

Nature Screened: An Eco-Film-Phenomenology

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Do cinematic representations of the natural world only put us in further remove from nature? A phenomenological approach shows that nature screened can produce a richer understanding of human–nature relations as these unfold in visual contact. If vision accesses the world in a unique relationship of sight, in which our contact with the world is defined by vision prior to any other interaction, the cinema offers a special setting for a phenomenology that seeks to draw-out the significance of human relations with the world of nature that come before utility or action. A detailed analysis of the opening sequence of Terrence Malick’s *The New World* (2005) demonstrates how the act of viewing positions the viewer in relation to what she sees. This position, prior to action and with the impossibility to act is seen here as an ethical position, a position of responsibility in the Levinasian sense. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of vision is put here to use alongside the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger and the existential responsibility of Levinas, while subverting Levinas’ anthropocentrism and rejecting Heidegger’s limiting view of technology. The approach taken in this essay, of bringing phenomenology into productive and reflexive interaction with ecology and with film is dubbed an “eco-film-phenomenology.”

What does it mean to encounter nature on a screen? Isn’t that the ultimate manifestation of the paradox of our time—the time of ecological crisis and a growing environmental concern contemporaneous with the dominance of high technology’s modes of representation and communication that render life mediated and de-natured? Nature screened would make for such denaturing mediation, nature framed and enframed, projected, pixilated, alienated, reduced to image.

Not so fast.

If we allow phenomenological investigation to lead our inquiry without rushing to make such value judgments, we may reach some illuminating realizations about human-nature relations, about cinematic representations, about phenomenology itself, and about how these three interact and implicate each other when cast into one investigative context, which I will here call, not without humor of course, an eco-film-phenomenology.

The film we shall insert between ecology and phenomenology is Terrence Malick's *The New World* (2005), where British settlers in 1607 arrive to a "virgin" land they name Virginia and encounter a world of nature and the natives of this world. We shall limit our observation to the film's opening sequence, which captures in this first encounter an essential significance of nature screened. At the same time, we heed the warning, appearing in one of the very first papers in the field of environmental aesthetics, that the appreciation of nature should not follow the model of landscape-as-picture, for nature or the environment "is not a scene, not a representation, not static, and not two dimensional" (Carlson 2000 [1979], 47), a warning that could easily extend to the view of nature screened. Yet the goals of the current investigation is not to produce an aesthetic appreciation of nature, but to seek meaning and understanding within the context of the cinematic images of nature and of humans within nature. Nature, I should clarify, is understood here in its most general sense as the flora and fauna, landscape and seascape, that at least appear as not yet altered by human re-ordering, except, of course, and here lies the seeming paradox, for the re-ordering of a screened view of nature that frames three-dimensional life and land into a two-dimensional image, discontinuous with its surrounding and mechanically produced. Nature screened refers to such *images* of land-, sea-, and skiescapes, which may serve as the living, three-dimensional environment for the characters within the film, yet are coming into a different kind of contact with the viewers of these images. Certain aspects and the significance of this contact is the subject of the current essay.

The understanding of humanity's relation with the world, redirected with much urgency by environmental philosophy to an attempt to understand our relation with the world of nature, is framed between the terms of separation and immediacy: our physical separation from the world by the borders of our bodies or within the enclosures of the bodies we are, and the immediacy of our contact with the world as beings-in-the-world. Immediacy will be understood in terms of the continuity of our mental and physical experiences with the world in which these experiences take place. Still, every articulation of such immediacy and continuity will have to tackle the facts of the physical separation of my body from everything which is not. Thus every such articulation will include a necessary element of interface as mediation.

With phenomenology, immediacy and continuity are offered by the notion of intentionality, where the objects of thought are already within me as the objects of *my* thought, inseparable from *my* thinking, even as these objects correspond to the world outside of me. But intentionality offers this binding structure not only to thought but also to perception, to vision, to experience as such, mentally framing the objects of perception, vision, and experience as the phenomena that offer my experiences to the most intimate of investigations. If my physical separation from my surrounding is doubled by the mediation of screened images that separate (and restructure) the sight of things from the things themselves, so is the bond of intentionality doubled. That is to say, when the world is reproduced as cinematic image it already undergoes the reduction and reproduction we perform in phenomenological awareness, where segments of the world are interiorized as phenomena, as *our* phenomena. Of course we will be taking in this imaging of the world, this phenomenalization of nature as performed initially by someone else—the filmmakers—and with the assistance of the various technological means that make up the cinematic apparatus. But this poses a problem only to those who fetishize first-hand and “natural,” unmediated experience as the only legitimate access to the world (how much of our encounter with the natural world is indeed “first-hand”? How much of it is not filtered through a window, a lens, a screen, or a text?).

