

**nature, history and "critique
of violence" in *the thin red
line* (1998)**

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*A critique of violence is the philosophy of its
history.*

—Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence"¹

Introduction

As Iain Macdonald's work on Malick's *The New World* suggests,² although many critics acknowledge nature as one of Malick's fundamental motifs and themes, very few have directly tackled the metaphysics and the problem of nature in Malick's films. In what follows, I claim that *The Thin Red Line* is a cinematic argument that reframes human relations to finitude, death and violence in the present of our dysfunctional subject-object relations to nature. To support this vision, the paper will not refer to Martin Heidegger's notions of *Dasein* and being-towards-death, because Kaja Silverman's³ reading of Malick's enigmatic and compelling film has already extensively demonstrated that the acceptance of life as fated to death, the acceptance of life as open possibility against the absolute impossibility of death is the film's accepted reality and philosophical starting point.

Walter Benjamin's approach will provide the theoretical and philosophical terrain to understand Malick's film as operating *within* the subject-object problem of

modern aesthetics. Rather than advocating mythical returns to a lost, prelapsarian or embodied oneness and reconciliation with the world of nature, this article uses Peter Fenves' insights on Benjamin's notion of time to maintain that Malick's film opens the subject-object dichotomy between spectator and film to a temporal "interplay"⁴ between nature and history. In the course of the argument, rather than focusing on Private Witt as the bearer of subjective openness⁵ and calm,⁶ the article will demonstrate that the protagonist of *The Thin Red Line* remains Adrian Brody's Corporal Fife.⁷ The film itself refuses to follow Witt's character in his "other" world and ostensibly shows that there is only this world, "this rock," as Penn's nihilist character Welsh reminds us. A Benjaminian approach to the film shifts critical attention from Private Witt's (Jim Caviezel) idealism and subjectivity, to Corporal Fife's (Adrian Brody) mute figural gestures as expression of a precise subject-less seeing of nature and history enabled by the film itself.

The Thin Red Line is an adaptation of James Jones' novel narrating the World War II battle of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in 1942. As many critics have argued, *The Thin Red Line* evades genre expectations. For example, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have pointed out that despite the use of the popular war film genre, "the only narratively significant event is the refusal on the part of Captain Starros (Elias Koteas) to obey Colonel Tall's (Nick Nolte) order to send his men directly up the hill in an attack on the Japanese bunker at the top."⁸ To further complicate genre expectations, rather than a cathartic experience of war, Malick's film offers very large, somehow pretentious, philosophical questions in voice-over narration about the nature of violence and the meaning of life. Warwick Mules argues that the film allegorizes the battle of World War II by "meditating on human life and its relation to death, nature, good and evil."⁹ Malick, for Mules, uses the theatre of World War II and Guadalcanal to allegorize Schelling's idea "that nature grounds the possibility of both good and evil by withdrawing from them (as indifferent nature)." In an application of Benjamin's ideas on allegory, Mules further elaborates that:

the film bears witness to the battle, not by recalling its historical or ideal truth, but by announcing that "man's subjection to nature" at war with itself destroys idealism and places the human in a state of mourning outside its own idealized self-image, yet open to a glorious otherness.¹⁰

But if the allegorical way of seeing opens nature to a glorious otherness beyond idealism, it is worth asking: what is this glorious otherness of nature? What does

it look like? Can we see it in Malick's film?

