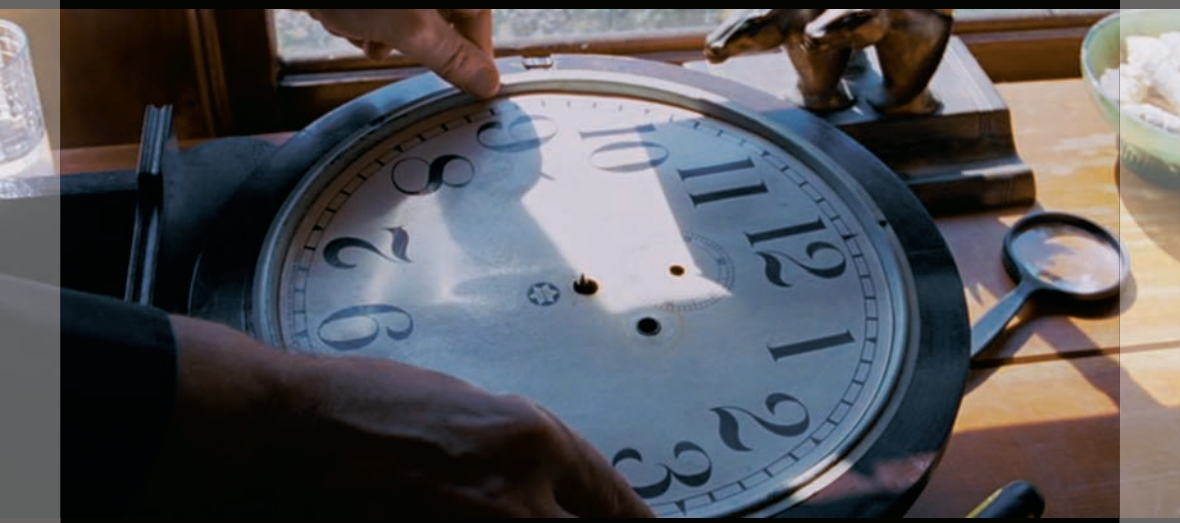
FILM CULTURE IN TRANSITION

THE WORK OF

TERRENCE MALICK



TIME-BASED ECOCINEMA

GABRIELLA BLASI

Amsterdam University Press

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For Alaya

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Introduction

Abstract
The Introduction of the book focuses on the concepts of nature and history in Malick scholarship and foregrounds historical and material approaches rather than mythical and theological approaches to his films. The chapter redirects Ecocinema scholarship on the importance of temporal relations to nature and finitude in films. The combination of Lyotard's figural aesthetics and Benjamin's concept of the shape of time are compared and contrasted with Merleau-Pontyenne phenomenology and Deleuzian materiality and notion of the time-image. The chapter frames Benjamin's concept of the shape of time as a novel contribution to film-phenomenology and presents a time-based methodological framework in Ecocinema approaches to time and nature in Malick films.

Keywords: time-image; figural aesthetics; shape of time; Ecocinema; phenomenology.

'People, you are the future. You will decide what happens to our world. What happens to the birds from the air, the fish in the sea, the water that we drink. You will decide what happens to our world. You. People. You. Are. The Future. And the future. Is. NOW.' (Song to Song, 2017)'

In May 2019, viewers of the 72nd Cannes Film Festival are the first to experience the latest Malick film, *A Hidden Life*, a cinematic retelling of historical events that happened in 1943 Europe. The story of an Austrian conscientious objector, Franz Jägerstätter, who was sentenced to the death penalty because he refused to obey state and religious authority of his time, will confront viewers' relation to ethical actions and choices, at a time in which Jägerstätter's acts and choices were questionable, non-heroic and private and the majority of his contemporaries were metaphorically jumping on a train to hell.

In 1943, Adolf Hitler's Holocaust was at its peak, with millions of European Jews being deported to concentration camps and systematically killed in gas chambers. In the same year Terrence Malick was born in Illinois and

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Martin Heidegger, a then member of Hitler's National Socialist party, was about to publish *The Essence of Truth* based on the *Aletheia* lectures given at Freiburg University ten years earlier. Only three years before, Walter Benjamin, one of the many German Jews intellectuals fleeing the Nazi occupation of France in 1940, also chooses death rather than succumbing to Hitler's laws and takes his own life after a failed attempt to reach the United States and cross the border from France to Spain without legal documents. Twenty-five years later, Malick, a then Philosophy student from Harvard, visits Heidegger in his hut near the Black Forest as he prepares to work on the English translation of *The Essence of Reason*. In 1969, after abandoning academic pursues and his thesis on the concept of world in Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, Malick chooses to sit the inaugural class of the American Film Institute Conservatory, beginning his remarkable career as a filmmaker.

This book joins a growing number of scholarly work on Malick's oeuvre that recognizes the important contribution of his cinema to contemporary culture and thought. Its main argument is that Malick's body of work articulates a radical shift in traditional human relations to time, nature and technology in the twenty-first century. The concept of a time-based ecocinema announced in this book's title encapsulates the central notion that Malick's cinematic work alters teleological notions of time and history in human culture and destroys traditional conceptions of spatio-temporal continuity. Malick's films bring forward a new temporal framework in nature-culture relations, opening up a reconsideration of the role of films and spectatorship in the twenty-first century. In 2019, at a time in which nation-states' powers ignore people's voices and ecological disaster is a transnational emergency, Malick's films mobilise considerations on the role of ecocinema studies in human-nature relations beyond nation-state authorities and borders. Malick's cinematic work is here analysed focusing on precise questions on human freedom in finitude and in technologically determined communication frameworks, questions that were central in both Heidegger's and Benjamin's philosophical projects and that are crucial today, when human beings are, once again, metaphorically jumping on a train to hell, ignoring calls to address climate change and systematic loss of natural habitats and animal species on a global scale.

The image of the train, borrowed from Franz Jägerstätter's writings in *A Hidden Life*, resonates in Malick's early work and portrayal of human history in his films. As I shall argue in Chapter 1, one of such images is at the end of *Days of Heaven* when Abby joins a group of young soldiers going towards World War I, just after a rather enigmatic figure, an apple seller,

exchanges glances with her as she crosses the road to reach the train station. The apple seller offers unexplored considerations on human freedom of choice in historical time, a figural thread that returns and recurs in Malick films, disguised under many shapes and forms as the trope of 'fallenness' into finitude and history in human-nature relations. In many ways this book tells the story of Abby's missed choice, the same choice that over the past 40 years continues to be offered to a growing number of spectators of Malick films through shifting film technologies and styles across nations, languages and borders.

Three major influences inform this book's theoretical approach to the analysis of Malick's films, providing the framework, vocabulary and concepts of a time-based ecocinema. These are Benjamin's phenomenology and concept of the 'shape of time' as discussed by Peter Fenves in *The Messianic Reduction*; a figural approach to aesthetics as discussed by Jean François Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure*; and contemporary debates in ecocinema scholarhip, particularly the work of Salma Monanni, Sean Cubitt, and Adrian Ivakhiv. The aim of this book is to shine a light on the relevance of a Benjaminian film-phenomenological framework in Malick studies and to complement traditional formalist approaches to film analysis with a figural approach in ecocinema studies.

Framing Nature and History in Malick Scholarship

From Kit and Holly's vain escape in the forest (*Badlands* 1973), to the biblical plagues of *Days of Heaven* (1978), the invasion of indigenous land and communities in *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *The New World* (2005), the evolution of life in the cosmos in *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *Voyage of Time: Life's Journey* (2016), and the deeply alienated twenty-first century settings of *To the Wonder* (2014), *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (2017), Malick's films consistently deal with the difficult relation between humans and nature in the form of finitude and freedom of choice. Malick's complex treatment of nature images in his films is the object of extensive scholarly work that privileges a mythical rather than historical framework of analysis on nature-culture relations. The mythical critical strand is broadly divided into Christian and transcendentalist views of nature. David Davies notes that many critics see an 'Edenic yearning for a lost wholeness of being or the expression of an Emersonian Transcendentalism' (p. 3) in Malick's films. Taking their cues from *The Thin Red Line*'s voice-overs referring to 'one big soul' and 'all things shining', Ron Mottram and Stacy

Peebles argue that Malick's conception of nature refers specifically to the work of Thoreau and Emerson in the American transcendentalist tradition. Peeble argues that for 'Emerson, as well as for Witt, and also Malick, nature and spirituality are inextricably intertwined,' and only through communion with nature, humans can regain their connection to an Emersonian universal soul (p. 157). Moving from similar premises, Mottram sees in the chronology of the historical settings of Malick's films a progressive loss of transcendental unity and wholeness with the world of nature. Whereas Robert Silberman sees a constant preoccupation with the pastoral in Malick's oeuvre, from the Maxfield Parrish print in *Badlands*, to H.H. Bennett's photographs in *Days of Heaven*, to the more explicit lost paradises of the Melanesian and Powhatan people in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*. Among other mythical interpretations, the myth of the American land and the West figure prominently in John Orr's and Neil Campbell's readings of *Badlands*.