The external phenomenon which is image becomes the internal phenomenon which is image internalized, phenomenon doubled, and with it are doubled the bond and binding of perception and object of perception, of consciousness and phenomenon. Such binding, such intimacy, offers a unique position from which to understand my relation to the world, as it cannot threaten me and I cannot take, transform, or act upon it. I can only observe—not merely the world, but several aspects of my *relation* to the world, a relation given in phenomenological immediacy—and seek an understanding.

With phenomenology we seek to reach meaning, the meanings that arise at the meeting point of consciousness and world, the meeting point provided by that which we call “phenomenon.” Husserl’s motto, “To the Things Themselves!”, and his definition of phenomenology as an investigation into essences are understood here as an advance towards the very *meaning* of the things themselves, the essence that makes a thing *meaningful* to us, who inquire into their meaning. Inquiry into meaning seeks to produce an understanding as the flip-side of meaning, and a phenomenological inquiry into nature, or eco-phenomenology, seeks to discover meanings, to produce understandings of nature and of our engagements with the natural world.

The cinematic image mediates the world, but at the same time brings us into immediate contact with a vision, with an image of the world. For phenomenology, the mediation which is image is a direct contact, the direct

contact of consciousness with its objects, that is, the direct contact of consciousness and phenomenon. This is precisely the contact wherein meaning and understandings are produced. An eco-film-phenomenology, then, brings us in direct contact with ecological meanings as offered by the cinematic image. Images, rather than inserting a distance and a removal from the things themselves, are the locus where the very meanings of things—that is, our very understanding of things—could be sought and found. The images of nature offer a site where we focus on nature as meaningful, where nature has no utility other than the perceptual and mental ones; they offer a contact with the world which is vision and consciousness.

I propose to utilize—selectively and creatively—the tools of phenomenological investigation, with emphasis on its hermeneutic thrust and its inherent ecological scope, for an examination of human-nature relations through their cinematic articulation. Phenomenology is inherently ecological in the sense that it operates according to a paradigm that is both an observation and an organizing principle for the discipline of Ecology and which can be coded as the primacy of relations. For phenomenology, this primacy features first and foremost in its constitutive understanding of the non-separation between consciousness and the phenomena appearing to consciousness. If phenomenology understands the relation between consciousness and its surrounding world as an internalization of the world as phenomena, and recognizes the bond of inner consciousness and internalized phenomenal world as the relation named *intentionality*, then phenomenology has already accepted mind and world to be bound and continuous. The distinctions between inner consciousness and outer world become in this context a binding rather than a separating distinction. Ecology has taught us that a full understanding of an organism dictates never separating it from its environment, and phenomenology—even with its famous (impossible) reductions—teaches us the inseparability of consciousness from the world-as-phenomenon,¹ intentionality as a relation without a distance. I shall explain this notion shortly.

Utilizing phenomenology selectively and creatively means trying at times to stir away from certain conclusions or “theses” of the thinkers who have produced the phenomenological tools for us. I am thinking specifically about the later Heidegger, who would have scoffed at the idea of film bringing us anywhere nearer to nature or to an understanding of the nature of Being. Heidegger expresses himself quite strongly against film’s “photographic objectification,”² laments in general the representational thinking that makes

1. Merleau-Ponty: “Perception and the perceived necessarily have the same existential modality, since perception is inseparable from the consciousness which it has, or rather is, of reaching the thing itself” (Merleau-Ponty 1996, 374).

2. See Heidegger 1982, 17.

the world into a “picture,” thus presumably separating the world from the thinker who thinks the world through representations,³ and further condemns cinematic and televisual technologies as bringing about “the dominance of the distanceless.”⁴ This is a mode of thinking and representing that abolishes the distances of space and time in a way that only drives us further away from beholding the world the way Heidegger would like to. Seeking, in the 1950 lecture, “The Thing,” to secure for “World” the (non)position of the no-thing that makes it possible for things to be present and to appear, the very relation that relates to each other what he views as the united four elements of Being—earth, sky, gods, and mortals—Heidegger makes the world untouchable for a thinking that seeks to explain and understand.⁵ Thus he decrees to “step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls.”⁶ But the response and recall in Heidegger, when not further qualified, appears to be an awe and a resignation that “lets Being be,”⁷ accepts the world as is, not as explainable.