The Thin Red Line is indeed a meditation on human "subjection to nature,"¹¹ however, as Bersani and Dutoit have pointed out already, there are many different ways "of looking" at nature in the film; characters are, "individuated not as personalities but as perspectives on the world."¹² This way, the film presents viewers with philosophical confrontations so that the pairings and couplings that Pippin,¹³ following Bersani and Dutoit, sees between characters, can be seen as philosophical debates between *dramatis personae* embodying different perspectives on the world of nature.¹⁴ However, as Robert Sinnerbrink's work on Malick's film attests, film-philosophers should move beyond philosophical readings and interpretations of the film's formal and narrative elements and consider, "the question of the nature of the cinematic image and its capacity to provoke thought."¹⁵ In answering Sinnerbrink's call, the broader hypothesis that this paper explores is that what constitutes the nature of the cinematic image and its capacity to provoke thought is cinema's distinctive relation to time. As we shall see in detail, Benjamin's conception of the "shape of time"¹⁶ is a suitable concept in tackling both the problem of nature and the problem of history in Malick's *The Thin Red Line*. In what follows I explore the hypothesis that Malick's *The Thin Red Line* offers two visions of nature: a mechanistic and vitalist vision in which human and non-human nature are interrelated and part of a larger Whole, and another vision of nature: where parts are totally disassociated from laws of causality and reciprocity. This philosophical opposition is not new in nature philosophy.

MECHANICAL AND HISTORICAL TIME

In "Renewed Question: Whether a Philosophy of History is possible,"¹⁷ Peter Fenves quotes Schelling's phrase, "Wherever there is mechanism, there is no history, and conversely, where there is history, there is no mechanism—a proposition Schelling briefly illustrates," Fenves reminds us, "with reference to the image of the clock" (the entire passage is worth quoting at length here):

The image of the clock ... can be generalized in relation to clock-like aspects of human beings, such as eating, drinking, having sex, and dying. In the broader context of transcendental idealism circa 1798 and even more so, in relation to Schelling's own writings of the period, this proposition and its attending illustration are characterised by a striking absence: no mention is made of a non-mechanistic mode of causality, specifically or-

ganic causality in which each part of the living thing is reciprocally connected to the whole, and the whole thus precedes its parts ... There are a number of ways to interpret the absence of any reference to organic causality, but one is particularly suggestive—not that Schelling somehow forgot about it, or perhaps suppressed it in his defence of the Fichtean program, but the inclusion of *Naturphilosophie* in a philosophical system changes nothing in relation to the question at hand [whether a Philosophy of History is possible and how].¹⁸

For Fenves, Schelling's omission of an organic conception of nature implies that an organic mode of causality (in which each part of the living thing is reciprocally connected to the whole), would still be a mechanistic mode of nature: that is, mechanic time linked to the clock-like aspects of life (eating, drinking, having sex and dying). The omission is, indeed, particularly striking considering that within the context of transcendental idealism, Schelling would have certainly held to an organicist, as opposed to a mechanistic/Newtonian concept of nature.¹⁹ This is an important précis that can help us contextualise the novelties of Malick's cinematic contribution to a material philosophy of nature and history in contemporary culture.

Fenves' renewed question can thus be posed in these terms: can nature and history evade the clock-like mode of being and becoming? As Fenves notes in his article, this was the central question of Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*. For Kant, who distinguishes between the lower faculty of philosophy and the higher faculty of positive law,²⁰ positive law can interrupt the causal mode of being and becoming as long as positive law is grounded in (pure) reason and, as such, it interrupts the mechanic flow of events by way of a revolutionary advancement of reason in history. On the other hand, for Schelling, historical time cannot be enforced by reason, it is still a "function of time" and as such it must be captured by a "time function."²¹ For Schelling, a philosophy of history must follow not Kant's but rather Leibniz's lead: 'for it must develop its own version of higher analysis ... such that "everything that is" can be immediately presented as a "function of time."²² The paradox is that for Schelling the goal of history is the same as its origin, namely freedom and "any progressive step forward is also its very inception."²³ Thus, if mechanical time is "periodic" or, "a movement in which goal and origin converge,"²⁴ how can historical time progress any better than mechanical time towards freedom? For Schelling, historical time does not progress or regress (as in a line between points or tangents) but is simply "gressive"²⁵ and, for Schelling, who

follows Leibniz's lead, without a mathematical function that captures the "gressive" character of history, no philosophy of history is possible because reason cannot transcend, so to speak, the periodicity of events in mechanical time.²⁶ Having defined the problem of an impossible philosophy of history based on reason, Fenves reads Hölderlin, and Benjamin's own work on Hölderlin "Two Poems,"²⁷ as new articulations of Schelling's problem in modernity.