With some notable exceptions (Steven Rybin 'Voicing menaing', *The Thought of Film*; Warwick Mules 'Mise-en-Scène and the Figural' and 'How Film Can Carry Being') the mythical and non-historical critical strand found renewed impulse in the early 2010s and predominates contemporary scholarship on Malick's films. With the release of *The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015), *Voyage of Time* (2016), *Song to Song* (2017) and *A Hidden Life* (2019) in uncharacteristically rapid succession, mythical interpretations of Malick's work have shifted to uncompromised theological readings in the Christian tradition (Peter J. Leithart; Nicola Hoggard Creegan). Malick's later films undoubtedly present increasingly marked religious themes with the exploration of Gnostic and Manichean worldviews (Bradley TePaske). As TePaske explains, a Gnostic view of the world entails an intrinsic 'fallenness' from an original state of grace. In this view, human kind, in particular, has fallen from the world of Grace to the world of Nature and must find their way back to Grace through trials and struggles. In this vein, Malick is treated in rather mystical terms and his films are seen as sacred texts that need to be decoded according to a 'pansophic tradition' (TePaske, p. 118) of arcane knowledge.[1] The insistence on another world (of peace and/or Grace) beyond the world of war and

1 TePaske likens Malick to a lineage of thinkers that goes from the 'pre-Socratic philosophers through Jewish apocalyptic, to Gnosticism, alchemy, Renaissance hermeticism, Goethe, William Blake, and on to C.G. Jung' (p. 118). Exponents of this pansophic tradition, for TePaske, 'were soulful visionaries who generally knew their Cabbala, were astrologically adept, and whose purview was born of, and intent upon, immediate experience of psyche and the spiritual world' (p. 120).

nature is a common thread of the mythical and transcendental approach to Malick's films. Silberman, for example, sees in the recurrent figure of speech of the 'spark' in *The Thin Red Line,* 'a kind of visual fire sermon [... that] offers another view of transcendence to go with the idyllic images of light and water [... these] indicate a realm of peace beyond the landscape of war' (p. 171). Notwithstanding the proliferation of theological readings of Malick's films of the 2010s (Kathleen E. Urda; Brent S. Plate; George B. Handley; Paul Camacho; Christopher Barnett and Clark Elliston), there is a consistent body of academic work framing Malick's concerns on nature and grace in philosophical rather than religious terms.

An important strand of critical work analyses Malick's cinema through the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, and draws on some fascinating biographical elements of Malick's career.[2] Focusing on the specifics of nature-culture relations, the general consensus is that the world of nature in Malick's films stands for the world of finitude and mortality or, in Heidegger's words, 'being toward death' (Heidegger, *Being and Time*). Among many nuanced Heideggerian readings in this vein (Hubert Dreyfus and Camilo Salazar Prince; Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy; Martin Donougho; Roger Clewis) Kaja Silverman argues that rather than speaking of Being, Malick's cinema, particularly *The Thin Red Line*, 'shows it to us' (324). This showing of Being, for Silverman, translates into a phenomenological approach to the sensuous possibilities of cinematic experiences. In this, Silverman's interpretation of 'fallenness', through Heidegger, is very different from the Gnostic interpretations mentioned above. Moving from Heidegger's insight that 'death is a way to be which Dasein takes over as soon as it is' (p. 228), Silverman suggest, 'fallenness' signifies not a permanent lapse out of innocence into sinfulness but rather *Dasein*'s normal, everyday state' (p. 342). As Davies points out, however, reading Malick's work through Heidegger brings forth a different set of preoccupations on nature-culture relations through his films: not only nature as an expression of being-towards-death and mortality, but as an 'expression of the Heideggerian ontological critique of technology, and of the Heideggerian role of the poet in destitute times who reveals through the medium of cinema the presencing of Being through language' (pp. 3-4).

2 Malick studied philosophy under Stanley Cavell, who, commenting on Malick's *Days of Heaven*, first noticed the director's affinity with Heideggerian thought in the introduction to his book *The World Viewed.* As John Rhym and others have noted, Malick's academic background in philosophy and his translation of Heidegger's *The Essence of Reason* have inspired many readings of his films as emergence of a Heideggerean cinema, especially from *The Thin Red Line* onwards.

Heideggerian readings of Malick's oeuvre privilege a thoroughly historical, rather than mythological, framework of analysis. Rybin's book-length analysis on Malick's films, for example, openly resists mythological views of nature and maintains that his cinema enables a phenomenological connection between characters and viewers:

> I seek to understand Malick's cinema and in particular our encounters with his characters, as the experiential site of our film-philosophy. Heidegger's concepts [...] will not determine what Malick means to us, then, but will rather open for us a space in which the meanings Malick's characters strive to make, and how they strive to voice this meaning, eventually mark who we ourselves strive to become in watching his films. (p. 3)

Rybin suggests Malick's characters do not occupy clearly defined subjectivities, ideologies, and viewpoints, but strive to make meaning. In his analysis of striving, he explicitly connects Heidegger's philosophy to Vivian Sobchack's existential phenomenology in film studies. Rybin's productive analysis of Heidegger's notions of striving, worlding, and dwelling in Malick's films is therefore to be understood as striving for meaning solidly anchored in historical space, in the space of the films' characters and their viewers' contingent circumstances.

Rybin's study of Malick's films intersects with work on film-philosophy and cinematic thinking. The question that runs through film-philosophical understandings of Malick's films, as Robert Sinnerbrink's work ('A Heideggerian Cinema ?'; *New Philosophies of Film*) suggests, is not concerned with mere illustration of a philosophical meta-text, but should take into greater consideration the specific role of film and media technologies in generating and provoking philosophical thought:

> A 'Heideggerian' approach to Malick's work [...] presuppose[s] that we have already considered the question of the nature of the cinematic image and its capacity to provoke thought. And these are questions still very much to be explored. ('A Heideggerian Cinema?', pp. 36-37)

The use of Heidegger's thought in film-philosophy, for Sinnerbrink, is problematic considering his take on Heidegger's nostalgic propensity for pre-technological art-forms in nature-culture relations. As Sinnerbrink puts it:

> Heidegger's thinking on film, such as it is, remains overwhelmingly negative: film is a powerful instance of reductive technological

> en-framing that only intensifies the Western obliteration of Being. From this negativistic, 'end of art' perspective in Heidegger, cinema can only be regarded [...] as an aesthetic resource oriented towards the intensification of subjective sensation and objectification of Being. (p. 35)

For Heidegger, modern science and technological development contribute to the modern enframing (*Gestall*) and objectification of the world; a world in which technology transforms nature into a standing reserve for human indiscriminate consumption (*The Question Concerning Technology*). While Heidegger does not explicitly engage with a critique of cinema technologies in any of his writings, his criticism on modern science and subjectivity ('The Age of the World Picture') and his considerations on art ('The Origin of the Work of Art') suggest that cinema is, indeed, 'an aesthetic resource oriented towards the intensification of subjective sensation' (Sinnerbrink, p. 35).[3] In his writings on art and technology, Heidegger clearly privileges poetry, painting, and classical art-forms as capable of world disclosure or *poiesis*,[4] a blossoming or revealing of Being through art. It can be seen that the use of Heidegger's ideas in film studies has the undesirable side effect of further polarising the subject-object divide at the base of modern aesthetics; a divide that Heidegger's philosophy and notion of Being consistently tried to resolve throughout his writing and life.[5] While this book acknowledges the relevance and importance of Heidegger's philosophy in contemporary film-philosophical work on Malick's films (Silverman; Rybin; John Rhym), it maintains that Heidegger's philosophy of art and technology is less suitable when applied to the historical analysis of nature-culture relations in Malick's films. Notwithstanding the tragic consequences of seeking an impossible fulfillment in Nature as Being in modernity,[6] how is it possible to reconcile Heidegger's notion of enframing with Malick's use of film

3 Sinnerbrink's views on Heidegger's criticism of modern aesthetics are articulated in 'Heidegger and the End of Art' (pp. 89-109).

4 Heidegger's examples of art capable of world disclosure in 'The Origin' essay are Vincent van Gogh's paintings and Greek architecture. For a notable critique of Heidegger's pre-technological nostalgia, see Alain Badiou's *Manifesto for Philosophy*.

5 For a succinct and very clear rendition of Heidegger's ideas on modern conceptions of subjectivity and aesthetics see Joanna Hodge "Against Aesthetics", and Giovanni Vattimo's *The End of Modernity*.

6 While Heidegger's thought has contributed to important developments in ecocritical approaches to literature and culture (see Ladelle McWhorter), Greg Garrard has voiced the dangers of using Heidegger's thought and language in environmental discourses. This is also evident in Mules's work *With Nature* in which Mules engages with Heidegger's concepts and

technologies in dealing with nature-culture relations in his films? Perhaps for this reason, Sinnerbrink's own work on Malick after 'A Heideggerian Cinema?' does not use Heidegger's philosophy at all, but interprets Malick's poetic relation to the world and nature using German Romantic philosophy ('Cinematic Romanticism') in the analysis of *The New World* and Bazin's ontological realism ('Cinematic Belief') in the analysis of *The Tree of Life*.

This book will specifically enter into dialogue with a number of critical and philosophical works on Malick (Sinnerbrink; Rybin; Stuart Kendall; Donougho; Iain Macdonald; Mules) to demonstrate that Malick's cinema presents exciting challenges for contemporary film studies dealing with cinematic, non-mythological and historical approaches to nature-culture relations in his films. As shall be seen in greater detail in the course of the argument, these challenges are very relevant in contemporary ecocinema dealing with the importance of a renewed relation to nature and subject-object relations in contemporary culture. Benjamin's philosophy of art and technology not only illuminates Malick's distinctively cinematic treatment of nature-culture relations, but shifts ecocritical attention from issues of space and representation to issues of time and duration in film studies.