We will re-examine this call to respond and recall towards the end of this essay, but for now we need to note that this is where Heidegger’s hermeneutic efforts finally lead to a rejection of hermeneutics, putting an end to the chain of semantic and conceptual substitutions that make for explanation. Heidegger’s appeal to the untouchableness of Being, his disgust with representations and mistrust of technology renders his later thinking unhelpful for an understanding of the world we live in today, the world in which technological intervention is part of daily life and representations take a much greater part than divinities do in human self-definition. (Indeed, one can claim that divinities enter cultural life only through representations.) The problem with this aspect of Heidegger’s work, at least for those who would like to be assisted by the brilliance of their hermeneutic moves and the rich and insightful existential phenomenology of *Being and Time*, is that it keeps leading to a single thesis, which sounds as anti-philosophical and technophobic as much as it is carried by an anti-Modern attitude. It predetermines the meanings we can reach when re-examining our relation to the world, especially as we direct our attention to this relation through a cinematic screen.

3. See Heidegger 2002.

4. See Heidegger 2001, 179.

5. “The world presences by worlding. That means: the world’s worlding cannot be explained by anything else nor can it be fathomed through anything else. . . . [T]he inexplicable and unfathomable character of the world’s worlding lies in this, that causes and grounds remain unsuitable for the world’s worlding. As soon as human cognition here calls for an explanation, it fails to transcend the world’s nature, and falls short of it” (ibid., 177).

6. Ibid., 179

7. See, for example, Heidegger 1966.

Still, an eco-phenomenology, and especially an eco-film-phenomenology, can be assisted by Heidegger's insight and the tools of his early phenomenology and later analyses. For example, the understanding of technology as a functionality that repositions everything in relation to it as a resource or *Bestand*⁸ is invaluable for any environmental philosophy, as long as a critical distance is kept from the wider directions or conclusions of Heidegger's approach.⁹

I referred above to intentionality as a relation without distance. Let me elaborate on this notion with a quick sketch of a phenomenology of vision, variations of which could be found along the line leading from Berkeley to Merleau-Ponty and Levinas.

In vision, we see objects around us which are at a spatial distance from our eyes, our body, ourselves. But it would make no sense to speak in terms of distance about our sight, that which we see, that is, the image of things rather than the material things themselves, in a word: the phenomena. That bird over there might be flying away from me, but the sight of the bird, its image—even as it grows smaller, the bird-phenomenon, maintains the same distance from my attentive consciousness, namely a non-distance. While the bird is in the world, at a distance, the bird-image is “in” me, so to speak, and my relation to the bird-image, bird-as-phenomenon, is neither spatial nor optical; it is *intentional*.

Vision offers us the world in its visuality, the world as image, which is taken in by sight. While the image of the world is “in” me, it does not emanate *from* me; it emanates from the world. The world by no means is *only* visual, contrary to Berkeley's suggestion; there is no reason to assume or support a claim for the non-existence of a world in darkness. But the visuality of the world comes into full actuality in a world *viewed*, in the meeting of a visible world and a viewer. Vision delivers the visual world to the viewer as image, an image emanating from the world, carried by light and entering as sight into the viewer who is in direct, non-mediated “contact” with the image as one's own images, the contents of one's own sight.¹⁰ The contents of one's sight, Merleau-Ponty shows

8. See “The Question Concerning Technology” (Heidegger 1993). *Bestand* is traditionally translated “standing-reserve.”

9. Michael Zimmerman, for example, reaches the conclusion that the absence of an explicit ethics in Heidegger, and the exclusion of a notion of compassion from his central notion of *Ereignis*, mean that “the central core of his thought provides inadequate guidance for environmental philosophy” (Zimmerman 2003, 95). Disagreeing, I would suggest that it is very much possible to detach many moves, terms, and insights from Heidegger's “central core of thought,” or its conclusions, and utilize them for an understanding of our relation with and our relating to nature through technological representation. This will be mostly practiced rather than argued in the present essay.