In an application of Fenves' insights, Benjamin's philosophical project can be understood as operating within the complexities of a material philosophy of history not based in post-Kantian reason that would not fall back into transcendental idealism. Moving from this premise, the next section of this paper contextualizes Benjamin's early essay "Critique of Violence" as operating within the same philosophical trajectory of "Two Poems" and other early essays and shows that the problem of historical and mechanical time is relevant here for a comprehensive analysis of nature *and* history in Malick's *The Thin Red Line*.

MECHANICAL AND HISTORICAL VIOLENCE

In Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence" the Kantian problem between natural law based in nature and positive law based in reason is formulated in similar terms to Schelling's: all laws are violent. No distinction is made between natural law and positive law, because if natural law sees violence as a "natural datum"²⁸ and positive law "sees violence as a product of history"²⁹ Benjamin, then, says:

the misunderstanding in natural law by which a distinction between violence used for just ends and violence used for unjust ends must be emphatically rejected. Rather, positive law demands of all violence a proof of its historical origin, which under certain conditions is declared legal, sanctioned.³⁰

This prompts Benjamin to declare that, "the critique of violence is the philosophy of its history."³¹ Thus, for Benjamin, contrary to Schelling, a philosophy of history *is* possible, it is precisely a "critique" of violence, where critiquing violence means the ability to see and recognize its development, because "only the idea of its development makes possible a critical, discriminating, and decisive approach to its temporal data."³² From this reading of a "possible" philosophy of history in Benjamin, one crucial question remains open: how is it possible to see and recognize the development of violence and gain a "critical, discriminating, and decisive

approach” to it? Benjamin’s ambiguous essay evades the structured thinking of binary logic. To paraphrase his “Coming Philosophy,”³³ Benjamin’s thinking does indeed require another relation between subjects and objects, a reconfiguration of the modern subject–object relation which is neither based on binary thinking and opposition, nor based on progressive or regressive thinking, reconciliations and synthesis.

This complex philosophical position is evident in “Critique of Violence,” where Benjamin introduces another concept that is neither natural law, nor positive law but a “divine” or messianic law. While the literature on Benjamin’s difficult essay is itself complex and divided,³⁴ in what follows, I claim that *The Thin Red Line* not only is a suitable case study to exemplify the complexities of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” but is also a thoroughly cinematic contribution to a possible philosophy of history. In the course of analysis, I understand the violence of each manifestation of “law” as the violence of mechanical time, historical time and messianic time. I claim that Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* can be seen as a “critique of violence,” in that it presents violence as such, in its natural *and* positive manifestations of law. In critiquing violence, however, Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* offers a philosophy of history through a cinematic approach to time and temporal data that gives us the ability to see and recognize the development of violence as such. As we shall see, this ability is not encumbered by individual intentionality, but is predicated on a “messianic” conception of time.

CRITIQUING LOVE AND VIOLENCE IN *THE THIN RED LINE*

There are various instances in which we see the problem and paradox of natural law and positive law in the war setting of the *The Thin Red Line*. Indeed, as Benjamin remarks in the “Critique of Violence” essay “Militarism is the compulsory, universal use of violence as a means to ends of the state.”³⁵ One of the most obvious moments where we see the justification of violence as a means to ends of the state is when Doll played by Dash Mihoc, kills a man for the first time and in voice-over says “I killed a man, worst thing you can do, worse than rape and nobody can touch me for it.” The violence is justified as a means to the ends of the state, that the film, through the nihilist eyes of Penn’s character Welsh, unmercifully sanctions as “Property. The whole fuckin’ thing’s about property.” Nevertheless, the most perplexing instance where the film shows us the paradox of natural *and* positive law at work is in the “only narratively significant event of the film,” as Bersani and Dutoit call it, “the refusal on the part of Captain Staros

