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The New World: Heideggerian or Humanist Cinema?

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Abstract: I offer a new Heideggerian reading of Terrence Malick's 2005 film *The New World*, in the style of film-philosophy, alongside a contrasting Cinematic Humanist encounter. I consider if the former is a theory-involving example of philosophy of film, and whether a positive answer to this question entails the latter must be also. I argue that whilst both engagements with the film use the work of other philosophers as part of their appreciation, Cinematic Humanism nonetheless remains one of many possible ways of doing philosophy of film *without theory*. Having compared these two methods, I suggest reasons why there is nonetheless a potentially valuable relation to be had between philosophy of film *with* and philosophy of film *without theory*. Close attention is paid to the film throughout.

INTRODUCTION

If one uses or discovers Heidegger's metaphysics when engaging with a film, is one doing philosophy of film *with theory* or *without theory*? If the answer is that one is doing philosophy *with theory*, then what are the implications for bringing the insights and ideas of Stanley Cavell or Ludwig Wittgenstein to bear in cinematic encounters or investigations?¹

In championing what we have christened 'philosophy of film *without theory*', Craig Fox and I are adding our own activities to those of others, past and present, who philosophise in non-, a-, and anti-theoretical ways. We are motivated by the view that doing philosophy need not be a matter of pursuing, creating, developing or testing theories.² That said, would characterising a film as Heideggerian, applying Cavellian considerations, or bearing in mind Wittgensteinian insights when doing philosophy of film, be a matter of doing philosophy *with theory*, albeit in a less obvious guise?³ Is the development of Cinematic Humanism – my own current project – guilty of applying a putatively theoretical 'ism' where an 'ism' is neither needed, wanted, nor philosophically appropriate? Do my own Wittgensteinian cinematic reflections run counter to the very rubric that gives philosophy of film *without theory* its *raison d'être*?

In what follows, I explore these questions by considering Terrence Malick's 2005 film *The New World*. I begin with a Heideggerian reading of the film before considering what, if any, theoretical commitments this requires and might entail. I then present a limited Cinematic Humanist engagement with the film and, using the same criteria in the first instance, reflect on the extent to which this is, or is not, theoretical.

I. MALICK AND HEIDEGGER

The practice of viewing the films of Terrence Malick through the lens of, or in tandem with, Martin Heidegger's philosophy is unsurprising given the writer-director's early philosophical pursuits.⁴ As an undergraduate in the 1960s, Malick studied philosophy under, amongst others, Stanley Cavell. He subsequently met Heidegger in Germany, briefly, before translating the philosopher's 1929 *Vom Wesen Des Grundes*; published in 1969 as *The Essence of Reasons*. Malick then began his doctorate at Magdalen College, Oxford under Gilbert Ryle's supervision. According to Hubert Dreyfus, Malick's thesis was 'to be on 'World' and Heidegger and Wittgenstein'.⁵ Before completing his first year, however, Malick left academic philosophy and enrolled on the American Film Institute's inaugural course for aspiring directors, in 1969. Since then, Malick has directed nine fiction feature films, several documentaries and shorts, and produced for other filmmakers.⁶ Malick's youthful involvement with Heidegger's philosophy, together with his cinematic preoccupations and style, have resulted in many of his films being characterised as Heideggerian.

Simon Critchley warns, however, against slipping on the ‘hermeneutic banana skin’ of reading too much biography into Malick’s films, before he identifies ‘obvious philosophical parallels’ between Heidegger’s notions of ‘Angst’ and ‘Being-towards-death’ in Captain Witt’s ‘calm’ during the final moments of his life, in Malick’s 1998 film *The Thin Red Line*.⁷ Robert Sinnerbrink presses the point that ‘the relationship between Heidegger and Malick should remain a *question*’⁸ before suggesting Malick’s films be understood as a kind of ‘cinematic poesis’ capable of bringing the director’s films into a ‘reflective relationship with Heidegger’s thought’ without ‘reducing the meaning of the film to a Heideggerian meta-text’.⁹ Undaunted by any cautionary caveats, Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy insist that Malick’s films offer not merely ‘Heideggerian content’¹⁰ but that the writer-director has ‘transformed his knowledge of Heidegger into cinematic terms’.¹¹ James Morrison declares that all of Malick’s four (at the time of his writing) films ‘have always been “Heideggerian”’ and little in Malick’s output since suggests Morrison would be uncomfortable in extending his assertion.¹²

One premise of Steven Rybin’s revealingly titled *Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film* is that ‘Malick’s films themselves ultimately shape our understanding of what many of Heidegger’s most important ideas about art mean’.¹³ Elsewhere, however Rybin reverses the direction of illumination, encouraging the use of Heideggerian thinking and concepts ‘to frame how we can understand Malick’s cinema’.¹⁴ Stanley Cavell acknowledges that the ‘particular mode of beauty’ of images in Malick’s first film, *Badlands*, ‘strikes me as a realisation of some sentences from Heidegger’s *What is Called Thinking?*’¹⁵ And, finally, Kaja Silverman, unhesitatingly characterises *The Thin Red Line* as:

more than a philosophically oriented film. It does philosophy, every bit as much as a text like Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language* might be said to do. Like the Heidegger of this disclosive text, moreover, Malick is not content merely to speak about Being; he also shows it to us.¹⁶

These writers are just some of those who bring Heidegger to their consideration of Malick’s work and/or find his philosophy there. To explore the possible theoretical implications of this, I focus on Malick’s fourth film, *The New World*.¹⁷

Briefly: *The New World* dramatises various relationships had by Pocahontas, daughter of Powhatan, in the wake of the first European colonists’ arrival at what will become Virginia (figure 1). Specifically, it dramatises her loving relationship with first-wave colonial adventurer Captain Smith; her banishment from her own community; her heartbreak at Smith’s departure and believed death; her love-less marriage to second-wave colonist John Rolfe; her visit to the English royal court with Rolfe and their son; her reunion with

Smith and consequent climactic realisation that she no longer loves him, but her husband. It ends with Rolfe recounting Pocahontas' death in England and his return home with their child.¹⁸



Figure 1: Pocahontas witnesses the Colonists' arrival: her openness contrasts with her brother's cautious reticence. A future choice is prefigured in the framing.

