before the grenade goes off, Keck throws himself up against the embankment where he and several other soldiers have sought cover from the machine gun fire coming from up the hill. As he realizes what has happened, he tells Private First Class Doll, "You write my old lady. You tell her… I want her to know I died like a man." Doll, trying to keep Keck from realizing the cost of his mistake, responds, "Nobody's gonna have to write your old lady. You're gonna make it out of this." Keck, already resigned to his fate, yells at Doll, "Don't you bullshit me." As Keck bleeds out, Witt moves from just beyond the frame right up to the dying sergeant, gripping Keck's shirt and calmly saying, "You're gonna be alright. Even if you die, you didn't let your brother down. If you hadn't thrown yourself against the embankment, we'd all have been killed." Keck can only reply that he is cold, and Witt draws Keck's army fatigue more tightly around him as he slips away. Doll, meanwhile, remains a few feet off, visibly shaken and sick.

Welsh confronts a dying man mere minutes later. This one has been shot in the gut and is wailing loudly for help on the hill, causing a stoppage in the charge

to the top. Captain Staros wonders if they might be able to get him some morphine, enough to keep him calm and even kill him before his wounds finish the job. Unasked, Welsh, in an extraordinary act of bravery, runs to solve the problem and help the dying man. As Welsh, the self-named "guy who runs" the company, comes to aid the soldier under his command, he hears, "I'm dying! I'm dying, sarge!" to which he responds, "Okay. Well, goddamn it, do it with less noise!" Welsh tries to carry the soldier back to safety, yet the dying man asks to be set down. Visibly upset, Welsh leaves him morphine and returns to the perch behind which Staros and several others have found cover. When Staros says Welsh's courage will be rewarded with honors and announcements, Welsh angrily refuses them, threatens to resign, and says, "Property. Whole fucking thing is about property."

The fact that this scene follows the interaction between Witt and Keck invites comparison between Welsh and Witt. Both scenes show a soldier confronting a dying comrade, both depict acts of bravery, and the hero of each is commended by a fellow soldier. Like Staros' view of Welsh, Witt sees real virtue in Keck's sacrifice and tells him. Welsh and Witt occupy different positions in the relational matrix of these scenes, but, in these examples at the limit of human experience, we are shown much about Welsh and Witt's respective ways of seeing the world. Welsh is admittedly disturbed by the death of his fellow soldier. He is not heartless. Yet his bravery holds no value in itself. Virtue is nothing real or substantial. He sees the horror of life, is disturbed by it, but in the end, he accepts

it as meaningless. Here, there are no transcendental values, just brute facts.[52] Witt's

encouragement to Keck reveals something quite different. He

believes in another world, but we do not need to take this as a world 'out there,' an

afterlife of eternal bliss. Instead, we could suggest, the world Witt believes in,

contra Welsh, is a world hued with virtue, honor, and value. Keck doing the right

thing meant not just that he "didn't let his [brother] down" but that he would "be

alright." This does not have to mean that Witt thinks Keck's soul will travel to an

eternal heaven. While this is a fair interpretation, we could also see Witt's comment

as a statement that Keck's act of bravery fulfilled his purpose and lived in harmony

with transcendental values like love and duty. By doing the right thing he had died

well and was therefore "alright."

I do not mean to downplay the validity of a more traditional religious

reading that sees Witt's metaphysical musings regarding immortality as discussion

and affirmation of life after death. Malick could be presenting Witt as a typical

Christian believer who has faith in an afterlife. But expectations that link

immortality and afterlife might overdetermine our interpretations of the religious

language we find in the film and limit us from seeing other possibilities. Witt

himself seems to give credence to an interpretation that aligns his own views of

immortality with Wittgenstein's. In the early minutes of the film, Witt, in voice-

over, says that he had not seen the immortality that "people talk about." Only in the

death of his mother, and the calm with which she experienced her final breath, does

Witt see this immortality. Speaking of this calm, Witt says "'Cause that's where it's hidden—the immortality I hadn't seen." There is no daylight between this experience of calm and immortality; this acceptance of life is its own kind of immortality, Witt seems to say. The early Wittgenstein resonates with this insight from Witt when he writes, "If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present."[53] If Witt means something like timelessness rather than infinite duration, then this declaration that immortality is contained in an experience makes more sense and helps us see the rest of his conversations in a new light.[54]

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I noted that Malick's interest in and connection to Wittgenstein—and Heidegger—lies in their similar tasks of making the ever-present yet overlooked background of perception available for reflection. By placing Witt and Welsh opposite one another, these conditions of perception are made available for attention. Using the cinematic medium and locking these two characters in a discussion over the drastically different shades coloring a common experience, Malick can show what cannot quite be put into words. Malick calls his viewers' attention to this boundary of language, and, by attending carefully to this limit point, viewers are trained to see the world anew.