10. In his essay “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty writes: “We must take literally what vision teaches us: namely, that through it we come in contact with the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere all at once, and that even our power to imagine ourselves else-

us throughout his *Phenomenology of Perception*, is at the same time the contents of one's cognition. A phenomenological description of vision will include the world as the source of images, the image of the world, the act of viewing which accesses the image, and the phenomenological viewer as subject or consciousness, "in" which the images are actualized. If the two ends of this description, world and consciousness, maintain a distinction which is often addressed in spatial terms—I locate myself as consciousness on *this* side of my eyes, whereas the world is out there, on the other side—it is the understanding of human being as *embodied consciousness* which comes to negotiate the spatial distance. The understanding of our being as embodied consciousness does not merely designate our material, bodily being as endowed with consciousness, hence placing consciousness in the material world through human agency; it also constructs the conceptual-semantic field that gives coherence to our use of spatial terms when describing the relations of consciousness and phenomena, just as it makes coherent our understanding of human inherence in the world in intentional terms. An embodied consciousness, located in a spatial, material world, accesses the world through the channels of material continuity, from the "rough" contact of touch to the more subtle contacts of sight and sound. All these modes of contact, these material channels of perception, extend a continuity which is both material and intelligible for an embodied consciousness.¹¹ Hence that bird, still flying out there, is in the world, while its image is in me, related to me without distance.

The images of vision, understood phenomenologically, are not "objects," if by object we understand something separate from the subject. We maintain the distinction between subject and object, between thought and the objects of thought, between consciousness and phenomena, for the convenience of philosophical analysis, but at the same time we rely on the inseparable immediacy of the two. Here is where pictures, including the moving pictures of the cinema, come in handy: they offer us precisely the material objectification of sight or of sight's products, of images, now standing as separate, distinct, and distanced objects. As such external objects, images, which are otherwise immediate to consciousness, are made "ready-to-hand"; they can be handled;

where . . . or to intend real beings wherever they are, borrows from vision and employs means we owe to it. Vision alone [by what it is rather than by what we see] makes us learn that beings that are different, 'exterior,' foreign to one another, are yet absolutely *together*, are 'simultaneity'" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 187).

11. Merleau-Ponty: "[M]y body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. It is not a self through transparency, like thought, which only thinks its object by assimilating it, by constituting it, by transforming it into thought. It is a self through . . . inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees, and through inherence of sensing in the sensed" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 162–63).

nowadays we can literally hold these moving images in our hand, suspending them at a distance while taking them back in in sight and thought. The cinematic image, excising vision from the mind, offering us an image-object, indeed *at a distance*, provides the laboratory setting in which even philosophical analysis operates in its distinction of object of consciousness from the subject which is consciousness, even as it holds this distinction in the unity of consciousness being one with its objects. Furthermore, the cinematic image performs the act of clinical distinction-as-separation in the other direction as well, peeling visuality from the material world, offering the world's visuality as screened images, separate from the objects from which they originally emanate. In so doing, the cinema operates with a certain illusion of *disembodiment*: separating the image of things from their body, on the one hand, and dimming our awareness of our own bodies, on the other hand, as we lose ourselves and our immediate surroundings in the visions screened. At the same time, the effect of disembodiment is dependent upon the spatiality of vision, of the spatial relation of distance between the *here* from which I see and the *there* which is seen. Distance, space, is necessary for seeing anything at all, and spatiality, indeed *embodiment*, is constitutive of the cinematic experience. Again, the binding "dialectics" (if that is the right term) of embodied consciousness, with its inner variations of the internal and the external, the intentional and the visual, guide us in our understanding of the cinematic, of vision understood in terms of an intentionality-without-distance, on the one hand, and of an embodied, positioned and positioning spatiality on the other.¹²

A phenomenological analysis of the cinematic experience renders, then, the laboratory situation of the very setting of phenomenological analysis without reducing everyday experience to the artificial sterility of the lab. For we will be using the same tools of observation in the cinematic lab as we do in everyday life: the tools of sight, sound, and spatial location.¹³ The cinema,

12. Levinas: "The subject is absorbed in the object it absorbs, and nevertheless keeps a distance with regard to that object" (Levinas 1987 [1947], 67).