The plot of *The New World* mixes historical fact, myth, and fiction. Dialogue phrases are sourced from 20th century poetry, Montaigne's *Essays*, first-hand accounts of 17th century European travellers, and the real-life Smith's own writings.¹⁹ Use is made of many of the director's signature techniques: magic hour and natural-light-only cinematography; a hand-held camera that seems to float; questioning and reflective voice-overs; cut-aways of flora and fauna, particularly grasses and trees moving in the wind, flying birds and running water; a pace that will not be hurried; and limited dialogue often mixed down to be just another layer in a soundtrack dense with the noises of wind, water, insects, and other animals. Musical leitmotifs cue or echo emotional and story developments. Repeated use is made of the Overture to Wagner's *Rheingold* and the Adagio from Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 32*. Stylistically, the result blends epic romance, gritty historical social realism, and an immersive, painterly, sky-, water-, and landscape pastoral.

I now offer what I take to be a Heideggerian engagement with the film, in order to ask if this is a case of doing philosophy *with*, or *without theory*? Spoiler alert: this Heideggerian reading has a rhetorical function that will be made clear in Section III.

II. BEING-IN-THE-(NEW)-WORLD

In *The New World*, Malick's thematic exploration of new, old, and possibly transcendent, worlds prompts comparison with Heidegger's metaphysical distinction between what he takes to be human beings' merely 'ontic' ways of being, and Dasein's more fundamental ontology of 'Being-in-the-world'.²⁰ Specifically, Pocahontas' encounters with the sky and nature, together with

her seemingly religious practices appear to dramatise Heidegger's notion of *dwelling*; where dwelling is taken to be 'the basic character of Being in keeping with which mortals exist'²¹ and in virtue of which we 'attain the world as world'.²²

Might Heidegger's dwelling-constituted world be one and the same as that 'New World' once had, then lost and finally recaptured by Pocahontas in her own film-length journey? Might her story be understood as a cinematic realisation – or equivalent – of what it is for mortals to *dwell* , and the plight, according to Heidegger, that Dasein has no other choice but to 'ever search anew for the nature of dwelling'?²³ Moreover, given that dwelling, as proposed by Heidegger, is encountered 'only when poetry comes to pass and is present'²⁴, might *The New World's* exquisite photography, richly layered soundtrack, and rhythm-sensitive editing, offer a cinematic consummation of film-as-philosophy and film-as-poetry?

In *Being and Time*, dwelling is a constitutive aspect of Dasein and has a crucial role to play in Heidegger's search for the answer to the 'question of Being'. By incorporating his characterisation of what it is to dwell into his wider metaphysical vision, Heidegger develops his ontological view that Dasein's world is not a causal construction out of sensations, encountered without, or prior to, their having, semantic content. Rather Dasein's world is a way of Being that one might describe – in unHeideggerian vernacular – as meaningful all the way down:

The fact that motor-cycles and wagons are what we proximally hear is the phenomenal evidence that in every case Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, already dwells alongside what is ready-to-hand within-the-world; it certainly does not dwell proximally alongside 'sensations'; nor would it first have to give shape to the swirl of sensations to provide the springboard from which the subject leaps off and finally arrives at a 'world'.²⁵

In other words, the *location* of Dasein's dwelling is not some spatio-temporal position, but rather a socio-cultural context, or meaning-soaked environment.

In the wake of Heidegger's self-christened philosophical 'turn', dwelling becomes less of a *given* and more of an *elusive* feature of Dasein's ontological Being-in-the-World. Dwelling is now to be striven for; mortals risk losing, might squander, or even fail to achieve it. Under this re-conception, human beings suffer 'the real plight of dwelling' in virtue of having to 'ever search anew' for it.²⁶ This task requires overcoming our 'homelessness'; a homelessness made more acute by the precariousness and disenchantment of our modern, technological age.

The (sometimes learned) achievement of dwelling reveals its essentially 'simple nature' in what Heidegger calls a 'presencing'. This both is, and is to be understood as, the preserving of a quartet of interrelated elements, namely, 'the simple oneness of the four we call *the fourfold*' of earth, sky, divinities,

and mortals.²⁷ According to Heidegger, the preservation of the fourfold requires us ‘to save the earth, to receive the sky, to await the divinities, [and] to escort mortals’.²⁸ Saving the earth is not a matter of mastering or subjugating it but rather setting it ‘free into its own presencing’.²⁹ Similarly, receiving the sky is a matter of letting the sky, sun, moon, and seasons follow their own courses, unfettered. Awaiting divinities is the task, and challenge, of avoiding making one’s own gods and worshipping idols, whilst waiting ‘in the very depth of misfortune’ for that ‘weal that has been withdrawn’.³⁰ And finally, escorting mortals is a matter of initiating our own nature; a nature capable of ‘death as death’, such that ‘there may be a good death’.³¹

This fourfold integration is available to a mortal who ‘is’ importantly already a ‘Being-in-the-World’. For ‘here’ an opportunity or an arena appears (or comes into Being) wherein a geographical place might encounter or coalesce with an otherwise non-spatio-temporal, unlocatable ‘place’. And it is here that man strives to be (and thereby ‘Be’ at last) able to dwell; here where, for Heidegger, the ‘poetic in dwelling’³² is found:

Poetry and dwelling not only do not exclude each other; on the contrary poetry and dwelling belong together, each calling for the other. ‘Poetically man dwells.’³³

Furthermore, in this metaphysical but nonetheless still ‘measurable’ space, man can, in virtue of his kindness, ‘succeed in measuring himself not unhappily against the godhead’;³⁴ something which is, presumably, a way of awaiting the divinities’ arrival whilst living in the sustaining of the fourfold.

When the poetic appropriately comes to light, then man dwells humanly on this earth, and then – as Hölderlin says in his last poem – ‘the life of man’ is a ‘dwelling life’.³⁵

Everything from the premise of *The New World* to its props looks ripe for philosophical dialogue with Heidegger’s notion of dwelling. The Europeans search for a promised land, their quest to discover a new ‘kingdom of the spirit’³⁶ readily captures the intermingling of the physical and metaphysical that is essential to Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, and the attainment of a new world. The struggle faced by the aboriginal inhabitants to hold on to their world (not just their land) in the face of colonial onslaught, reveals the vulnerability of dwelling is apiece with what Heidegger identifies as the plight of homelessness. In the aboriginal community’s practices the essence of dwelling, as ‘preserving the fourfold’ is found in ‘saving the earth, receiving the sky, awaiting divinities, and initiating their own nature as being capable of death as death’. To explore this further, I focus on the three main characters; first Pocahontas.