[1] Commenters on Malick's work tend to be just as interested in Malick's philosophical influences and insights as in the technical details of his filmmaking. A few examples of recent work with such a framing include Steven DeLay, ed., *Life Above the Clouds: Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2023); Joshua Sikora, ed., *A Critical Companion to Terrence Malick* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020); Robert Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston, ed., *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[2] Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*, trans. Terrence Malick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

[3] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film (*Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), xiv.

[4] For Cavell, Malick's filmmaking, aware of the filmed object's participation in its own photographic presentation, cinematically presents Heidegger's thoughts on the distinction between Being and beings, our forgetfulness of such questions, and, therefore, the tendency toward "trying to take dominion over the world" (*The World Viewed*, xvi). Later interpreters have followed Cavell's lead, meaning readings of Malick as Heideggerian tend to center questions of the meaning of existence, nature, human self-importance, technological control, and the ability of images to prompt reflection on such questions.

[5] Malick, "Translator's Introduction," xv.

[6] Malick, "Translator's Introduction," xv.

[7] Malick, "Translator's Introduction," xiv-xv. Malick also compares "world" to Kierkegaard's "sphere of existence," but my article will not address Malick from a Kierkegaardian view.

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §217.

[9] The distinction between facts and things is central to the early Wittgenstein, but Malick does not abide by it in his "Translator's Introduction."

[10] Malick, "Translator's Introduction," xvii.

[11] Much of this debate hinges on whether nonsense is always "mere" or if it can be "elucidating." For a description of the debate over whether and how nonsense can "elucidate," see James Conant, "The Method of the Tractatus," in *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Erich H. Reck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[12] Ludwig Wittgenstein,. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 1921), §6.54. The full text is, "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the

ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright."

[13] Malick, "Translator's Introduction," xvi.

[14] Cavell, despite a willingness to engage with Heidegger's thought at this time when many analytic philosophers found the German unworthy of academic study, is a largely Wittgensteinian thinker. For examples of Cavell's engagement with Wittgenstein, see, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*: *A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[15] Simon Critchley, "Calm: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," in *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell*, eds. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005).

[16] Critchley, "Calm: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," 139.

[17] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §4.112.

[18] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.54. Such a view meant that "the book is an ethical one," as Wittgenstein wrote in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker in 1919 submitting the manuscript of the Tractatus. Quoted in Alfred Nordmann, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 48.

[19] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §4.112.

[20] For Wittgenstein, the great enemy to this clarity is the way we think about our language, which confuses and entangles us. For this reason, "Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §109.

[21] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 16e. Theologians have found resonances with Wittgenstein on this front. For an example, see Fergus Kerr, *Work on Oneself: Wittgenstein's Philosophical Psychology* (Arlington,VA: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

[22] Wittgenstein, *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*, §113, in *Philosophical Investigations*.

[23] Wittgenstein, *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*, §118.

[24] Wittgenstein, *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*, §130.

[25] For a discussion of the reasons why Wittgenstein refers to this as "seeing" rather than interpreting, see Severin Schroeder, "A Tale of Two Problems: Wittgenstein's Discussion of Aspect Perception," in *Language, Mind, and Value: Essays on Wittgenstein*, (London: Anthem Press, 2024).

[26] Wittgenstein, *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*, §140.

[27] Kate Rennebohm, "The 'Cinema Remarks': Wittgenstein on Moving-Image Media and the Ethics of Re-Viewing," *October*, no. 171 (March 2020): 48, 50.

[28] Rennebohm, "The 'Cinema Remarks': Wittgenstein on Moving-Image Media and the Ethics of Re-Viewing," 50.

[29] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.421.

[30] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.421.

[31] The resolute reading, made famous by Cora Diamond and James Conant, takes seriously Wittgenstein's own claim that his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was a work of "nonsense." The resolute reading distinguishes itself from positivist and "ineffability" readings which both uphold substantialist accounts of nonsense in the early Wittgenstein. This is of central importance for understanding that Wittgensetin's nonsensical propositions offer no ethical claims *in themselves*. For seminal essays arguing for this interpretation see Cora Diamond, "Throwing Away the Ladder," *Philosophy* 63, no. 243 (1988), and Conant, "The Method of the *Tractatus*."

[32] Zumhagen-Yekplé, *A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 8. Zumhagen-Yekplé notes how this tendency places Wittgenstein within a modernist tradition. She notes similarities between the philosopher and writers like Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce.

[33] Zumhagen-Yekplé, *A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature after Wittgenstein*, 8.

[34] Pippin, "Vernacular Metaphysics: On Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (January 2013): 267.