Ecocritical Film Studies and the Problem of Space

As a sub-branch of ecocriticism, ecocinema or ecocritical film studies is a productive field of investigation in the humanities. Ecocriticism investigates the complexities of nature-culture relations through their historical and contextual representations in cultural artifacts; the different ways humans relate to non-human nature and the environment; and the philosophical underpinnings of such relations. Films and moving images of human and non-human nature convey their meanings through complex interrelations of time-space coordinates, visual and aural cues and stimuli. Moving images and associated soundscapes can therefore be seen as heightened sensory experiences of the world; complex and highly artificial productions of

thought in the development of a contemporary philosophy of nature and sees a precise risk in Heideggerian nature-culture relations:

> Heidegger understands the nature-culture relation as one of mythologizing, in the sense that it is only enabled in the possibility of a mythic reunion with nature as Being, understood as a "to come" not yet here. This mythologizing [...] suggests that Being is a destiny towards which certain beings are directed. (pp. 140-141)

experiences; and imitations as well as constructions of the way humans relate to phenomena, real or invented.

In this view, the field of ecocinema, or ecocritical film studies or, more generally, ecomedia, has seen a proliferation of theoretical approaches in recent years. Publications in the field comprise edited collections presenting interdisciplinary work to tackle the complex ways in which moving images affect the relationship to the more than human world (Alexa Weik von Mossner) or apply findings derived from actor-network theory and ecological systems theory to media analysis (Sean Cubitt et al. *Ecomedia*). In a similar vein, Adrian Ivakhiv's model of analysis seeks to understand world forming in 'process-relational terms' (p. 47). Ivakhiv draws on Peirce, Bergson, North Whitehead, and Deleuze, to develop a 'synthetic triadic model' ('An Ecophilosophy' 60; *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, pp. 64-65) through which these relations can begin to be understood. On the other hand, Scott MacDonald maintains that ecocinema seeks an empirical 'retraining of perception—as a way of offering an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship' (p. 108). Applying a similarly empirical framework of analysis in cognitive psychology, Joseph Anderson et al. explore 'the ways moving images mesh with our minds' (David Bordwell, 'Foreword' in Anderson et al., *Moving Image Theory* xi).

The theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of ecocinema are currently undergoing a tripartite polarisation between Deleuzian materialism, a cognitivist approach to films, and a film-phenomenological one. A fourth emergent paradigm in the field is the hybridisation of cognitivism and film-phenomenology, despite the differences between the objective and empirical epistemology of the former and the subjective and experiential epistemology of the latter. What justifies the use of such diverse methodologies in the field is a concern to understand the ways in which humans relate to the more than human world and to their environments, be they real or virtual, in ways that are 'based on defensible philosophical principles, [and which] will account for all relevant aspects of film spectatorship, and, if possible, generate informative textual interpretations of individual films' (David Ingram, p. 24). The cognitivist/phenomenological approach to ecological concerns in films suggests the bipolar approach to cinema as subjective art or objective and empirically measurable product of technological intentions is far from resolved in contemporary culture.[7] For this reason, films, and

7 This approach to film studies trough subjectivist and objectivist lenses is evident in contemporary attempts to blend film-phenomenology and cognitive neuroscience (See Jane Stadler "Experiential Realism: A Neurophenomenological Approach") and attempts to blend Deleuzian film-philosophy and neuroscience (See Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image*).

especially Malick's, are a productive terrain of discussion for film scholars interested in the disruption of the Cartesian subject-object divide that has dominated cultural criticism and relations to non-human nature in the Western, now global, way of seeing and conceiving art, films, and natural resources.

While ecological considerations of Malick's films will be further developed in the course of the argument, it is important to point out that current work on ecocinema is mainly concerned with spatial relations to the more than human world, whether in terms of systemic or relational-material approaches or in terms of bodily and sensual connections between spectators and films. With the notable exception of Sean Cubitt,[8] ecocinema theory has given limited consideration to issues of time in films. Following a Nietzschean and Deleuzian approach that is specifically 'ranged against the subjectively oriented environmentalism' of film-phenomenology, Cubitt argues that:

> films can help us understand the role of affect in cinema, the specificity of time as the native dimension of affect, and the relation between affect and environment which the moving image, the audiovisual moving image as the art of time par excellence, is uniquely fitted to express ('Affect and Environment', p. 251).

As I shall argue in detail, Benjamin's philosophy not only offers a novel and non-mythical approach to nature-culture relations in Malick's films, it offers a substantial contribution to contemporary ecocinema theory interested in the audiovisual moving image as the art of time par excellence. While current approaches to subjectivity in film-phenomenology and subsequent applications to ecocinema tend to approach the film experience and the spectator's body in spatial terms, this book claims that Benjamin's philosophical work engages with space-time coordinates in ways that overcome what Cubitt calls 'the dangers of a subjectively oriented environmentalism in film studies' (251). In order to support this claim through analysis of nature-culture relations in Malick's films in the rest of the book, I turn to the notion of figurality in film studies and its correspondences with Benjamin's concepts of time, art and technology.

8 In *Finite Media* Cubitt argues that finitude is a key issue in Ecomedia studies and develops his arguments around the notion that:

> Media are finite, in the sense both that, as matter, they are inevitably tied to physics, especially the dimension of time; and that their constituent elements—matter and energy, information and entropy, time and space, but especially the first pair—are finite resources in the closed system of planet earth. (p. 7)

The Figural Approach to Analysis in Film Studies

> There is no concept of the aesthetic that does not ground itself in an ontology that projects a form of time, or rather timelessness, where Art must shore up its Being over the erosions of history. (David Norman Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, p. 30)

The figural in film studies emerged to complement structuralist and semiotic approaches to art and texts through seminal works by Jean-François Lyotard (*Discours, figure*) and Gilles Deleuze (*Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*). Contrary to Gilles Deleuze's books, widely disseminated in English-speaking academe through several translations over the past 40 years, the existing work on the figural has received limited attention. The English translation of Lyotard's *Discours, figure* (*Discourse, Figure*) was published in 2011, 40 years after its publication in France, and it is only recently that non-Francophone film scholars have begun to engage with Lyotard's writings on film (Ashley Woodward).

The first book-length work on the figural in relation to film and media studies in the English language is Rodowick's *Reading the Figural: or, Philosophy after the New Media.* Rodowick's work presents compelling readings of both Lyotard's and Deleuze's notions of the figural, and sets on 'a philosophical journey where I seek out allies both for deconstructing the opposition of word and image and for creating new concepts for comprehending the figural as a transformation of discourse by recent technologies of the visible' (p. 2). In approaching the figural 'in recent technologies of the visible,' Rodowick also clarifies that the figural is not at all a new approach to artistic practices; rather, the figural, he says, 'is both new yet very old' (p. 4), with ramifications in both the history of philosophy and the history of art:

> Lyotard himself readily admits that the figural has an autonomous existence with a long history. The history of art, or more deeply the history of representation, is full of 'authorless' examples of figurative text and textualized figures. Simply recognizing their existence already pushes the limits of modern philosophy's *distinction between the arts of succession and those of simultaneity* [...] Nonetheless, in their own peculiar transformation of discourse, perhaps the new media help us challenge in new ways the ontological gesture that separates the arts of time from the arts of space. In so doing, the visible is no longer banished from the realm of discourse, which is reserved for linguistic sense as the site of

> rational communication, and the articulable, or *enonçable*, can regain its powers of plastic transformation. [emphasis added] (p. 4)

Mules's review article on *Reading the Figural* ('The Figural as Interface') points to the important potential of the figural in film analysis and welcomes Rodowick's text as timely for two main reasons:

> the consequence of this re-reading of the figural away from signifier effects and towards the torqued image of the plastic material of film, is significant. It overcomes the limitations of a critical analysis always cast in the mode of resistance, where film structure is placed in question by the destabilizing force of figurality [...] it also reaffirms the film in its filmness, thereby paving the way for a positive engagement with the film text, bringing into view new forms of connections and modes of becoming that films in their specific technological formats, make happen. (n.p.)

While the literature on the topic does not provide ready and straightforward definitions of what the figural is,[9] it is very clear on what the figural is not. Not only does the figural represent a break from semiotics and signifier/signified structures in film analysis, it also presents challenges to subjective, bodily, and sensorial approaches to films.[10] For example, Philipe Dubois ('Au

9 For example, Nicole Brenez explains her use of the term 'figural' in her introduction 'Letter to Tag Gallagher', in a marginal note on Siegfried Kracauer's essay on photography. Brenez writes:

> [r]ather than tracing the historical notions of the 'figural' (you have read Erich Auerbach's *Figura*, it suffices to extend it with Jean-François Lyotard *Discours, Figure*, and above all with Gilles Deleuze's *Francis Bacon. The logic of sensation*), I'll give you a practical definition, which borrows from the propositions of Kracauer or Jean Epstein: 'the figural implies the usual fragmentation which society infers to its natural world. The figural itself would imply an articulation—seized or produced—of the visible world, or of a constructed visible universe whose parts are not yet "arranged" into [*ne sont pas encore"appretées" aux*] Figures of the natural world.' [my translation] (*De la figure*, p. 12)

Brenez's definition is quoted from semiologist Jean-Marie Floch.