The New World is strategically punctuated with Pocahontas’ salutations to ‘Mother’ – an enacted gesture of holding out her hands to the sky whilst looking upwards (see figures 2, 3, and 4).



Figure 2: Pocahontas' salutation is sky- rather than sun-directed.



Figure 3: Pocahontas' sky-directed salutation is framed to facilitate a union of sun, sky, and earth.



Figure 4: Pocahontas' skyward salutation is done near water perhaps echoing her return to that world of unqualified joy dramatised in the film's opening (pre-European arrival) swimming sequence.

This apparently religious practice is also on show in the men's sunset salutation whilst fishing (see figure 5).

[In] this realm [of sheer toil], man is allowed to look up, out of it, through it, toward the divinities. The upward glance passes aloft towards the sky, and yet it remains below on the earth. The upward glance spans the between of sky and earth. This between is measured out of the dwelling of man.³⁷



Figure 5: Indigenous tribesmen practice a water-involving, sky-directed salutation.

These skyward gestures dramatise three of the four elements constitutive of dwelling: saving the earth, receiving the sky and awaiting divinities. The fourth element – a ‘good death’ – is woven into the ending montage with Pocahontas’ most celebratory sky salutations. The value of these elements is presented during the ‘language-learning’ sequences when ‘sky’, ‘sun’, ‘water’ and what seems to be ‘wind’, or perhaps ‘spirits’ or indeed ‘Mother’ are the first words Pocahontas teaches Smith (see figure 6, 208).

Smith’s initial encounter with this newfound land, stirs a questioning gaze and questing search amongst the rivers, forests, and sky, and we see his attempts to measure that space between land and sky in search of a dwelling place that calls but cannot be comprehended. ‘Who are you whom I so faintly hear, who urge me ever on? What voice is this that speaks within me? Guide me towards the best.’ Smith’s voice-over manifests his yearning for, and tentative recognition of, a something, he knows not what.

As the conflict between the Colonists and the Naturals deepens, and the relationship between Smith and Pocahontas comes under pressure from the realpolitik of colonial ambition, Smith stumbles in his nascent fumbling towards a way of dwelling. Pocahontas no longer takes for granted the security of the practices that have shaped her spiritual life to date. Doubt enters her soul. ‘Mother. Where do you live? In the sky? The clouds? The sea?



Figure 6: Pocahontas' language lesson involves the intermingling of the actions of her salutation practice and its seeming vocabulary.

Show me your face. Give me a sign.' The precariousness of dwelling is made visible through acting and action, and audible in voice-over. When Pocahontas confesses to herself that Smith seems to her 'a god', the threat to the dwelling-imbued activity of awaiting the divinities grows.

Meeting Smith several years later in England, Pocahontas regains the dwelling place when realising her erstwhile idol-worship has evaporated and that it is Rolfe she loves. As Rolfe's recognises, 'She weaves all things together'. Moreover, when Rolfe acknowledges, 'I touched her long ago – without knowing her name,' we are invited to contrast his own successful search for a dwelling place with Smith's frustrated quest. The ambiguities of the 'her' in Rolfe's 'I touched her long ago', invoke purposeful ambiguities between her/Pocahontas and her/the spirit 'Mother', and her/'the promised land'. Thus, the 'weal' that once drove Pocahontas from her own place of dwelling is healed as unqualified loving and dwelling coalesce in the Heideggerian horizon of *The New World*.

Smith's own climactic admission to Pocahontas, 'I thought it was a dream what we knew in the forest. It's the only truth', is a late-arriving appreciation that a world once tentatively inhabited is now lost. The possibility that Smith might dwell has unravelled, gone with a poetic way of Being that eludes but still haunts him. Smith and Pocahontas are left on opposite sides of a primordial metaphysical gulf that he cannot bridge and she neither wants nor needs to.

Even at the micro level Heideggerian interplay and disclosure is at work in *The New World*. A key prop in the film is a jug given as a present to Pocahontas and Rolfe. In *The Thing*,³⁸ Heidegger uses a jug to articulate his distinction between a *thing*, as opposed to a mere *object*. Out of the jug's 'taking and keeping', that is its ability to receive, hold, and pour, can be wrought an understanding of the essence of pouring as a consecrated libation.

It is ‘the gift of the outpouring’ that ‘makes a jug a jug’ and ‘[i]n the jugness of the jug, sky and earth dwell’.³⁹ Heidegger’s extended exploration of the jug as ‘thing’, opens up a further metaphysical proposal that ‘each thing stays [ie. it ‘gathers and unites’] the fourfold – into a happening of the simple oneness of the world’.⁴⁰ In so doing it ‘things’ and thereby brings about ‘the nearing of the world’ which simultaneously ‘occurs out of the ringing of the world’s mirror-play’ (see figure 7).⁴¹



Figure 7: The jug ‘things’ in the hands, and play, of Pocahontas, Rolfe and their son.

The lyrical shooting of Pocahontas’ ‘jug-play’ scene might well be taken as a resounding dramatisation of this ‘ringing of the world’s mirror-play’. And so on . . .

This barely scratches the surface of the fecundity of Heidegger’s philosophy as a way of thinking about *The New World* or perhaps better, as a film-philosopher might put it, the way *The New World* itself thinks.

III. ANALOGISING AS THEORY

Exploring Heidegger’s philosophy, and proposing and developing analogies between it and films is undoubtedly rewarding, but is it philosophy? Is it philosophy of film? Is it philosophy of film *with* or *without* theory?

There are, I believe, four ways of characterising the previous section: (i) data-gathering to support a metaphysical theory; (ii) philosophically inflected film criticism; (iii) the illustration of philosophical texts; (iv) an exercise in collapsing categorial distinctions between film-viewing, film-making and philosophising.

With Option (i) *The New World* is a reservoir of empirical evidence potentially capable of corroborating Heidegger’s metaphysical edifice. For those who regard philosophy as a conceptual rather than empirical matter, however, (i) is not philosophy; so any with/without theory distinction is irrelevant. To those for whom philosophy is sensitive to empirical confirmation, there is no

prima facie reason to deny that (i) is philosophy and indeed philosophy of film. Furthermore, the very task of using evidence to confirm, or otherwise, substantial metaphysical claims *itself* is a theoretical practice and thereby the Heideggerian reading qua Option (i) is most definitely philosophy with theory.