[35] We might think of the early Wittgenstein's reminder in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.373 our will is independent of our world.

[36] See Robert Sinnerbrink's *Cinematic Ethics* and *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, (London: Routledge, 2016).

[37] Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, 4. The "expansive sense" of ethics is crucial for Sinnerbrink to push past traditional approaches to thinking about ethics and film which tend toward emphasizing "morally charged situations, conflicts, decisions, or actions" in a film narrative; the politics of "cinematic representation;" or the ways "cinema as a cultural medium express[es] moral beliefs, social values, or ideology" (10). Each of these three approaches to the ethics of *The Thin Red Line* would be a worthwhile task. Several characters, like Captain Staros, played by Elias Koteas, for instance, are faced with ethical conundrums that viewers would do well to consider; Malick's approach to editing has meant that some actors who were under the impression they would be in starring roles, like Adrien Brody, have been reduced to minor, peripheral characters, casting questions of cinematic representation in a strange hue; and the ways in which Malick troubles the genre of war film offers a rich text for interpreters interested in the nationalist and masculinist stories we tell ourselves.

[38] Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 9.

[39] This ethical view aligns with certain forms of moral philosophy which thrived in the space of mid-20th century English philosophy opened by Wittgenstein. Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*, (London: Routledge, 2013), for instance, praises that which takes one's attention away from the clutches of the "fat relentless ego," the great enemy of the human moral life (51). Explicitly rejecting dominant attitudes in moral philosophy that take ethics to be a matter of right action, Murdoch argues that moral choices are not the sites for moral inquiry but rather what goes on "in between such choices is indeed what is crucial" (36). She calls this "attention," or "looking," describing it acutely as "the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality," which she believes "to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent" (33). Whereas theories that make morality a matter of choice imply that moral living is something that can be appropriated immediately in the sense of *doing* the right thing, Murdoch observes that the cultivation of a proper way of looking is a slow process that takes time and is cultivated with a great deal of difficulty. She names a number of techniques for developing this kind of attention which fall under "a sort of contemplation of the Good" (90) but which tend to specifically prioritize beauty and art. While we need not make a Platonist connection between Malick and the Good, these reflections help illuminate the way a certain mode of attention cultivates a moral way of seeing the world and the forms of experience conducive to the development of such attention.

[40] Pippin, "Vernacular Metaphysics: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," 252.

[41] Understandably, Kaja Silverman's, "All Things Shining," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (University of California Press, 2002) attributes some of Private Train's southern-accented philosophical reflections to Private Witt.

[42] Pippin, "Vernacular Metaphysics: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," 249.

[43] Pippin, "Vernacular Metaphysics: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," 249.

[44] The title of this film is a reference to the final line of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (Brooklyn: Restless Books, 2021), 754. "That things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

[45] Pippin, "Vernacular Metaphysics: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," 289.

[46] James Jones, *The Thin Red Line*. (New York, N.Y: Delta Books, 1998), Title Page.

[47] Rudyard Kipling's "Tommy" is a poem about the disconnect between the alienation a British soldier feels when among civilians and the praise he receives during war. Specifically, the phrase references the Stand of the 93rd Regiment at the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War in 1854, known as The Thin Red Line.

[48] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §1.1.

[49] Welsh's view seems to resonate with that of his Brig. Gen. Quintard, played by John Travolta, who introduces the map of the island and says, "They call it the rock."

[50] Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 6.

[51] Bersani & Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 142.

[52] In Jones' novel, Welsh is said to be "amused" by "everything." "Politics amused him, religion amused him, particularly ideals and integrity amused him; but most of all human virtue amused him. He did not believe in it and did not believe in any of those other words." Jones, *The Thin Red Line*, 24.

[53] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.4311.

[54] In the notes his students gathered entitled "Lectures on Religious Belief," Wittgenstein argues that the grammar of the word "belief" confuses us and leads us to mistake it as operating in the same way as belief in daily life. Wittgenstein instead speaks of a religious belief as a regulating ideal which conditions one's way of being in the world. He uses the example of a belief in the Last Judgment as a frame to guide one's living. Instead of the mental images and concepts of afterlife—understood as a kind of empirical reality to be experienced after death—Wittgenstein argues that these often accompany belief, but they are not the belief itself. So, belief in a Last Judgment is more properly understood as a kind of frame for interpreting experience as meriting punishment or praise. Different beliefs, then, are not the results of different assessments of metaphysical of postmortem realities. While certain pictures and predictions may accompany a belief, belief is primarily about the shaping of one's vision and practice. Like the men who see alternate realities in the dying bird, people with different beliefs have vastly different experiences of reality. See Wittgenstein, Ludwig. "Lectures on Religious Belief." In *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief, 40th Anniversary Edition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

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