13. Vivian Sobchack introduces her remarkable work on the phenomenology of film experience, taking her cues mostly from Merleau-Ponty, with a note on the reflexive continuity of the everyday and the cinematic:

More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood. Objectively projected, visibly and audibly expressed before us, the film's activity of seeing, hearing, and moving signifies in a pervasive, primary, and embodied language that precedes and provides the grounds for the secondary significations of a more discrete, systematic, less "wild" communication. Cinema thus transposes, without completely trans-

in other words, presents us with a phenomenology of phenomenology, a materialization or visualization of Husserl's original scheme in which we think ourselves thinking, here: we see ourselves seeing. I would suggest that the ocularcentrism of Husserl's phenomenology, well observed by David Michael Levin,¹⁴ delivers neatly the phenomenological model to the cinema and the cinematic experience to phenomenology.

The cinema becomes an invaluable tool for our search for new significances in our relation with the natural world, as it also allows us to see the world in ways which we could otherwise not see. This medium delivers us visually to places—too far, too near, small, large, hidden, dangerous—that we could not otherwise reach, as can be seen in the phenomenal nature documentaries produced in recent years, such as the BBC series *The Blue Planet* (2001), *Planet Earth* (2006), and *Earthflight* (2011). Moreover, environmental cinema enables us to see in temporal and spatial scales that are otherwise not available to us, as demonstrated by Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982) and its sequels *Powaqqatsi* (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002), which practice a variety of cinematic manipulations of time, space, and movement in their parallel observations of the natural world and human urban environments. Narrative cinema might shift the focus away from nature as the main object of attention, but it offers in return, through its fictional, historical, or fantastic plots, a framing of human-nature relations in dramatic and thematic contexts.

We will focus here on the latter. Terence Malick's *The New World* tells the story of the encounter between the English settlers of Jamestown, 1607, and the land and inhabitants of what they called "The New World." It is a fictionalized story of the encounter of Captain John Smith and the native Pocahontas, her later "culturization" in the English ways and in Christianity, her marriage to settler John Rolfe, and finally her arrival in England, where she encounters segments of the built and ordered environment of seventeenth-century Britain and soon thereafter dies. But the story and its characters, as always in Malick's work, present only part of the interests of the film, and not necessarily the central part. The cinematic environment presented in Malick's work, along with his signature meditative voice-over reflections provided by one or more of the characters, expand the themes of Malick's films beyond the restrictions of narrative economy or character study.

forming, those modes of being alive and consciously embodied in the world that count for each of us as *direct* experience. (Sobchack 1992, 3–4)

14. "For Husserl, the paradigm of rationality seems inextricably bound up with looking and seeing: so much so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine expounding his ideal of reason without the rhetorical resources—the metaphors and allegorical associations—of the discourse of vision" (Levin 1999, 62).

ARRIVING AT THE NEW WORLD

The cinema of Terrence Malick lends itself quite generously to an ecological and phenomenological inspection. A truly environmental filmmaker, Malick had released three films prior to *The New World—Badlands* (1972), *Days of Heaven* (1978), and *The Thin Red Line* (1998)—all of which repeatedly display their characters *in* nature, often deserting narrative action for a visual exploration of the flora and fauna that surrounds the characters and the action. Neither background nor scenery, nature in Malick's films is at least as significant as their central characters.¹⁵ Visual nature—the forest and plains of South Dakota in *Badlands*, the wheat fields and their surrounding terrain of what is presented as the Texas Panhandle in *Days of Heaven*, the tropical jungles of what stands for Guadalcanal in *The Thin Red Line*, and the coastlines and interior of Virginia in *The New World*—all become the locus of often unspoken meanings, presented by visual means and hence inviting the kind of linguistic interventions, such as the present one, that seek to learn and articulate what further can be understood and incorporated into the philosophical discourse of human-nature relations from a non-linguistic representation of and reflection on the natural world.¹⁶

Malick has been receiving rapidly growing attention from the precincts of film-philosophy,¹⁷ not only for the reflective nature of his films, but also due to his own personal history as a promising student of philosophy, an early translator of Heidegger¹⁸ and a student of Hubert Dreyfus and Stanley Cavell, who jumped ship to Hollywood and is thus often perceived as having chosen to philosophize in a different medium.¹⁹

15. In a short essay included in a booklet accompanying the Criterion Collection 2007 DVD edition of *Days of Heaven*, film scholar Adrian Martin writes about this film: “the landscape truly moved from background to foreground, and the work that went on in it, the changes that the seasons wreaked upon it, the daily miracles of shifting natural light or the punctual catastrophes of fire or locust plague that took place . . . all this mattered as much, if not more, than the strictly human element of the film” (Martin 2007, 8).