One might object that empirical evidence taken from films must deal with potentially problematic issues relating to the metaphysics of fiction but theoretical views on the use of thought experiments might provide acceptable responses to such concerns. More problematic for Option (i) is the nature of the putative evidence-theory relation, for the relation articulated is less one that offers warrant and more a case of proposing analogies. Perhaps Options (ii) and (iii) are more appropriate ways of characterising the substance of Section II. When analogies are drawn from Heidegger's system and applied to the film, as with (ii), they enrich the content of the film; when the direction of travel is reversed, as with (iii), the analogies serve as cinematic illustrations of Heidegger's theoretical metaphysics. Option (ii) looks to fit the tradition and practices of film Theory in which evidence for Lacanian, semiotic, Marxist, feminist, etc., theories are found in films. Whether those theories, or Heideggerian metaphysical theories of Being, the film is taken as providing cinematic warrant capable of confirming the truth of the considered theory. Parallels with film Theory, and its heir, film-philosophy, offer another theoretical way of doing philosophy.

In contrast, with Option (iv), the analogising not only helps dissolve distinctions between making films, viewing films, and philosophising, it blurs to the point of potential redundancy the differences between films as works of art and written philosophy as works of philosophy. This serves post-structuralist ambitions to collapse the difference between a work and a text, to regard everything as a text, and to see all texts if not actually on a par, then on a continuum. Whatever the value or otherwise of this activity, it is uncontentiously theory-involving. As such, if it is also construed as philosophy, it too is philosophy with theory. It is noteworthy that once the distinction between different categories of *works* is lost (works of art, of history, of philosophy, etc.) then the resulting texts are now suitably a-categorially positioned for claims that films can *be* and *do* philosophy.

To summarise: either my Heideggerian reading of *The New World* is philosophy with theory, or it is not philosophy at all. In so far as it is regarded as the former it encourages the commitment to various views, including: (a) the presumption that philosophical 'hypotheses' are subject to empirical confirmation; (b) fiction films are an instrumentalizable source of evidence for extra-cinematic theories; and (c) the activity of drawing analogies between texts is a form of philosophising.

A major consequence of these commitments is that it becomes difficult to distinguish between *drawing an insightful analogy* between an aspect of a

film and an idea in the history of philosophy and using an aspect of a film to *legitimise* that idea. In making these analogies one looks to be implicitly ratifying Heidegger's metaphysics. Yet one might wish to accept the pertinence of the analogy whilst challenging the substance of Heidegger's views.

If one questions, for example, the very idea that there is an ontic/ontological distinction between being and Being and that 'not-yet primordial' metaphysics is doomed never to reach 'the truth of Being', what is the purpose of identifying these putatively supporting analogies in films?⁴²

Providing a Heideggerian reading of *The New World* in a film-philosophical spirit reveals the diversity of ways in which theory and Theory are implicated and may compromise the philosophical rewards it strives for. Might there also be comparable difficulties for Cinematic Humanism, which I take to be an example of philosophy of film *without theory*?

IV. *THE NEW WORLD* – A CINEMATIC HUMANIST ENCOUNTER

Near the end of the *The New World* Pocahontas realises that the man she loves is her husband John Rolfe, and not, as she had presumed, Captain Smith. Prompted by this revelation, she reaches up to the sky saying, 'Mother! Now I know where you live'. Pocahontas' gesture dramatises her (and our) realisation that the sought-for new Kingdom of the Spirit is not a land to be found through geographical discovery, physical exploration or colonial conquest, rather it is constituted in our loving relationships. Furthermore, the home of these loving relationships is perhaps the 'New World' of the title: a world Pocahontas herself initially, but unreflectively, inhabits (with her beloved brother and father) and from which she is subsequently banished (when her father disowns her; her brother is killed; and Smith departs and reportedly dies) and which she finally regains in realising her love for her husband and confirming her love for her son (see figures 8 and 9, on 212).

Pocahontas' journey simultaneously dramatises the journeys of her viewers; journeys in which we live our human form of life, in one or more of its many human forms (plural) of life and come to realise things about our human condition throughout our life. This point is not made by, or learnt by, our extracting hypotheses from the film and testing them against the tribunal of experience in an extra-cinematic world. Rather it is learnt by engaging with the film itself. For in the actions, reaction, activities, and practices of Pocahontas, Rolfe, Smith, the Naturals, and the Colonists we come to see ourselves as people who make choices, do things, react to things that happen to us, and know pain, yet who also search for, find, and try to hold on to meaning, value, comfort, and joy.

For this reason, I believe *The New World* is a work of cinematic art that is of epistemic value. In other words, it confirms the central tenet of Cinematic



Figure 8: Pocahontas radiates her newly realised love for Rolfe in an over-the-shoulder reaction shot.



Figure 9: Pocahontas' love for her son is seen in an over-the-shoulder reaction shot echoing her encounter in Figure 8.

Humanism, namely, that we can achieve valuable epistemic understanding of ourselves, each other, and our human form, and forms, of life by actively engaging with some fictional works of cinematic art. In the next section, I consider whether or not this is a *theoretical* commitment or entailment which puts Cinematic Humanism on all fours with claims that the film is an example of Heideggerian cinema. But before that, a little more on the film.

Pocahontas' final celebratory montage dramatises her newfound world of loving delight. It simultaneously provides the culmination of her story and the film's overarching story and defies that either be regarded as a tragedy. For some critics this spurning is at the very least naïve and, at worst, shameful given the genocidal consequences of the colonial enterprise. In dramatising the idea that out of the miscegenation of victor and vanquished and the re-

blooming of unconditional love, there is a way to move beyond the colonial holocaust, *The New World* shows, I would argue its political audacity.⁴³

There is also a not-unrelated structural audacity at work in the film. For on the one hand, Pocahontas' story can be seen as readily conforming to a classic three-act structure with its clear beginning, middle and climax-involving end. On the other hand, the handling of the point-of-view camouflages whose story the film is for nearly two-thirds of its length. The film spends the first 90 (of its 130) minutes as a twin point-of-view story, cutting between the lives and worlds of Pocahontas and Smith. This exploits the familiar conventions of a dual-protagonist love story by not giving either a favoured point-of-view in their private shared scenes. Once, however, Smith leaves Jamestown, 40 minutes from the end of the film, the film becomes almost entirely Pocahontas' point-of-view. There is a single shot of Smith on distant windswept shores (before their reunion), and we briefly experience Rolfe's point-of-view when we first meet him, primarily, I believe, as a way to avoid his final voice-over exposition about Pocahontas' death being unprecedented, and thereby jarring.