10 As William Routt puts it, despite acknowledging Erich Auerbach's essay 'Figura' in the genealogy of the term (see previous footnote), Brenez's attention to the body in her book titled *On the Figure in General and on the Body in Particular* [my translation] complicates 'figural' approaches to film images. Following Routt, it is perhaps important to point out that Auerbach's seminal essay 'Figura' provides a detailed philological account of the term and traces figural interpretation back to historical and hermeneutical approaches to biblical exegesis and sacred iconography. Auerbach writes:

> Figura is something real and historical which announces something else which is also real and historical. The relation between the two is revealed by an accord or similarity[...] Often

seuil', pp. 143-144) maintains that Lyotard's figural aesthetics differ from semiological and structural approaches to texts and distances itself from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: 'when Lyotard conceives the figural in his notable and always intense *Discours, Figure*, he does so starting from a critique of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology' [my translation]. To be sure, Lyotard addresses the problem of phenomenology, and in a passage worth quoting at length states:

> [Merleau-Ponty] wanted to introduce the gesture, the mobility of the sensory, even into the invariance characteristic of the system of language, to articulate what is constitutive of saying, to restore the act that inaugurates the possibility of speech: the ultimate attempt on behalf of transcendental reflection. To no avail. *The system is always already there* [emphasis added], and the gesture of speech that supposedly creates signification can never be grasped in its constituting function, for it is always and can only be grasped as *deconstruction* [original emphasis]. What one can show to reach this order sought by Merleau-Ponty is how the beyond-Logos dwells in language, how it invades it to transgress the invariances—the keys to signification—and arouse in it the lateral meaning that is surreality. But if this meaning is indeed surreality, this is because the energy of deconstructing is not only on this side of the Logos, but also on this side of the real, or of perception, and because this sensory, or rather this *visible* [original emphasis] with which we will have to deal is not that which surrenders to the utilitarian or scientific eye [...] not even the visible seized by the eye trained to wait, to see the invisible (which is Cézanne's, according to Merleau-Ponty). *No, it is the visible of a subject-less gaze, the object of nobody's eye* [emphasis added]. (*Discourse, Figure*, pp. 54-55)

> vague similarities in the structure of events or in their attendant circumstances suffice to make the *figura* recognizable; to find it, one had to be determined *to interpret* in a certain way [emphasis added]. (p. 29)

This 'certain way' of interpreting is not empirical and objectively defined but always historical and contingent. While Nicole Brenez acknowledges Auerbach's essay 'Figura' in the history of the term, Brenez's own definition of the figural (quoted above in previous footnote) draws from a semiologist (Jean-Marie Floch). Brenez focuses on signs: non-historical, Classic, symbolic signs in films. In this, Bill Routt's review essay duly notes that Brenez's work does not account for Auerbach's historical hermeneutics: the recurrence of similar figures in texts as continuous (not fulfilled) promise of their fulfillment. Contrary to Brenez's approach, '[t]he alternative offered by Auerbach [for film theorists] [...] would seem to suggest that film does indeed have a significant [...] relation to some kind of *profilmic reality* [emphasis added]' (Routt n.p.). The profilmic reality Brenez's work on the figural does not account for is film's unique relation to time.

This passage is important in distinguishing the figural approach from both structural linguistics and phenomenology. Indeed, Lyotard's position, as John Mowitt's introduction to the English translation asserts, is provocative for its time and Lyotard does in fact begin his discussion by saying:

> [t]his book protests [that] the given is not a text, it possesses an inherent thickness, or rather a difference, which is not to be read, but rather seen; and this difference, and the immobile mobility that reveals it, are what continually fall into oblivion in the process of signification (p. 3).

Later, Lyotard specifically addresses this thickness or opacity of objects (and world's mobility):

> [t]he thickness of the world and its very possibility as always incomplete synthesis, as horizon hollowed out behind its sensory presence, are in this way a function of language [*langage*] [...] But this observation should not lead us to the absurd conclusion that there is nothing but text, for if the world is a function of language, language possesses a world function, as it were: out of what it designates, every utterance makes a world, a thick object waiting to be synthesized, a symbol to be deciphered, but these objects and symbols *offer themselves in an expanse* where showing is possible. This expanse bordering discourse is not itself the linguistic space where the work of signification is carried out, but a worldly type of space *plastic and atmospheric*, in which one has to move, circle around things, make their silhouettes vary, in order to utter such and such signification heretofore concealed. [emphasis added] (p. 82)

Lyotard makes clear that the 'beyond-Logos [surreality] dwells in language,' that is, in appearance, which is *always* historical: 'Words are not signs but the moment a word appears, the designated object becomes sign' (p. 82). For Lyotard, however, the process of designation is not arbitrary:

> arbitrariness must be supported by an intrinsic property that would allow the linguistic term to escape the attraction of motivation. Such a property does exist: it is that of double articulation, characteristic of articulated language; its function is easy to grasp from a discussion of the sign's *temporality* [original emphasis] (*Discourse, Figure*, pp. 82-83).

It can be seen that the 'plastic and atmospheric expanse,' for Lyotard, is the ground of appearance, of perception, defined *in terms of the sign's temporality*.

While Lyotard uses the language of structural linguistics,[11] his theory of figural language and signs in *Discourse, Figure* is not structural at all. For example, while Lyotard's approach to language does not consider the relation between signifier and signified as naturally determined, it is important to stress that he does not even consider this relation as arbitrary, which is one of the foundations of structural linguistics. More importantly, however, Lyotard's thinking distances itself from phenomenology as well. Lyotard does not concede the body and sense perception a prelapsarian and pre-linguistic state of unity with the world, an *a priori* comprehension of sense perception. Words and world cannot be fully grasped and continually fall into an inherent 'thickness' and opacity of signification.

Going back to an application of the figural discourse to film analysis, we are now better equipped to understand why the literature on the figural consistently points to a certain mobility, plasticity, and fluidity of sense construction in our relation to films. Rather than the work of pictorial composition, for example, Jacques Aumont likens the work of the figural in films to the economy of the musical motif. A motif can be analysed autonomously, is repeatable and is always variable, plastic and mobile. Most of all, it is *always* recognisable although disguised, changed, or reinvented in new ways throughout the composition. Going back to images, for Dubois ('La tempête et la matière temps', p. 269), looking for figural gestures in films means looking for the fleeting 'matter of visual thinking' [*pensée visuelle*] (p. 269). While the literature on the figural is dense and suggestive, it is important to ask: what are the philosophical specifications of this 'matter' of visual thinking? The 'matter' of visual thinking is, precisely, time; the pro-filmic, time-based spatial reality that is at the very foundation of the film experience.

The importance of time in film studies has already been established by Deleuze's notion of the time-image (*Cinema 2*) and the connection with the figural has been amply explored in Rodowick's work. For example, Rodowick maintains that the advent of film and photography in modernity signals the beginning of what he terms 'time-based spatial media,' triggering a new set

11 The term 'double articulation' in Lyotard derives from the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev. Hjelmslev's concept is also used by Deleuze and Guattari in a *Thousand Plateaus* to designate the work of "strata" (p. 48). For the importance of Hjelmslev's concept in Deleuze and Guattari, see Jeffrey Bell (pp. 218-226).

of ethical questions related to experiences of time rather than experiences of space in films:

> Aesthetic questions of medium specificity have continually turned into ethical questions. This is the deep value of the kind of ontological evaluation that Cavell and Barthes exemplify [...] Throughout the history of film theory, film aesthetics has concerned itself primarily with the analysis of space. Here, I want to suggest that what most powerfully affects us in film is an ethics of time. (*The Virtual Life*, p. 73)

For Rodowick, the explicitly ethical questions about medium specificity concern human relations to the passing of time: 'what we have valued in film are our confrontations with time and time's passing' (p. 73). In this, one of the main preoccupations of *Reading the Figural* is establishing a non-Hegelian conception of historicity and time. For example, Rodowick draws important commonalities between Lyotard's and Deleuzel's philosophies: they are united in an attempt to move away from 'philosophies of representation,' and more importantly, do so by 'unremitting hostility to Hegel and Hegelianism' (*Reading the Figural*, p. 17).