(Elias Koteas) to obey Colonel Tall's (Nick Nolte) orders."³⁶ As Pippin's reading suggests, this conflict is not only crucial in narrative terms, but is also emblematic of a deeper conflict between different versions of Humanism in nature-culture relations. While Colonel Tall follows the heroic ethos of an archaic code of nobility and courage³⁷ and uses nature to justify the application of this code to the battlefield, Captain Staros embodies the doings of a later, Christian Humanism. Staros counters Tall's uncompromised commitment to winning the battle by showing prudence and temperance and demonstrating his "love" to his soldiers as a father to his children. While Staros' demonstrates Christian love and compassion and embodies the doings of human individual intentions and rationality against the mechanisms of nature in history, the film itself "critiques" Staros' act of rebellion by showing viewers that the same ethical values proceed undisturbed in the film. For example, the film shows us that the fatherly and patriarchal attitude of military life proceeds in the metaphors used by the new Captain (George Clooney) at the end of the film. In an application of non-dualistic insights from Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," while Staros' conscious act of rebellion is a wonderful demonstration of human's compassion and rationality, Malick's film shows us that the same violence is at the root of *both* positive and natural law. Staros, who is a lawyer in civilian life, cannot evade the fact that violence is—*de jure*—sanctioned and legalized in those circumstances. Perhaps for this reason, Bersani and Dutoit note that in the battlefield "the Captain's humanistic defense of life is absurd."³⁸ However, despite the absurdity of Staros' defence of life in war, his decision does not remain without consequences in the film.

Captain Staros' mutiny does emphatically mark a narrative turning point in *The Thin Red Line*. From that moment onwards, through a series of resonant sequences of love (embodied by Bell's romanticized fantasies and recollections about his wife at home as he climbs the hill, for example), Charlie Company finds that much needed courage, cohesion and strength to conquer the hill and bring the mission to a success. In this, Malick's film does not only critique the historical origins of violence *and* positive law, it shows us that the much needed love, courage and compassion that motivate Charlie Company's success remain violent act of nature in a mechanical flow of events. In this, it is important to note that good and evil are equally questioned in the film's voice-overs, with the exact same words: Private Train asks, "This great evil. Where does it come from?" Private Bell asks: "Love. Where does it come from?" In Malick's film, both good and evil, positive law and violence, are *mechanical* possibilities of nature, and this position beyond binary logic is evoked and questioned in the initial voice over narration in the

film: “is there an avenging power in nature not one power but two?” As Bersani and Dutoit explicitly argue using Freud’s words, *The Thin Red Line* shows us that both violence and love are part of the same destructive and ecstatic pleasure of the drives. In Benjamin’s words, however, the thought could be completed saying that human history, as a Whole, mechanically progresses towards freedom in the form of death, entropy and destruction³⁹ and mechanism, here, includes vitalist and organicist visions of nature.

The film repeatedly shows us Charlie Company as a Whole, an interconnected body—or “machinic assemblage” as Deleuze and Guattari⁴⁰ would call it—where all parts are univocally connected, as in the flock-like behavior of the soldiers moving together, like birds, in the jungle as one body. To further reinforce this organicist vision of Charlie Company as an interconnected organism, it is important to point out that in the first phases of the battle, chaos and madness predominate, lines of command are not clear and the soldiers appear lost. It is only after Captain Staros’ act of rational rebellion (which in the story is importantly preceded, and almost motivated, by the unpredictable “line of flight”⁴¹ of Welsh’s run through the battlefield in a self-less attempt to save a soldier who does not want to be saved) that the company becomes itself again. The point I want to stress here, following the lines of argument introduced above via Benjamin, is that the mechanical vision of history is not restricted to the progress of the oppressors, embodied by Colonel Tall’s egoistic motivation and furious determination, but the mechanic vision of life, in Malick’s film, does also include human rationality, love and compassion, embodied by Captain Staros’ Christian ethos and Private Bell’s memories of an idealised love. Love, too, proceeds in a mechanical and, indeed, violent sort of way; in this mechanism, Bell’s wife (Miranda Otto) replaces Bell with another man back home and asks Bell to help her leave him. The same mechanism haunts Captain Staros’ Christian values and compassion. Staros—contrary to Welsh’s striking refusal of the Silver Star because war is “all about property”—does not turn down Colonel Tall’s deal and leaves Charlie Company with the Silver Star and the Purple Heart, after all. In this view, characters in *The Thin Red Line* are indeed perspectives on life, they are philosophical perspectives on violence and nature; however, the film shows that not one single philosophical perspective, embodied by the confrontations of its principal four characters, can escape the *mechanical* flow of time, the clock-like mode of being and becoming, as Schelling would call it.