These manipulations in the point-of-view (henceforth 'pov') exploit, only to overturn, viewer expectations about the person whose story it is. Mainstream films rarely separate the pov of view of the story and the person whose story it is (i.e., the person who has the most substantial character development, or journey). The standard approach is to conflate the two. In setting up a dual pov film, the film's grammar prioritises the Pocahontas-Smith relationship, announcing them as co-equal leads. Once this changes in the last forty minutes the viewer is prompted to recapitulate the story to date, and newly appreciate Pocahontas' actual status as the sole protagonist. This audacious and temporarily destabilising story structure is not, however, sprung on us out of nowhere.

In the ceremony at the Naturals' longhouse, when Smith is first captured, he recounts in voice-over, 'At the moment I was to die she threw herself upon me.' Just prior to this moment, however, we see Pocahontas on stand-by, being cued to join the proceedings with a nod from father, Powhatan.⁴⁴ It subsequently becomes clear that she has been instructed to engage in this life-saving intercession, and that she is playing a preordained role in the ceremony. Whether the ceremonial requirements demand that the person who intercedes be of high standing (e.g., the Chief's daughter) or whether Powhatan deliberately chooses Pocahontas because she is best positioned to befriend Smith, and thus discover the Colonists' plans, is unclear, but both reasons may apply. Either way, Powhatan is confirmed as strategically savvy and tactically shrewd, whilst Pocahontas is revealed to be an unquestioning follower of parental authority. Smith's voice-over announcement about her 'life-saving intercession' quickly reveals him to be an unreliable narrator; this then enables the subsequent shift to Pocahontas' sole (reliable) pov.⁴⁵ Further evidence that Smith's voice-over is unreliable is demonstrated by the

fact people and equipment are ready and waiting for the ‘rebirthing’ section of the ceremony that follows the intercession; these would not be needed were Pocahontas’ involvement not stage-managed.

One result of the pov shift to Pocahontas, on Smith’s departure, is to downgrade the Pocahontas/Smith relationship from being the film’s *raison d’être*, to just one of several loving relationships explored. So the film blossoms into an exploration of the various kinds of love a young woman might experience: from the heady passion of a virginal girl for a more experienced sexual partner to a measured marital love steeped in kindness, respect and shared labour; from the love between a father and a daughter, which might be sacrificed for political goals to that of the all-too-temporary playful love between siblings; and *The New World* re-envisions the diversity of possible loving finally to the unquestioning love between mother and child. By playing with and against the standard pov conventions of a love story, relationships, putting Pocahontas at the centre of their life-shaping values.

One might view Pocahontas’ journey as a Christian allegory illustrating Eve’s innocence in the Garden of Eden, her exile from Paradise at the Fall, and Paradise Regained with her final divine state of grace achieved through the transformative power of love. But whilst that resonance is, for some viewers inescapable, Pocahontas’ inculcation into the life and practices of Jamestown contains no direct education into Christian beliefs or practices, albeit she is baptised and married (by a ship’s captain). The house Pocahontas moves into, inside the stockade, once belonged to Jamestown’s now-dead Reverend, suggesting perhaps that the Christianity inside the fort has been usurped. There seems to be little, if any, direction that we draw specifically Christian conclusions about the film’s meaning. Indeed, one might recognise an overtly anti-Christian aspect given Pocahontas’ journey dramatises the possibility of reversing the supposed catastrophe of the Fall *without* divine intervention.

Lloyd Michael’s claim that the film is some kind of ‘synthesis’ of both pagan and Christian religions into a ‘natural religion’ is therefore unjustified.⁴⁶ No such synthesising occurs. Instead, it is one of the extraordinary achievements of the film to leave open the door to see the film as both a metaphor for the meaning-giving existence of a loving Christian God, and for the fact of ‘His’ complete redundancy.⁴⁷

The film dramatises the opacity of another’s religious iconography, offering a re-estrangement of a number of visual symbols for those viewers familiar with them. When the aboriginals encounter the Colonists’ large wooden cross and when Pocahontas’ companion, Opechancanough considers the statue of Jesus and stained-glass windows in the English royal chapel, both cross and statue are inert: meaningless to curious people for whom the practice of Christianity is as nothing (see figures 10 and 11, on 215).

The impenetrability of the religious practices of others is also evident in the extended longhouse ceremony when Smith is ‘reborn’ perhaps as an hon-



Figure 10: An indigenous tribesman encounters a crucifix outside Jamestown fort.



Figure 11: Opechancanough visits the royal chapel in England.

orary aboriginal. With its shaman- or priest-like figures dressed in tree- and bird-evoking costumes, and the highly choreographed ‘re-birthing’ experience – later echoed by Pocahontas’ own Christian baptism – the film shows the inextricable intimacy between religious belief and religious practices (see figures 12 and 13, on 216).



Figure 12: The captured Smith is taken through a religious or cultural ceremony.

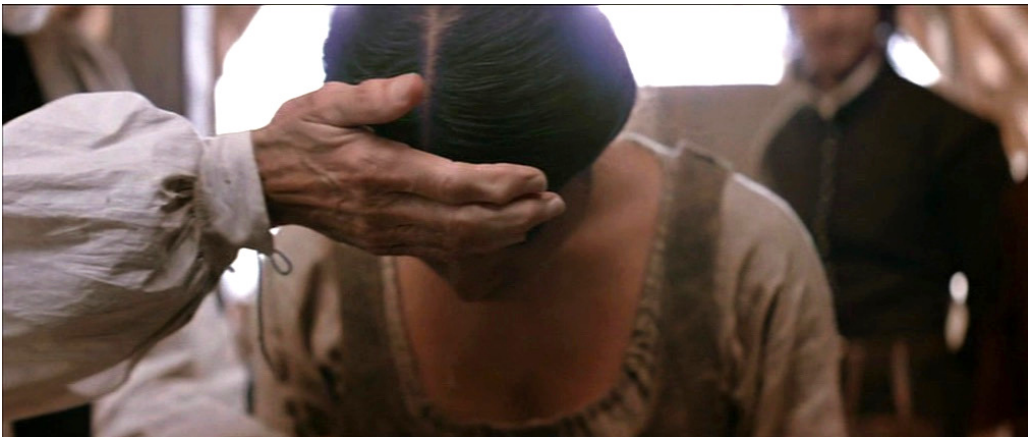


Figure 13: Pocahontas is baptised in Jamestown.