This attempt at moving away from Hegelian conceptions of time and history is a constant preoccupation of Rodowick's contribution to a figural aesthetics. In the introduction to *After Images of Gilles Deleuze's Film-Philosophy*, Rodowick sketches the following film-philosophical premises to his work on the figural:

> In *Reading the Figural*, I suggest that the movement-image and the time-image are not historical concepts and that it is misleading to conceive of the latter as following the former along a chronological time line. The two concepts do suggest, however, divergent philosophies of history owing to their different relations to the Whole and to their immanent logics of image and sign [...] The movement-image has a history in a dialectically unfolding teleology. It progresses to a point where it logically completes its semiotic options [...] But the time-image pursues another logic altogether. Expressed as eternal return, the recurrent possibility in each moment of time for the emergence of the new and unforseen. (pp. xvii-xviii)

Nietzsche is already central to Rodowick's *Deleuze's Time-Machine*, along with his reading of the influence of Bergson, Kant and Spinoza (pp. xvi, 122-38) in Deleuze's writings. This centrality is then reiterated in *After Images*, where Rodowick claims that the 'direct image of time,' what Deleuze

calls the crystal-image,[12] 'occurs or recurs in the form of [a Nietzschean] eternal recurrence' (*After Images*, p. xvii). To further reinforce this Deleuzian position, in the introductory remarks to *After Images* he writes:

> as soon as the cinema becomes possible, the direct time-image subsists within the logic of cinema as pure virtuality, and this virtuality *is not historical* because it is unencumbered by the empirical or chronological forms of time [...] here [in the time-image] the whole is in relation to an outside expressing as possibility or virtuality that has existed since the beginning of cinema but only rarely finds the conditions for appearing as such, and then only infrequently on 'pure' examples [...] [emphasis added] (pp. xvii-xviii)

Rodowick's invocation of Deleuze's time-image as a 'pure virtuality' that has always existed and 'only infrequently finds expression in "pure" examples,' translates in a 'non-historical' view of the time-image and the crystal-image.[13] For Rodowick, as for Deleuze, actual and virtual lives (bodies, images, dreams, worlds) are inscribed within a larger Whole constantly opening up through its parts, the plane of immanence.[14] It can be seen that while moving

12 Deleuze's crystal-image is central to an understanding of the time-image. Drawing from Bergson, Deleuze suggests that the structure of the crystal-image is irreducible: 'the structure consists in the indivisible unity of an actual image and "its virtual image"' (*Cinema 2*, p.78). For Deleuze, just as a seed contains the potential plant, the virtual image structures the actual image:

> The crystal is expression. Expression moves from the mirror to the seed [...] In fact, the seed is on the one hand the virtual image which will crystallize an environment which is at present [actuellement] amorphous; but on the other hand the latter must have a structure which is virtually crystallizable, in relation to which now the seed plays the role of actual image. Once again the actual and the virtual are exchanged in an indiscernibility which on each occasion allows distinction to survive. (*Cinema 2*, p. 74)

13 In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze characterises the crystal image in relation to the Whole with the following terms:

> [t]he little crystalline seed and the vast crystallizable universe: everything is included in the capacity for expansion of the collection constituted by the seed and the universe. Memories, dreams, even worlds are only apparent relative circuits which depend on the variations of this Whole. They are degrees or modes of actualization which are spread out between these two extremes of the actual and the virtual. (p. 81)

14 Deleuze's notion of the 'plane of immanence' is his major ontological category of the 'virtual continuum,' which is consistently defined in Deleuze's oeuvre as:

> a pre-extensive, non-qualified 'milieu' or 'space stratum' enveloping complexes of differential relations, pure intensities and singularities, with Deleuze seeking to determine in this way *an impersonal and pre-individual* [...] field assembling the conditions of real—and not merely possible—experience [emphasis added]. (Louise Burchill, p. 155)

away from questions of representation, teleology, and Hegelian historicity,[15] Rodowick's subsequent use of Deleuze in *Reading the Figural* and in his later film-philosophical work privileges a thoroughly non-historical conception of time. In expanding on Rodowick's film-philosophical claim that the figural methodology intersects with Hegelian and Nietzschean notions of time and history in films, Benjamin's shape of time is a suitable alternative to the Deleuzian route. This alternative Benjaminian route not only enables an historical conception of the time-image, but it provides interesting and original ways to deal with questions of language and subjectivity in film analysis.

Here, it is important to point out that Deleuze's work does not engage with the problem of subjectivity at all, whether in terms of linguistics, psychoanalysis or phenomenology. As widely recognised, this is a problem that Sobchack's film-phenomenology has explicitly foregrounded and dealt with. For Sobchack, a Deleuzian film-philosophy 'neglects the embodied situation of the spectator and of the film' (*The Address of the Eye*, p. 31). As Darlene Pursley further elaborates: Deleuze distinguishes his approach to cinema from a phenomenological one by arguing that cinematic images emerge from action-reaction encounters between images, rather than from a perceiving subject situated in space. By detaching consciousness from both the anchoring of the subject [Husserl] and the horizon of the world [Heidegger], however, as Sobchack points out, Deleuze risks the disembodiment of both the spectator and the film (Sobchack, p. 31). Thus in order to ground the film, its meaning, and the spectator's lived-body situation, Sobchack roots cinema and spectatorship in spatial terms. She identifies the dichotomy of space and time as the distinction between her phenomenology of film and Deleuze's reading: It is not time, but space, Sobchack explains, that grounds the question of cinematic signification in her study. (Pursley, p. 1196)

These definitions and characteristics of the virtual continuum or plane of immanence are important to differentiate Deleuze's thought from 'empirical fields (with their correlation of a consciousness and its objects)' and from an 'undifferentiated "depth" or groundlessness … identified as pure chaos' (p. 155). For Deleuze (and Félix Guattari) there are no subjects, but 'only hacceities, affects, subjectless individuations that constitute collective assemblages' (*A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 266). In this view, life is constituted of assemblages and rhizomatic networks (p. 266) and the plane of immanence is an 'abstract machine' or a 'machinic assemblage' where 'there are only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between elements, or at least between elements that are relatively unformed, molecules, and particles of all kinds' (p. 266).

15 In Chapter 5 of *Reading the Figural*, Rodowick engages at length with the work of Siegfried Kracauer (*History, the Last Things Before the Last*) in relation to a historical conception of the image and duly references its indebtedness to Benjamin and Adorno.

Despite some attempts to bridge the philosophical gap between Sobchack's embodied phenomenology and Deleuze's time-image in film studies (Laura Marks), the incompatibility between Deleuze's plane of immanence and current film-phenomenological conceptions of subjectivity and intentionality is irreconcilable in film theory.[16] As will be further discussed, Benjamin's shape of time fills the gap that Sobchack rightly identifies in Deleuze: the detachment of consciousness from both the anchoring of the subject and the horizon of the world *is* a possibility enabled by Benjamin's conceptions of time, history and language. This anchoring has nothing to do with spatiality and subjective intentionality but is a function of Benjamin's 'shape of time' itself.[17]

16 Elsaesser and Hagener critique some uses of Deleuze's philosophy in contemporary film-phenomenology, pointing to the incompatibility of the two because: 'the notion of intentionality, so central to phenomenology, is alien for Deleuze' (p. 126). See Claire Perkins' review of Marks's work:

> Deleuze [...] genuinely privileges the cinematic work beyond any conception of subject or object [...] The image exists in itself as matter, not as a sign for matter which is hidden behind the image. For Deleuze, following Bergson, consciousness is on the outside or surface of things, rendering the image and the 'thing' indistinguishable. Marks, despite her concern with the surface of the image, relies upon the phenomenological subject to perceive this surface and thereby bring into being the notion of embodied spectatorship. For Deleuze, the privileging of bodily perception subordinates movement itself by replacing it with either a subject to carry it out or an object to submit to it. For Marks the works examined are made for a viewer to feel out and constitute—they highlight the act of perception. For Deleuze, the set of movement-images which make up cinema are definitively not addressed to anyone—they are an Appearing in which there is 'not even an eye.' ('This Time It's Personal' cited in Elsaesser and Hagener, p. 125)

17 The use of Benjamin's philosophy in figural criticism finds precedence in Adrian Martin's work *Last Day Every Day*, in which Martin presents a suggestive account of the figural by linking different sources in a particular constellation of meaning (Paul Ricoeur on Freud; Brenez on Abel Ferrara; Erich Auerbach on Dante; Siegfried Kracauer on the detective story, *Le roman policier*) and citing Benjamin's 'World and Time'. The resulting picture of the figural, in Martin, points to films' 'ability' to be named and interpreted in always-new ways:

> Here I am reminded of Andrew Benjamin's presentation [...] where he entered sympathetically into what he (following Walter Benjamin) described as the quality in an artwork to call out for its own naming, or rather its *nameability*: its potential or capacity to be named, and its invocation, directed at the critic or viewer, to assume this (by no means easy) task. Of course, neither of the Benjamins (Andrew or Walter) mean to say there is one, simple, flat name that we can affix to an artwork like a label, once and for all; the task assumed is more arduous, more labyrinthine than that. And it is potentially infinite, open. It certainly opens the door to a more detailed discussion of criticism, to be had at another time [...] (pp. 27-28)

This capacity and 'ability' to name is certainly creative but never arbitrary; the film's contingency guides its nameability according to specific questions that the film itself poses through its figural economy. In her book on figural film criticism, Brenez articulates the film's capacity of posing questions in terms of 'figural logic' and 'figural economy' (*De la* Figure, pp. 10-17). For Benjamin's use of the suffix 'ability' (*Barkeit*) see Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's Abilities*.