THE TIMID LOOK OF THE POET AND *THE THIN RED LINE*

In an application of Fenves' insights offered in "Renewed Question" and other writings on Benjamin's philosophy of time, this paper claims that Corporal Fife can be seen as expression of a precise "poetic," rather than philosophical looking:

A striking feature of Hölderlin's poems is the peculiar passivity that can be ascribed to the poet, a passivity that finds its paradoxical security in defenselessness as supreme vulnerability. For the young Benjamin this vulnerability cum security is the counter-mythological traits par excellence.⁴²

In *The Thin Red Line* Brody's character Fife is the only one who does not project mythological or philosophical views (whether Classical, Christian, Hegelian or Nietzschean) on the violent events of war. Corporal Fife is the witness of the battle, he does not talk, but sees everything, and his facial features communicate the power of looking in distinctively aesthetic terms. Just as the owl's big eyes, Fife's big eyes see everything, but, contrary to the owl, Fife's facial features and his bodily gestures communicate a profound distress rather than eerie detached participation. My argument here diverges from Bersani and Dutoit's argument, when they claim that: "the close-ups of Witt's looking defines a cinematic aesthetic and ethic of implicated witnessing, of a *witnessing identical to total absorption* [emphasis added].⁴³ For Bersani and Dutoit:

it is an illusion to think that we can look at nature the way it appears to look at us: as a spectacle distinct from the looking. That appearance is eerily represented in the sequence preceding Witt's death by the shots of an owl sitting in a tree, looking.⁴⁴

The problem of Witt's "witnessing identical to total absorption," is that it falls back to a mythical vision of nature; an impossible, pre-fall and paradisiacal vision of the world that cannot be recuperated in aesthetic experiences (especially complex, highly artificial productions of experiences such as films). More importantly, the witnessing that Bersani and Dutoit advocate does not move away from witnessing a mechanical flow of events in nature. In this view, that which pertains to Benjamin's poetizing, it is worth noting that while Caviezel's (Witt) facial features communicate a beautiful, ennobling *courage* in his acceptance of death, Brody's (Fife) *timid* gaze and body language there is something arresting and compelling, something that remains significantly muted and silenced, elicit-

ing a variety of affective responses in the viewer, without closure.⁴⁵

Corporal Fife is a supremely vulnerable, pure witness. This purity is especially evident in the scene where a very young soldier is dying under the compassionate and participative gaze of Staros' Christian values and the soldier repeatedly asks for Fife. The young dying soldier wants Fife to be there, to *just* be there and witness his death, "I'm dying Fife." Malick's direction does not even give Fife a close-up, he is simply there, shot from behind, juxtaposed along the plane of the camera's viewing. In the scene, Fife's neutral and discrete witnessing (like the witnessing of Malick's camera work) is very different from the emotionally charged perspective of Captain Staros' gaze. In all his appearances, Adrian Brody's Fife looks, does not speak, yet he testifies to something. He is one of the "two witnesses" of Captain's Staros mutiny, and, significantly, he is the one that Witt wants to save when he volunteers to go in a final mission that will lead to his beautiful, courageous (somehow heroic) and calm death. Fife, on the other hand, is the one that, utterly terrified, follows Witt's orders, goes back to Charlie Company and warns about the imminent peril up the river, although he does not actually say anything. Fife's looking, is the looking of a vulnerable subject that sees and recognises the inevitability of violence in nature, but rather than "making himself superfluous in order to multiply his being," as Witt does—in Bersani and Dutoit's attentive reading (165)—makes himself *necessary* in order to allow that seeing.