To the film's political and structural audacity, I would therefore add religious audacity for daring to show religion as a form of life, not a matter of divine revelation.

There are many such parallels between Smith's inculcation into the 'new world' that is the Naturals' way of life, and Pocahontas' absorption into the 'new world' of the Colonists and the 'new world' of the English court. We see afresh not just the similarities and differences in our human practices but the very fact that we all have them (see figures 14, 15, 16, and 17, on 217 ff.).



Figure 14: Smith is groomed by a tribesman.



Figure 15: Pocahontas helps Smith with his ablutions (cf. her baptism in Figure 13.)



Figure 16: Pocahontas at her own ablutions, Jamestown-style.



Figure 17: Pocahontas is dressed (cf. Smith's grooming in Figure 14); the framing emphasising the co-existence of the strange and the quotidian.

The English Royal Court is another version of an aboriginal longhouse. Pocahontas' walk towards King James, the Queen, and officials echoes Smith's running-the-gauntlet walk towards Powhatan and his key advisers (see figures 18 and 19, on 219). The clothes of all both are no less meaning-endowed uniforms; part and parcel of practices in which they are worn.

With Malick directing, it is unsurprising to see characters' engaging with the surrounding natural world as a way of developing various themes. Smith's walk amongst the fields and trees – after his reprieve from hanging – is the wide-eyed encounter of a man who has just escaped death and for whom the world and its beauty is born anew. The point is echoed and reversed in Opechancanough's confused encounter with the trees and hedges of English Royal Gardens which have been topiarised into submission. It is also echoed, without irony, by Pocahontas' delight in the gardens at the end of the film, when the world and its beauty is born anew for her, too. And so on . . .

In such ways does *The New World* exploit, toy with, and defy genre expectations and the conventions of film grammar. With the opening sequence of languorous swimming and the enveloping presence of nature, the film's style, pace and rhythm insist that the audience take their time with the film and abandon expectations prompted by the familiar subject matter. In its final moments, the film culminates in a montage that mixes our human world with the realm of nature as Pocahontas' celebratory salutation is intercut by her watching her husband play with their son, her playing with the boy herself, shots of her empty marriage bed, her headstone, rushing rivers and the sunlight through trees. Throughout, the rumbling *Rheingold* crescendos, then cuts out. We are left with just the sound of birds and flowing water as we gaze up into the tree canopy, watching the trunks and branches sway in the wind. A leaf falls and the film cuts to black. Pocahontas may be



Figure 18: The English court officials scrutinise their unprecedented visitor Pocahontas.



Figure 19: The tribesmen scrutinise their unprecedented visitor, Smith.

dead, but life goes on, and with it the final dramatic questions of the film are released: how might or ought I/we to live? what can be chosen and what not? and what have I/we yet to realise and appreciate? In proselytising for the importance of treasuring loving relationships – with lover, spouse, parent, child, sibling, and nature – *The New World* simultaneously shows us that we are people who also make choices, create meaning, and value love.

V. CINEMATIC HUMANISM

In Section III., I presented four ways to characterise the Heideggerian encounter with *The New World*. i.e., as one or more of: (i) data-gathering to support a metaphysical theory; (ii) philosophically inflected film criticism; (iii) the illustration of philosophical texts; and (iv) an exercise in collapsing categorial distinctions between film-viewing, filmmaking, and philosophising. Insofar as these were correctly applicable to the Heideggerian approach they were shown to be theoretical. Are any of these options relevant to the above Cinematic Humanist engagement with the film?

Option (i) is beside the point: there is no theory, metaphysical or otherwise, being brought to bear on the film, so the film is not being used to provide evidence of any such thing. Similarly, Option (iv) has no purchase on the Cinematic Humanism encounter for I am not claiming that the film itself is philosophising, nor am I seeking to collapse film-making and film-viewing. Malick (together with his colleagues in front of and behind the camera) is responsible for the film. I, as a viewer, am responsible for exploring and discovering what is on screen, its sub-text, and how the cinematic, dramatic, and other aesthetic resources are brought to bear on the film's subject in developing its themes. In so doing I find the film to have artistic, aesthetic, and epistemic value.

This Cinematic Humanist consideration might well be regarded as Option (ii), i.e., philosophically inflected film criticism. If philosophy is *by definition* theoretical then the very idea of philosophy *without theory* is an oxymoron. With Craig Fox, I have already argued that philosophy of film *without theory* is a way of appreciating a range of philosophical methods which include: fine-grained description and discernment; disentangling confusions; reactive and/or reflective critical inquiry; the exploration of conceptual connections; conceptual clarification and synthesis; logical geography; the provision of perspicuous presentations and surveyable overviews; non-systematic engagement with individual or particular works, subjects, objects, ideas, events, and/or situations; and an appreciation that the view is always from somewhere and at some time, etc.⁴⁸ I trust that the previous section's Cinematic Humanist encounter can be characterised as engaged in a number of these activities, without having to labour the point. It also accords with Stanley Cavell's suggestion that 'the way to overcome theory correctly, philosophically, is to let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it'.⁴⁹

The question remains, though, is Cinematic Humanism, as a particular example of philosophy of film *without theory*, philosophically valuable? I would argue it is because it requires seeing a film, such as *The New World*, not just as a *work* of art, but as a *whole* constituted not simply by its parts but by its parts in all their relations with each other and in relation to the whole; and that this requires an openness to the work and a readiness to engage with it not just in its historical and cultural context but on its own terms. This openness requires one to recognise that we bring assumptions

to bear on the work and in understanding and appreciating the work afresh we also come to understand and appreciate our assumptions afresh, and in doing both we see ourselves afresh and anew in the work. To see ourselves afresh and anew, in the film, is to see ourselves philosophically; and this is not trivial.