Benjamin's Concept of Time in Film Studies

A non-teleological philosophy of history that accounts for subjectivity, language, and nature is possible via Benjamin's idea of the shape of time. In order to prove the relevance of Benjamin's thought in contemporary ecocinema studies, it is important to return to the image of the apple seller in Malick's *Days of Heaven* and the figural notion of 'fallenness' that it entails. In his early essay 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' Benjamin provides an explanation of 'fallenness' as the moment in which human beings have lost an immediate relation with the world and 'fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle' (p. 72). In his seminal book *Benjamin's Abilities*, Samuel Weber starts the chapter on Benjamin's theory of language with the title 'Impart-ability: Language as Medium' (pp. 31-52), working with an explicit parallel between Benjamin's philosophical position on language and theories of the medium in media studies.[18] Weber starts the chapter with a detailed reading of mediality as it is commonly understood and taught in media theory. The medium, for Pierre Sorlin, is 'the instrument' in between a sender and a receiver, this instrument is not neutral, but, after Marshall McLuhan, modifies and contributes to the message being sent (p. 3). Weber's argument is that contemporary notions of mediality are based on Aristotelian and Hegelian premises, and that most of them still seem to accept:

> the notion of 'medium' as an 'instrument' that 'modifies our hold of the world'—and hence, the notion that assisting 'us' to get a 'hold' on the world constitutes the primary object of this instrumentality. This notion, however, was problematized long before McLuhan, at the culmination of Western philosophy, in the dialectics of Hegel. For the dialectical process by which conceptual thinking determines itself, according to Hegel, proceeds through a dynamics that he designates, as [...] 'mediation' [...] The medium qua mediation is already, for Hegel, the 'message' and indeed much more: it quite literally in-forms the object [...] by *having turned it inside out* [original emphasis]. ('Impart-ability: Language as Medium', p. 36)

Weber's details a reading of the temporal and syntactical implications of Hegel's use of the past perfect tense in the conception of mediation points

18 Weber refers to Benjamin's essay on language, where Benjamin asks 'what does language "communicate" or impart?' ('On Language as Such' cited in Weber, p. 41).

to Hegel's conception of mediation as 'a circle returning to itself' (pp. 36-37). This is no abstract rhetorical use of language:

> the image of the circle indicates the two properties of the Hegelian conception of medium as mediation: it is infinite and it is self enclosed. In the context of such mediation 'virtuality' is [...] 'here and now' insofar as the unmediated present is always only a 'moment' on the way to becoming what it 'virtually' will always have been: a future perfecting itself as the presence of the past (perfect) [...] For the Hegelian notion of mediation as infinite process of becoming other in order to become the same, *presents a strategy of safeguarding finitude from an alterity and from a future that would not come full circle* [emphasis mine]. (p. 37)

Hegelian dialectics with its implied conciliatory idea of synthesis in a 'future perfecting itself' (p. 37) is thus at the base of a conception of mediality that informs a certain way to view the world; a world in which one can 'reasonably' hope to 'get a hold' on the future, or 'in which reason is defined precisely in terms of such project, which in turn depends on the control *of* the media (subjective *and* objective genitive)' (p. 38). Weber then discusses Benjamin's possible alternative to the Aristotelian and Hegelian notions of mediality by acknowledging the global nature of the twenty-first century's media landscape, a globalising and unifying process that was in its infancy when Benjamin wrote his 'Work of Art'. Implicitly referring to the complexities of fragmentation, convergence and issues of global media ownership in the twenty-first century, Weber suggests that paradoxically the media seem to be 'losing their grip' in their drive to reach global control in a process 'involving greater power and greater vulnerability' (p. 38). A Benjaminian notion of the medium and his concept of impart-ability are therefore important for two reasons: not only do they differ from Aristotelian and Hegelian conceptions of mediality, they also present challenges to Deleuze's notion of the virtual continuum (pp. 37-39). Whether one agrees or not with Weber's readings of Deleuze, the current film-philosophical usage of Deleuze's time-image as a non-historical, 'pure virtuality' that has always existed and 'only infrequently finds expression in pure examples' (Rodowick, *After Images*, p. xvii) does indeed rest on non-historical conception of the virtual, which runs the risk of incurring in a 'disembodied' (Sobchack) view of 'media theology in which "mediation" takes over the function of "creatio ex-nihilo" (Weber, p. 37) in a future (perfect) that will always have been the same.

Despite Deleuze's incommensurable distance from Hegelian and teleological thinking, Weber maintains that Deleuze's virtual continuum is

problematic in contemporary material philosophy. For example, after a careful reading of *Difference and Repetition*, he argues that 'Life,' for Deleuze, 'is conceived from the perspective of unity, wholeness and "global integration"' (Weber, p. 33).[19] The consequences of a persistent, universal and combined-into-one view of the virtual continuum are that:

> as long as 'local differentiation' can be said to operate in the service of 'global integration,' the concept of the virtual remains dependent on a notion of the whole that is traditionally associated with the privileged status of 'man' whose image reflects and embodies the unity of the Creation deriving from a single Creator (p. 33).

While Weber is clearly *not* saying that Deleuze endorses the existence of a single creator, his reading of the virtual continuum suggests that Deleuze's thinking appears obliterated by a Spinozian unifying and totalising view of the universe and that this vision informs Deleuze's notion of the crystal-image.[20] For, if on the one hand Deleuze conceives the crystal-image as 'visible time', what is visible for Deleuze is 'the *perpetual foundation* of time, non-chronological time' intended as an irreducible, structural (however virtual) reality. Such a notion of time, for Deleuze, 'is the powerful, non-organic

19 The full passage from Weber reads:

> In regard to the transmission from the virtual to the actual, Deleuze writes, four terms must be considered synonymous: 'Actualising, differentiating, integrating, resolving. The nature of the virtual is so constructed that actualisation signifies differentiation for it. Each differentiation is local integration that converges with others in the entirety of the resolution of the global integration.' In the context of this definition of the actualisation of the virtual as the global resolution of a problem, Deleuze invokes the notion of the living organism as being exemplary [original emphasis]. (*Benjamin's Abilities*, p. 32)

The analogy with the living organism, in Deleuze, as Weber acknowledges in footnote 6 (331), derives from Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* and *Matter and Memory*. The enormous influence of Bergson's work on Deleuze's concept of the time-image is certainly acknowledged in Rodowick's work (see Darlene Pursley 'Gilles Deleuze's' and Keith Ansell-Pearson); nevertheless, Rodowick opts for the Nietzschean route. As this book sets out to demonstrate, Benjamin's philosophical project remains underestimated in media theory seeking to explore the concept of time beyond Nietzschean nihilism and Bergsonian vitalism. Weber is quoting from Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 270-274.

20 For another notable critique of Deleuze as a philosopher of 'the One,' which runs similar to Weber's critique, see especially Alain Badiou's *Deleuze*:

> Deleuze's fundamental problem is most certainly not to liberate the multiple but to submit thinking to a renewed concept of the One. What must the One be, for a multiple to be *integrally* conceivable therein as the production of simulacra? Or, yet again: in what way should the All be determined, in order that the existence of each portion of this All-far from being positioned as independent or as surging forth unpredictably-be nothing other than expressive profile of 'the powerful, nonorganic Life that embraces the world?' (p. 10)

Life *which grips the world*' [emphasis added] (*Cinema 2*, p. 81). Despite the importance of Bergson's notion of time for both thinkers,[21] Benjamin's material philosophy differs from Deleuze's Spinozism.[22] Benjamin's shape of time presents striking similarities with Deleuze's notion of the virtual continuum, with one crucial difference. Benjamin's notion of time is precisely capable of undoing and destroying the univocal conception of the virtual continuum, thus liberating the full potentiality of Deleuze's time-image as upsetting the unifying, globalising process rather than integrating it.

In order to define a Benjaminian time-based image[23] in ecocinema, I now turn to current work on Benjamin's conception of mediality, virtuality, and

21 See Keith Ansell-Pearson 'The Reality of the Virtual' (p. 1117). Ansell-Pearson points to Bergson's use of the analogy of the body 'as the center of real action' whose 'activity will appear to illuminate all those parts of matter with which at each successive moment it can deal' (Bergson, *Matter and Memory* 23). In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze clarifies Bergsonism with the following words:

> Bergsonism has often been reduced to the following idea: duration is subjective, and constitutes our internal life [...] But increasingly he came to say something quite different: the only subjectivity is time, non-chronological time grasped in its [perpetual] foundation, and it is we who are internal to time [...] Time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, the interiority in which we move, live and change. (p. 82)

In this view, Deleuze's time-image remains trapped, so to speak, in a 'perpetual,' non-chronological whole that constitutes the 'outside' of things, their 'constitutive AND' (p. 180). For Benjamin, there is no perpetual foundation of time, the 'now' of cognisability imparts itself turning and folding time in all possible directions.

22 It is perhaps opportune to mention here that the different cosmogonies (the universe as one substance or multiple substances) informing Deleuze's and Benjamin's material philosophies can be traced back to the differences between Spinoza and Leibniz. In this view, it is perhaps useful to quote a passage from a recent study comparing and contrasting Spinoza and Leibniz on free will, causation and substance:

> in summation, we might concisely appraise the extent to which Leibniz provided an acceptable counterargument to Spinoza's necessitarian determinism. Spinoza's system is, taken on its own terms, theoretically impregnable. If one agrees to his definitions and axioms, it is difficult to see any other way of construing things. One quickly sees that his system is based principally upon the notion of a single, all-encompassing Substance constrained by an efficient species of causation. Conversely, Leibniz's system takes for its point of departure the notion of a plurality of simple substances (monads) which ultimately obey a teleological or final order of causation. Commonalities surely exist between the two philosophers' conceptions of Substance. But Spinoza's definition in *The Ethics* permits of no diversity; Leibniz's claim to the contrary in his *Monadology* indicates a significant redefinition of the term." (Ross Wolke, p.19).