In this, my claim in this paper is that Corporal Fife stands for the witnessing of Malick's cinema divested of intentions and subjectivity, a distinctively non-subjective seeing of camera work that gives us access to images of nature and violence *as a spectacle distinct from the looking*, it gives us access to a vision of nature and time that is simply precluded in the immediacy of everyday life. Following Benjamin's philosophical trajectory, the possibility of looking at nature as nature looks back at us, not only *is* possible but is a non-mechanical function of time rendered visible in cinematic experiences and this is, precisely, what Malick's seeing advocates in the last three shots of *The Thin Red Line*. As we shall now see in detail, in Malick's film the possibility of a critique of violence, and consequent philosophy of history, resides in Malick's *cinematic* vision of time and nature.

Messianic Time in *The Thin Red Line*

The last three images of *The Thin Red Line* are images of human and non-human nature just living, as if the dramatic events of Guadalcanal never happened or be-

longed to another planet. Here, the cinematic and highly artificial interpolation of images of glorious nature (human and non-human) communicates a sort of nightmarish continuation of life despite the evils of war. What we witness is, indeed, “a dangerously immortal world ... a world complete without me” to use Cavell’s words.⁴⁶ Using Benjamin’s insights, however, these images present themselves as pure mediality, as means without ends that cut through the illusion of immediacy with the world of nature and give back to us an even wider distance between the subject–object position, the viewer and the world viewed of modern aesthetics. In this, Malick’s cinematic viewing allows a temporal, reflective space opening up between the images of a world past and their contingency in the present of the viewer’s life.⁴⁷

In an application of a Benjaminian “messianic reduction” (Fenves), it is important to go back to the “gressive” character of historical time. Despite Fenves’ reference to a mathematical function (precisely Karl Weierstrass’ “pathological function”—a curve which is continuous everywhere but differentiable nowhere—or a fractal in contemporary mathematical terms), the trope of the “Turn of Time” (*Wende der Zeit*), in Fenves as in Benjamin, is irremediably associated to aesthetic experiences *in* receptivity. In this view, the poetized or turn of time, is not the result of a prelapsarian immersion and absorption in the world of nature, but quite the opposite: the result of witnessing the (violent) historical value of poetic and linguistic work, camera work included. It can be seen that Benjamin’s poetizing assumes the relevance of a practical methodological approach to aesthetic experiences of time (rather than space) in films *beyond subjective intentionality*. Benjamin’s “poetizing” and consequent turn of time would be that powerful experience of singularity (and suspension of the “natural attitude” as Husserl would call it)⁴⁸ that comes and happens to us in a flash, but without intentions, when we experience, witness and recognize the historical value of a creative act or artifact such as Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*.

CONCLUSION

Moving from Bersani and Dutoit’s heuristic reading of characters’ look in *The Thin Red Line*, this article claims that the analysis of Corporal Fife’s look reveals a poetic perspective on *The Thin Red Line*. As exemplified in the scene of a young soldier dying, Fife is a perplexed witness of both violence and love in history allowing a much needed “critique of violence” *and* philosophy of history to emerge from the film itself, in the act of experiencing, witnessing and recognizing its historical