One might nonetheless object that this particular Cinematic Humanist encounter trades on philosophical theories and as such is philosophy of film *with* rather than *without theory*. Such an objection might leverage Option (iii) pressing the point that Cinematic Humanism illustrates or exploits Wittgensteinian and perhaps Cavellian proposals, albeit in a covert, rather than the overt Heideggerian way.

There is, however, a major difference between these uses of, or allusions to, extra-cinematic philosophers, which undermines the potential grip of this objection. For, in the case of Wittgenstein, he is not a metaphysical system builder; he is not a philosophical theoretician; he does not put forward hypotheses and thus one cannot use cinematic resources as confirmatory evidence for any non-existent theory of his. That said, Wittgenstein is committed to the use of fiction in conceptual, rather than, empirical investigations. ‘Nothing is more important for teaching us to understand the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones.’⁵⁰ But in exploring the conceptual connections between the different uses of, say, our notion *world*, in the previous Section, I am not seeking to prove Wittgenstein right in this claim, for he is not making an empirical claim. He is just describing a practice, and I am just engaging in a similar practice.

Along the same lines, my reading does not seek to claim that Pocahontas’ death, as characterised by her husband’s voice-over ‘proves’ Wittgenstein’s appreciation that death is not an event in one’s own life. Nor am I extracting empirical evidence from the film to justify Wittgenstein’s non-theoretical observation that the world of a happy man is not the same as that of an unhappy man.⁵¹ In pursuing understanding rather than propositional knowledge, and sense rather than truth, the philosophy of film *without theory* – and Cinematic Humanism as one possible example of it – leaves theoretical pursuits to the scientists and the empiricists.

The objection is perhaps less easily overcome in the case of Cavell, for although he is not a theorist, his interest in finding commonalities between films might be taken as proto-theoretical. Were I to take Pocahontas’ final realisation that she loves her husband Rolfe, and not her first lover Smith, as evidence for there being non-comedic examples of remarriage films, my purpose would not be to strengthen some supposed Cavellian theory that seeks to make generalisations about a small clutch of films that share a common story structure and dramatic idea.

Finally, one might object that the ‘humanism’ in Cinematic Humanism is a theoretical, or at least quasi-theoretical, notion in its own right. By

championing Cinematic Humanism as one possible way of doing philosophy of film *without theory*, am I not ejecting theory out the front door, only to let it in through the back? Undoubtedly there are, and have been, theoretical constructions put on humanism, but I mean to invoke none by my choice of the term. The ‘humanism’ in Cinematic Humanism is there primarily as a reminder to myself, and perhaps others, that the approach to philosophy of film it favours is non-reductive. Unlike cognitive film theory, Cinematic Humanism does not seek to surrender the personal to the sub-personal. It is people, not their brains, or any putative intercranial cognitive abilities or processes who watch films and discover themselves and our human condition therein. Unlike film Theory and some film-philosophy, Cinematic Humanism does not regard human beings as impotent ideologically constructed ‘subjectivities’. It is people, rather than any erstwhile human beings, that we find in films and understand ourselves to be.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In our making, watching, and thinking about cinematic works of art we find artistic, aesthetic, and epistemic value. Some ways of doing this can be appreciated as doing philosophy of film *without theory* and I have proposed and demonstrated Cinematic Humanism as one such way.

What then of the relation between theoretical philosophy of film and philosophy of film *without theory*? In the spirit of Morris Weitz’s observation, one can, I trust, criticise the presumption that philosophical investigations must aim at definitions and theory construction, whilst simultaneously recognising that the theoretical practices of others are worth engaging with.⁵² For although such philosophers may be pursuing a questionable quarry, in so doing they draw attention to aspects, and features of works of art that sometimes go unrecognised, overlooked, and/or undervalued. In developing diverse ways in which to do philosophy of film *without theory*, there is no reason to self-isolate to avoid theoretical infection. For this reason, I conclude that *The New World* is both a Heideggerian and a Humanist film.⁵³

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NOTES

¹Wittgenstein 2009.

²Fox and Harrison 2020 in this issue, and forthcoming.

³I use ‘film’ and ‘films’ not as medium- or material-specific terms but as catch-all nouns for moving picture, or moving image productions of any length or scale that

might reasonably be conceived of as works of art, either in a classificatory or honorific sense.

⁴See Patterson 2007; Rybin 2011 and 2012; Silverman 2003; Barnett 2013; Donougho 2011; Loht 2013 and 2015; Sinnerbrink 2006, 2011, 2014, 2015 and 2019; Cousins 2007; Critchley 2002, Garrett 2008

and Neer 2011, for some examples of Heideggerian considerations of Malick's *œuvre*.

⁵Maher Jr. 2014, 31-32. This book is self-published and has obvious inconsistencies. It remains, to my knowledge, the primary source for identifying Malick's doctoral topic.

⁶See IMDb for Malick's filmography here: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000517/>.

⁷See Critchley 2002 for his discussion of Malick's screen version of the James Jones' 1962 novel of the same name. For Production Notes, Cast, and Crew, see <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120863/>.

⁸Sinnerbrink 2006, 29.

⁹Sinnerbrink 2006, 34.

¹⁰Furstenau and MacAvoy 2007, 190.

¹¹Furstenau and MacAvoy 2007, 181.

¹²Morrison 2007, 201-203, original spelling.

¹³Rybin 2012, 2.

¹⁴Rybin 2011, 14.

¹⁵Cavell 1979, xv.

¹⁶Silverman 2003, 324.

¹⁷See Martin 2007, 220 fn.1, for individual details of the various versions. The general release PAL (Region 2) DVD (New Line Productions) I work with is 130 minutes, not the 135 minutes, referred to there. The synopsis in fn.17 below is of the shortest of the released versions. See IMDb for cast, crew, and production details, here: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0402399/>.