23 The Benjaminian time-image rests on the concept of the dialectical image and 'dialectics at a standstill' that Benjamin proposes in his unfinished *Arcade Project* (p. 462 [N2a,3]). I use the term time-image because the term dialectical is loaded with misleading Hegelian connotations. The non-Hegelian temporal trajectory of Benjamin's 'dialectics at a standstill' is clear and detailed in Weber's 'Genealogy of Modernity'. For the definition of Benjamin's dialectical image as a temporal problem see, especially, Max Pensky. For a comprehensive study of the 'dialectical image' in *The Arcade Project*, see Susan Buck-Morss *The Dialectics of Seeing*.

time. Exploring a number of philosophical influences on the young Benjamin (including Kant, Husserl, Bergson, and the Marburg School), Peter Fenves (*The Messianic Reduction*) composes a coherent philosophical constellation informing Benjamin's conception of the 'turn of time' as 'the inner plasticity of existence' (Benjamin, 'Two Poems', p. 30):

> [t]he course of time [in Benjamin] is captured by a curve that is everywhere continuous yet nowhere differentiable: it is so sharply 'turned' at every point that it proceeds without direction, neither progress nor regress, and every one of its stretches is not only like every other but also like the course of time as a whole. For the same reason, every time recapitulates—without exactly repeating—the whole of time. In this way, Benjamin responds to the Nietzschean idea of the eternal return of the same. (Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction*, p. 243)

This 'course of time' moves in a non-linear, plastic trajectory turning and folding time on itself. Benjamin's turn of time and its 'recapitulations' not only proceed without direction, but every 'stretch' or 'sharply turned' point (although re-proposing a similar shape of the course of time as a whole) is a fractal-like, 'imparted' and interpolated fold. Although Fenves argues that Benjamin (like Deleuze) draws on Bergson's notion of duration,[24] the difference from Bergson's universe as an integrated living organism is significant.

Benjamin's cosmogony is a potential pluriverse where every single recapitulation can alter and change the whole. For Fenves, Benjamin's whole is a very fragile, fluid and malleable virtuality investing the singular reality of the 'stretch' and 'turn of time' with the capacity to recapitulate the whole in a tremendous abbreviation and in every possible direction (*The Messianic Reduction*, pp. 243-244). This capacity of the shape of time can be translated in terms of a material cosmogony where temporal realities are free to impart themselves, continually altering a non-integrable virtual whole in a 'now' of cognisability. For Fenves, 'every time recapitulates without ever exactly repeating all of time. The circular or cycloid character of the eternal return of the same is thus broken up—without time taking on a *telos* in the process' (p. 243) because 'the appearance makes "the now" of time—which is to say, its shape—recognizable' (pp. 243-244). This capacity and *freedom*

24 'Not only is time, for Bergson, indivisible; it is also malleable-elastic, if not exactly plastic-for depending on a range of factors, duration can be longer or shorter' (Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, p. 31).

(the freedom and implied responsibility of recognition, recapitulation, and separation) is very difficult to see in Deleuze in a material conception of life where realities and virtualities are parts of a virtual continuum that will ultimately integrate and combine all differences into one. In Benjamin, every now of re-cognisability is potentially *free* to impart itself in a new, non-repeatable now. The notion of plastic time provides the philosophical premise for a Benjaminian contribution to a film-phenomenology of time.

Fenves' reading of Benjamin's philosophy of time opens new avenues in the understanding of Benjamin's relation to phenomenology and is significant for contemporary film-philosophers seeking to expand the limits of spatial relations to films in the form of spectators' cognitive and embodied perceptions. Fenves' study clearly reveals and proves Benjamin's relation and distance to Husserl's phenomenology. To fully appreciate this relation and difference between Benjamin's 'reduction' and Husserl's, Fenves clarifies that: '[t]he premise of Husserl's initial enquiry under the rubric of phenomenology is that expression owes its origin to a living subject, who, by animating certain sensible complexes, lends them meaning' (p. 135). This explains Husserl's non-linguistic philosophy because, 'whenever an expression enters into communication, regardless of the situation, it gets caught up in indication' (p. 135). By way of contrast, after a detailed and rigorous reading of Benjamin's essay on language, Fenves (as does Weber) comes to the conclusion that for Benjamin '*there is* language disentangled from designation' [emphasis added] (p. 151). This language, Fenves explains, is not a monologue or 'soliloquy' of a perceiving subject but '"a panlogue" deriving from things, not from "proper speakers"'(p. 141). Things (that is, *all* phenomena and manifestations) for Benjamin, communicate their proper language immediately; however, they communicate themselves in an original, *temporal split* of perception that is always 'parted' and 'turned' on itself.

Space, for Benjamin, is a thoroughly temporal and historical ground[25] generated by time. Time generates and *disrupts* space; it constantly renews its grounds as time turned on itself:

> [i]f the course of time can be captured by a curve of this kind, its concept can be aptly described as 'highly enigmatic,' for every time, down to the smallest unit, would be similar to every other time and to time as a whole [...] History interpolated in the form of a 'constellation' acquires the monadic character of time by virtue of an *epoche* whose unity is of *a*

25 The historicity of space-time in Benjamin counters the ahistorical groundlessness of Deleuze's views exposed in previous sections of this Introduction.

> *higher power than that of an activity of thinking* that directs itself toward immanent objects of thought. [emphasis mine] (Fenves, p. 243)

Such a non-teleological and, indeed, non-dialectical, conception of time and history, for Fenves, requires the 'arresting' of the thinking subject, the suspension of a subjective 'reduction' and the *recognition* of a constellation of meaning '[w]here thinking suddenly halts [*einhalt*] 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, 'On the Concept of History' [Thesis XVII] cited in Fenves, p. 243).

What distinguishes Husserl's from Benjamin's reductions, then, is that for Benjamin phenomena and experiences cannot be grasped in 'pure receptivity':

> What ultimately separates Benjamin's mode of thought from Husserl's is this: from its title onwards, *Ideas* [that is, Husserl's work *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*] proceeds as though the philosopher is fully capable of 'turning off' the attitude that bars access to phenomena and can thus enter into the sphere of 'pure phenomenology' on the strength of will; Benjamin, by contrast, makes no such concession to the profession of philosophy (p. 3).

In this context, it is clear that the only 'higher power' capable of receding from subjective intuitions (p. 243) is the shape of time itself:

> A particular *phenomenon* will be identified in the course of this study that nevertheless guarantees the existence of a fully 'reduced' sphere [...] And a name will emerge from this sphere: time. The term time in this case refers neither to the time of 'inner-time consciousness' (Husserl) nor to time as 'possible horizon for any understanding of being' (Heidegger), but rather, to a 'plastic' time, which is shaped in such a way that its course is wholly without direction, hence without past, present and future, as they are generally understood. (p. 3)

Benjamin's shape of time contributes to the development of a film-phenomenology that does not elect subjectivity as the locus of irreducible sensory perceptions.[26] Benjamin's shape of time brings 'time into speech

26 Recent Benjamin scholarship (Sami Khatib *Teleologie Ohne Endzweck*; Carlo Salzani) increasingly recognises that Benjamin's thought prefigures the possibility a non-individualist

without conforming to the idolatry of language' (Fenves, p. 31) and without conforming to the idolatry of the senses of a temporal living subject.[27] Language and subjectivity are instead reconfigured as temporal medialities capable of imparting themselves in free life-contexts of re-cognition and re-interpretation. In 'The Program of the Coming Philosophy' Benjamin writes, 'there is a unity of experience that can by no means be understood as a sum of [singular, individual and subjective] experiences, to which the concept of knowledge as teaching is immediately related in its continuous development' (p. 109). As will be elaborated in concrete terms, this 'unity of experience' is the experience of time-based, fallen, aesthetic experiences of art and nature, to which knowledge, in its continuous development, is immediately recognisable.

Benjamin's revolutionary ideas provide a fitting framework to understand Malick's specific use of the film medium to deal with human-nature relations in contemporary culture.[28] Via Benjamin's philosophy, films and other

stance in contemporary culture. For example, Daniel Mourenza maintains that Benjamin's *Einmensch*, in particular, with its anticapitalist and anti-individualist stance, provides 'a better posthuman model to oppose to the humanist prototype of the human as white, male, individual, liberal self than Nietzsche's *Übermensch*' (p. 44).