value. Malick's film-philosophy opens to a cinematic seeing and poetic witnessing that gives visibility and access to a different apperception of both time and nature. Rather than mythical oneness and absorption in nature, the highly artificial interpolation of images of glorious nature in the final three shots of the film returns to us a non-mechanical vision of time that Benjamin's "shape of time" helps us understand. Benjamin's *Wende der Zeit* or turn of time or time sculpting not only is fully disassociated from laws of causality and organicity in general, but its apprehension is only possible in aesthetic and poetic experiences and manifestations of art and nature. Malick's vision in *The Thin Red Line* testifies for the fleeting unreliability of rational and bodily subjectivity of reflected being, however philosophically informed or guided. More importantly, Malick's film stands for a pure witnessing of both violence and love in their mechanical unfolding beyond myth and idealism, a witnessing that gives visibility and access to a distinctively aesthetic apperception of time and a very much "possible" critique of violence and philosophy of history in contemporary culture.

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NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings* Vol. I, 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996), 251.
2. Iain Macdonald, "Nature and the Will to Power in *The New World*," in *The Thin Red Line*, ed. David Davies (London: Routledge, 2009).
3. Kaja Silverman, "All Things Shining," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Kazanjian and David L. Eng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
4. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 107.
5. See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit. "One Big Soul," in *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: BFI, 2004), 124-85.
6. See Simon Critchley, "Calm. On Terrence Malick's the Thin Red Line," in *The Thin Red Line*, ed. David Davies (London: Routledge, 2002), 11-28. See, also, Robert Pippin, "Vernacular Metaphysics: On Terrence Malick's the Thin Red Line.," *Critical Inquiry* 39:2 (2013), 247-75.
7. According to conventional Hollywood and celebrity market-place understandings of what a protagonist does in a film, Adrian Brody's character is not a protagonist. As widely noted in popular press, Fife's dialogues and presence in the film were heavily cut in postproduction, much to Brody's personal disappointment. The following link to Newsweek's 2012 Oscar Roundtable provides Christopher Plummer's and George Clooney's reported experiences with director Malick: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwo8GQwohBI>. Malick's direction and filming methods present as particularly interesting for contemporary film scholars; they challenge the application of known theoretical and philosophical frameworks of analysis and are increasingly at odds with conventional, now global, scriptwriting, filming and production practices. This is more and more evident in Malick's film production of the 2010s, particularly *To the Wonder* (2012) and *Knight of Cups* (2015).
8. Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, 128.
9. Warwick Mules, *With Nature. Nature Philosophy as Poetics through Schelling, Heidegger, Benjamin and Nancy* (Chicago: Intellect, the University of Chicago Press, 2014), 172.
10. Mules, *With Nature*, 172-173.
11. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1992), 166.
12. Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, 146.
13. Pippin, "Vernacular Metaphysics," 251.
14. In *The Thin Red Line*, the dialogues between Sgt. Edward Welsh (Sean Penn) and Private Witt (Jim Caviziel) and between Lt. Col. Gordon Tall (Nick Nolte) and Captain Staros (Elias Coteas) can be seen as philosophical confrontations between the Classic heroic ethos of Lt. Col. Gordon Tall (Nick Nolte) and the Christian ethos of Captain Staros (Elias Coteas), and the dialectical/Hegelian relation to history and nature of Private Witt (Jim Caviziel) and the Nietzschean/nihilistic approach of Sgt. Edward Welsh (Sean Penn).
15. Robert Sinnerbrink "A Heideggerian Cinema?: On Terrence Malick's the Thin Red Line," *Film-Philosophy* 10:3 (2006), 36.
16. Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011).