¹⁸A fuller synopsis: 1607 – on the shores of what will become Virginia, three ships arrive bringing Europeans and indigenous people into contact for the first time. As the construction of the Jamestown fort gets underway, the Colonists and the so-called 'Naturals' develop a cautious co-existence. Pocahontas (early/mid-teens) and Captain Smith (late 20s) – fresh from the hangman's noose, pardoned for we know not what – meet in the fields beyond the stockade and a mutual fascination begins. When much of the Colonists' food is ruined, leader Captain Newport (70s) returns to England for supplies, sending Smith upstream in search of potential trading partners. Smith is cap-

tured by Pocahontas' people, and in an opaque-to-him ceremony led by her father, Chief or King Powhatan, Smith believes Pocahontas intervenes and saves his life. Pocahontas' father tasks her with getting to know Smith, as part of his strategy to gain information about the new arrivals' plans. As Smith is inculcated into the language and practices of this native community, Pocahontas falls in love with him and their emotional and (presumed) sexual intimacy grows. Smith returns to Jamestown discovering an ever-worsening situation. Just before starvation decimates the remaining survivors, Pocahontas and other Naturals arrive with food. Although she is eager to continue her relationship with Smith, he deliberately distances himself from Pocahontas, insisting she misunderstands who he is. Spring brings new hope for the Colonists as their crops flourish and trading with locals begins, but when it becomes clear the Colonists are staying, the Naturals attack Jamestown. During the fighting, Pocahontas' brother is killed. Blaming Pocahontas, Powhatan disowns and banishes his daughter. The still-estranged Smith finds his own temporary leadership of the surviving Colonists usurped. By the time Captain Newport returns from England with supplies, and a second wave of Colonists, Pocahontas is being held hostage in the fort on the mistaken presumption this will prevent further attack. Smith is present but by now, *persona non grata*. Pocahontas is inculcated into the European lifestyle and practices. Freshly baptised 'Rebecca', she attempts to revive the relationship with Smith. After a few tender, though for him hesitant, encounters, Smith leaves abruptly, accepting a commission to find a route to the Indies. Pocahontas' heartbreak turns to grief when she is subsequently told (falsely) that Smith has died at sea. After a period of sorrowful inactivity, she slowly re-engages with life's mundane tasks. Pocahontas unwittingly draws the attention of recent arrival, John Rolfe (30s) accepting his offer of marriage whilst insisting she does not love him. Rolfe accepts this fact, announcing his intention to win her love, nonethe-

less. Married, Pocahontas and Rolfe live outside the stockade walls and cultivate tobacco with the help of both Colonists and Naturals, and Pocahontas gives birth to a son. A few years later, when she learns that Smith is still alive, Pocahontas spurns Rolfe's affections, insisting she is still 'married'. Pocahontas and Rolfe accept an invitation to meet King James I in England. In the wake of their presentation at court, Rolfe reveals that Smith is also present. He encourages Pocahontas to meet with Smith, confessing he was wrong to try to make her love him. Pocahontas re-meets Smith who makes no attempt to explain his disappearance or win her back; simply stating that what they 'had in the forest' is 'the only truth'. Pocahontas returns to Rolfe and declares him to be her (only) husband, kissing him unreservedly. In the formal royal gardens Pocahontas offers her familiar, but long absent, religious salutation to 'Mother' declaring, 'Now I know where you live', then plays with her son. Rolfe's voice-over reveals that Pocahontas died in England, soon afterwards, but that she accepted her death, believing it was enough that her child lived. Rolfe and their son sail back, leaving Pocahontas buried in England. Rivers flow and trees branches sway against the sky.

¹⁹See Nicol 2011 for a detailed provenance.

²⁰Heidegger 1962.

²¹Heidegger 1971, 160 original emphasis. For more on dwelling see especially the 1950-51 lecture-based essays *Building Dwelling Thinking, The Thing and ... Poetically Man Dwells...* in Heidegger 1971.

²²Heidegger 1971, 182.

²³Heidegger 1971, 161.

²⁴Heidegger 1971, 227.

²⁵Heidegger 1962, 207.

²⁶Heidegger 1971, 161.

²⁷Heidegger 1971, 150.

²⁸Heidegger 1971, 158-159.

²⁹Heidegger 1971, 150.

³⁰Heidegger 1971, 150.

³¹Heidegger 1971, 151.

³²Heidegger 1971, 221.

³³Heidegger 1971, 227.

³⁴Heidegger 1971, 229.

³⁵Heidegger 1971, 229.

³⁶This is Captain Newport's phrase in his address to the Colonists.

³⁷Heidegger 1971, 220.

³⁸Heidegger 1971, 165-182.

³⁹Heidegger 1971, 172.

⁴⁰Heidegger 1971, 181.

⁴¹Heidegger 1971, 182.

⁴²Heidegger 1977, 230 and 203.

⁴³Robert Sinnerbrink tries to cauterise what he sees as the political naivety of *The New World* by characterising it as 'knowing romanticism' designed to 'retrieve the possibility of a reconciliation between cultures and which acknowledges our general human dependence on nature' as the basis for such a reconciliation (Sinnerbrink 2011, 183). Rybin slightly mollifies his punch but only after landing it, announcing any 'educated audience' with the decency enough to be 'sensitive' to the historical facts of colonial violence would find the vision of Pocahontas having a life-enriching experience in the English Royal Gardens 'perhaps offensive' (Rybin 2012, 166, emphasis added). Indeed, Rybin backs away from any thematic consideration of the film, as if to avoid guilt by association. Instead he insists, Pocahontas is 'keeping that meaning secret' (Rybin 2012, 164); 'meaning is held in suspension' (166). He even suggests that Malick 'disavows his ability to know' (164) insofar as he 'refuses to explain' Pocahontas' spiritual 'epiphany' (166). At this point Rybin retreats to the challenging prose style of Theory to propose 'the human being has no hierarchical place of mastery over the narrative' (138).

⁴⁴Around 24 minutes into the film.

⁴⁵An examination of the single reaction shots on her (which there is not space for here) would show she is not an unreliable narrator.

⁴⁶Michaels 2009, 91.

⁴⁷This point could also be made about *The Thin Red Line*.

⁴⁸Fox and Harrison 2020.

⁴⁹Cavell 1981, 10.

⁵⁰Wittgenstein 1982, 19.

⁵¹Wittgenstein 1961, 6.43.

⁵²Weitz 1956.

⁵³I dedicate this article to Daniel Shaw who died in March, 2020. Dan was the first person to respond to my Heideggerian encounter with *The New World*. I treasure his personal kindness and generous encouragement, not least *because of* his theoretical commitments. Thanks also to Vernon Cisney and all the participants of Gettys-

burg College's 2016 Seminar *The Film and Philosophy of Terrence Malick* where the seeds of this paper and Cinematic Humanism were first sown. My thanks also to Craig Fox, Rob van Gerwen, Peter Lamarque, and David Levy for comments on earlier versions of this material.

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