27 As will be elaborated, this book uses Benjamin's 'shape of time' (Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*) as a precise effort to contribute to the reframing of human relations to the world of nature beyond postmodern nihilism in contemporary culture. In his appraisal of Anthony Jensen's recent study on Nietzsche's philosophy of history, Fenves ('From Nietzsche's Philosophy of History to Kant') rightly notes the connection between postmodern thought and nihilism and rightly adds: 'Whatever "postmodern" may mean, it generally does include Kant' noting that 'the philosophy of history Jensen uncovers in Nietzsche's late writings is not only comparable to certain strains of nineteenth century neo-Kantianism; it is thoroughly Kantian' (p. 283). Benjamin's work is particularly relevant here. As widely noted, the young Benjamin was certainly familiar with certain strains of nineteenth century neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School (Rickert, Cohen and others), see Peter Osborne (pp. 86-87). Nevertheless, Fenves' philosophical work convincingly argues that Benjamin's philosophy of time is not simply neo-Kantian, but works with the 'irreconcilable' ('An Idea in Combat with itself', p. 282) projects of the Marburg School *and* Bergsonian vitalism. This crucial point of argument is then reiterated in *The Messianic Reduction*: '[a]n artistic task can thus be established in the context of Bergson's version of vitalism: the task of bringing time into speech without conforming to the idolatry of language [...] and this is where the real daring of Benjamin's endeavor lies, for in the concept of temporal plastics he combines—without synthesizing—the antithetical philosophical programs undertaken by Bergson on the one hand and the Marburg school on the other' (p. 31). Fenves maintains that Benjamin's 'non-synthetic' philosophical project builds on the antinomies produced by Marburg neo-Kantianism (with its accent on critique) and Bergson's markedly non-linguistic vitalism.

28 The importance of Benjamin's writings in material culture and film theory is well established (William Brown; Miriam Hansen *Cinema and Experience*; Susan Buck-Morss; Koch) and Benjamin's work is undergoing significant reevaluations in environmental philosophy (Beatrice Hanssen; Mules, *With Nature*; Catriona Sandilands).

time-based spatial media can be recognised as an unprecedented force[29] in culture capable of opening up and transforming meanings beyond subjective and individual intentions. As will be argued in the ensuing chapters, a time-based ecocinema ultimately enables the reconfiguration of the conditions of apperception of nature-culture relations in the present of our dysfunctional and commodified relations to art and nature in the twenty-first century. Benjamin's complex, but extremely coherent philosophical position will help conceptualise non-subjective and non-logocentric aesthetics of play[30] that bear much potential in contemporary environmental film criticism.[31] As will be seen in detail, Benjamin's notion of plastic time enables a reframing of the gap between subjects and objects and guarantees what Benjamin sees as *another* relation other than synthesis between antithetical positions.[32] In this, Benjamin's notion of a messianic reduction provides the temporal, material, and historical ground that grants a non-empirical and equally non-subjective relation to film analysis. This temporal ground not only enables what Benjamin calls the nameability of biblical tropes, in Malick films, but also a positive engagement with human technological 'self-alienation' as 'interplay' ('Work of Art', p. 113) between human and non-human nature in contemporary culture.

Terrence Malick's Work: Time-Based Ecocinema

The explicitly ecocinema approach of this study looks at the aesthetics of Malick's films as a precise intervention in modern conceptions of

29 As is demonstrated in greater detail in the course of the argument, Benjamin's conception of plastic time is understood as the force at the base of the torquing and plasticity of images and discourses in films. Lyotard understands this 'force' in terms of Freudian desire, whereas Rodowick opts for a Nietzschean route.

30 Such a Benjaminian aesthetics of play in media theory and aesthetics would translate into 'a shift from the cultivation of semblance (*Schein*; auratic artworks, technologically enhanced phantasmagoria) to an aesthetics of play [*Spiel*]' (Miriam Hansen, 'Why Media Aesthetics', p. 393). On semblance [*Schein*], Benjamin writes, 'the significance of beautiful semblance for traditional aesthetics is deeply rooted in the age of perception that is now nearing its end. The theory reflecting this was given its last formulation by German Idealism' ('The Significance of Beautiful Semblance', p. 137). As this books sets out to demonstrate, the concept of the 'shape of time' (Fenves *The Messianic Reduction*) is particularly relevant in articulating Malick's time-based ecocinema. As will be further detailed in the course of analysis Benjamin's concept of time helps articulating a contemporary ecocinema operating in Malick's films.

31 The overcoming of logocentrism is one of the central preoccupations of ecological criticism and non-anthropocentric approaches to nature and culture (see Kate Soper, *What is Nature*).

32 On the possibility of certain non-synthesis between subject and object, see Benjamin 'On the Program for the Coming Philosophy' (p. 106).

nature-culture relations. In each film, Malick's cinematic relation to the marked nature-culture divide that figures prominently in the films' narrative and formal elements provides a new way to look at nature in films—a way that disrupts symbolic and mythic interpretations of 'fallenness' in nature-culture relations and opens narrative teleology to figural presence and disruption of causal relations. This disruption of causal relations certainly finds full formal expression in the experimental aesthetics and folded editing style of Malick's works of the mid-2010s. As each chapter shows in greater detail, a film-philosophical intervention in modernist conceptions of nature-culture relations has always characterised Malick's oeuvre. From Kit and Holly's tree house in *Badlands*, to the lost paradises of the indigenous communities of *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*, to the way of nature and the way of grace in *The Tree of Life* and *Voyage of Time*, the contemporary wastelands of *To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups*, and *Song to Song*, this book analyses the ways in which Malick's aesthetics intervenes and reframes the marked nature-culture divide so present in the films' narrative and formal elements. In this effort, Malick's films are grouped into early narratives (*Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*), mid-career narratives (*The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*), evolutionary narratives (*The Tree of Life* and *Voyage of Time*), and contemporary settings (*To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups* and *Song to Song*), as a way of showing the development of Malick's groundbreaking, ecocinema intervention in contemporary nature-culture relations.

Chapter 1, 'From Myth, Tragedy and Narrative to Allegory, *Trauerspiel* and Film in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*,' redirects scholarly attention to the film-philosophical aspects of Malick's early-career films. Drawing on Benjamin's concept of second technology, Malick's films are seen as self-reflexive meditations on the renewed affectivity of time opened up by media technologies in modernity. The chapter shifts critical attention from characters' visions and subjectivities to the films' oblique presentation of recurrent biblical allusions in conjunction with modern film technologies. In particular, the sequence in which Holly (Sissy Spacek) looks at the stereopticon in the forest in *Badlands* and the scene in which Linda (Linda Manz) attentively watches the projection of Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1918) in *Days of Heaven* are reframed as disclosing a distinctively Benjaminian relation to time-images in modernity.

Chapter 2, 'Time and History in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*' looks at the marked nature-culture dichotomy that plays out in these historical narratives and reframes them in non-mythic terms. The chapter illuminates Malick's mid-career films as revealing two visions of finitude and materiality in nature: a mechanistic and organicist vision, where parts are

reciprocally connected; and another vision of nature, where parts are totally disassociated from laws of causality and reciprocity. Through close analysis of Corporal Fife's (Adrian Brody) and Rebecca/Pocahontas' (K'Orianka Kilcher) gestures, the chapter argues that the films reveal a poetic looking of camera work and cinematic disruption of mythical approaches to nature, time, and storytelling.

Chapter 3, 'Looking at Evolutionary Narratives in *The Tree of Life* and *Voyage of Time*,' extends the non-mechanistic and non-organicist vision of Malick's cinematic looking to a precise material-theological approach to evolutionary narratives and discourses in present culture. Malick's cinematic relation to progressive, evolutionary visions of life intervene in current debates about the role of 'secular natural theologies' in evolutionary sciences. Both films engage with concepts of deep time in ways that foreground a cinematic articulation of meanings and the disruption of dualistic thinking and structural binaries. The films' relation to time deeply affects myth and the binary logic on which the scientific and religious discourses of the films' narratives elements are predicated.

Chapter 4, 'The Wastelands of Progress in *To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups* and *Song to Song*' illuminates Malick's mature works of the mid-2010s as important articulations of ecocritical meanings in contemporary culture. Contrary to predominant religious-theological readings in the critical literature, the chapter performs a figural interpretation of the films' many religious and esoteric references and allusions. It argues that Malick's use of cinema deeply affects the underlying mythic structures of traditional religious interpretative frameworks and opens thought to a phenomenology of time that directly calls into question viewers' ethical actions in the present of our dysfunctional relations to art and nature. Through analysis of images belonging to latest early twenty-first century's space technology disguised as early twentieth century's cinema aesthetics in *Song to Song*, the chapter looks at Malick's consistent meditation on the role of technology in contemporary nature-culture relations. As argued, Malick's relation to time-based images and technologies exemplifies that 'interplay' between nature and humanity that Benjamin so clearly foreshadowed in the increasingly mediated and alienated world of second technologies.

Malick's films articulate a new ecocinema stance on nature-culture relations in contemporary culture. The book expands ecocinema concerns from the analysis of space, narrative drive, and characters' subjectivities in films, to viewers' relation to ethical action in historical time and finitude. From the explicitly self-reflexive meditations on second technologies in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* to the complexities of mythical and historical

narratives in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*, and the disruption of progressive and teleological conceptions of the evolution of life in *The Tree of Life* and *Voyage of Time*, I argue that Malick films foreground a consistent preoccupation with the role of what Benjamin would call 'messianic' time. As I show in detail in the course of the argument, such Benjaminian notion of time is non-mythic and precludes both Hegelian and Nietzschean visions of history and nature in present culture. Malick's sophisticated use of cinematic language and disruption of traditional narrative conventions in the contemporary settings of *To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups* and *Song to Song* push the temporal possibilities opened up by film technologies to an unprecedented level of experimentation in twenty-first century culture. From this temporal approach to language, subjectivity, and historical figural complexities, the book explores the beginning of a time-based, non-religious and non-transcendental relation to the messianic in twenty-first century culture.

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