17. Fenves, "Renewed Question: Whether a Philosophy of History is Possible," *MLN* 124 (2014), 514-24.
18. Fenves, "Renewed Question," 517-518.
19. Ian Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), 68-69.
20. See Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).
21. See, Schelling quoted in Fenves, "Renewed Question," 517.
22. Fenves, "Renewed Question," 517.
23. *Ibid.*, 518.
24. *Ibid.*, 519.
25. From Fenves' writings, we can describe the "gressive" character of time as sharply turned on itself, or folded, so that every fold recapitulates the whole in a similar, interpolated shape. See "Renewed Question," 522-524 and *The Messianic Reduction*, 106-112. For Fenves' work on Benjamin's connection to Leibniz's philosophical and mathematical thought (via Schelling and Hölderlin), see also Fenves' *Arresting Language, from Leibniz to Benjamin* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2001).
26. Fenves, "Renewed Question," 518-519.
27. "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin," in Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*. Volume 1, 18-36.
28. *Ibid.*, "Critique of Violence," 237.
29. *Ibid.*, 237.
30. *Ibid.*, 238.
31. *Ibid.*, 251.
32. *Ibid.*, 251.
33. Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*. Volume 1, 100-110.
34. For a recent articulation of the complexities of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" and a fresh perspective on this ambiguous essay, see Alison Ross "The Distinction between Mythic and Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' from the Perspective of 'Goethe's Elective Affinities,'" *New German Critique* 41:1/121 (2014), 93-120.
35. Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," 241.
36. Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, 128.
37. Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) cites Homer's *Odyssey* in Greek and refers to its relevance in his military formation.
38. *Ibid.*, 140.
39. On history as catastrophic progress, as catastrophic expression of the dominant vanquishing the dominated, see Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History." *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*. Volume 4 1938-1940, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.
40. See, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 2004).
41. *Ibid.*
42. Fenves, "Renewed Question," 521.
43. Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, 160-161.
44. *Ibid.*, 161.
45. Here, it is important to remember that "courage" [*Dichtermut*] and "timidity" [*Blödigkeit*] are

the two qualities associated to the poet in Hölderlin's two poems. See, Benjamin "Two Poems" 21-22. Benjamin's analysis of Hölderlin's poems is especially relevant in distinguishing a mythic and a messianic or divine approach to "violence" as expression of unavoidable death, finitude and temporality in nature and history. The poet epitomises artistic work within the constraints of language and finitude and the "timid" approach to death counters the "courageous" and mythic one. Here my argument diverges from recent scholarship casting Benjamin's "divine" violence as an expression of Benjamin's belief in God. See, Ross "The Distinction between Mythic and Divine Violence." What Ross sanctions as an "amorphous conception of language" (96) in Benjamin scholarship is here more broadly interpreted as a reflection on some of the recurrent themes of Benjamin's philosophical work such as mediality, language and history. My argument on the "purity" and "timidity" of poetic looking builds on the insights on mediality ("pure means" [*Reine Mittel*]) offered by Fenves' *Arresting Language* and Werner Hamacher "Afformative, Strike: Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" in *Walter Benjamin' Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*. ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Clinamen 2000), 111-12. For the important connection between language and a non-Hegelian conception of mediality in Benjamin, see also Samuel Weber's "Language as Medium," in *Benjamin's Abilities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 31-52.

46. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979), 160.

47. Following the insights of Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay, this cutting through the illusion of immediacy with nature is in the very nature of the cinematic image, of its violent impact on the human sensorium. For Benjamin's philosophical concern with the violent effects of cinema on our senses, to which we have probably "adapted" in present culture, see Susan Buck-Moss' "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." *October* 62 (1992), 3-41.

48. Contrary to Husserl's, a Benjaminian *epoché* requires the "arresting" of the perceiving and thinking subject, the suspension of intentionality and the recognition of a constellation of meaning, where "thinking suddenly halts [*einhalten*] in a constellation saturated with tensions, it imparts to this constellation a shock through which it crystallizes as a monad [or new turn of time]." (Benjamin cited in *The Messianic Reduction*, 243). For Benjamin's relation (and distance) to Husserl's thought, see Fenves *The Messianic Reduction*, 44-78. For an application of Fenves' work to film-philosophy, see Gabriella Blasi, "The Cinematic Life of the Figural" Mapping Shapes of Time in Terrence Malick's *The New World*," *Cinema: the Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 7 (2015), 11-27.