16. Scholarly articles focusing on the role of nature in Malick's films include McCann 2007; Silberman 2007; and Evertson 2011, but practically anyone who writes attentively about Malick (see the following footnotes) offers some commentary on this topic. The obvious centrality of non-human nature in Malick's work does not necessitate a scholarly-philosophical eye to be noticed. See, for example, film critic David Thomson's observation that *The Thin Red Line* is actually “about a Pacific island where, for a moment, a war occurred. It is a botanical panorama in which the soldiers scurry and rant, like furious insects. . . . The island, its foliage, its fauna, and its light endure—as if the war was just a passing rainstorm” (Thomson 2012, 208).

17. See, for example, Patterson 2007; Davies 2009; and Tucker and Kendall 2011.

18. *The Essence of Reasons*, published by Northwestern University Press in 1969.

19. Within the growing body of Malick scholarship there is a tendency and a tradi-

My focus, in looking at the opening sequence of *The New World*, aims to detect a mode in which ecology and philosophy are not merely presented by film, but, instead, exposes how the cinematic act of viewing and showing, viewing-as-showing, is implicated in, becomes *part* of an ecological philosophy and forms together an eco-film-phenomenology. We find this in *The New World* in a practice that is already widely exercised in *The Thin Red Line*, in which the general visual presentations of nature and of humans-in-nature are interspersed with the characters' own visual observation of the natural world. This practice dominates the opening sequence of *The New World*, where, as the English settlers are about to land on the shores of Virginia, we see them looking at this natural world, and we see the "naturals" (as they are referred to in the dialogue) of this world looking back. Looking, seeing, and what is seen arise as central operations and themes in the introduction to this cinematic environment, an environment we enter by sight.²⁰ And yet, the very first moments of the film, prior to the visual introduction of world-as-image, voice precedes image. We first hear the voices of living nature (birds, frogs, cicadas), and the human voice of the character that we will later recognize as Pocahontas, delivering an off-screen invocation: "Come Spirit, help us sing the story of our land. You are Mother. We, your field of corn, we rise from out of the soul of you." In between these two audible voices a third voice is presented in a different channel; it is presented visually, yet differently than the visual images that will soon follow: it is text quoted from the historical diaries of Captain John Smith, claiming the inability to know or understand Virginia even by those who have visited it.²¹

tion to seek Heideggerian influence in his work, or view it as expressing Heideggerian themes. For the relation of Malick's cinema to Heidegger's philosophy see Critchley 2002; Clewis 2003; Sinnerbrink 2006; Fusterneau and MacAvoy 2007; and Woessner 2011. For an overview and reassessment of the Heidegger-Malick link see Loht 2013. Loht adds an important cautionary remark, that "in spite of good reasons to pair the two, the relationship of Malick to Heidegger among film philosophers has probably been *over-emphasized*" (Loht 2013, 130).

20. James Morrison, in an insightful essay, suggests that Malick offers in *The New World* two alternatives for seeing and relating to nature: the colonial gaze carrying the approach of modernity to conquer nature by impressing human will and design on it, and, alternatively, to see nature "as confronting us with an otherness against which we may define ourselves apart from the antagonisms of alien human will. [This alternative] entails *the gaze of a receptive consciousness* attuned to nature's capacity, in time, to individuate and differentiate in its seeming reproductions of identity. . . . These alternatives are, in large, what the film is about: how worlds are 'made' as they are *because the ways that we look at them*. Depending on which option prevails, they might become home to a multifarious flourishing humanity, or they might be destroyed" (Morrison 2007, 201; italics mine). Morrison continues to claim that these are the same alternatives offered by Heidegger in response to the crises of modernity (ibid.).

21. For another treatment of the visual-philosophical aspects of the opening sequence and of the John Smith quote, see Sinnerbrink 2011, chapter 9: "Song of the Earth:

If we are about to enter a visual world, a world whose body is image, then the significance of these introductory voices arises as a pre-embodiment or a dis-embodiment, a detachment of voice from body, an audible or textual voice that is not accompanied by a visual body as its source. These disembodied voices of nature and of humanity will serve as a reminder that in a visual universe opened up by the visual medium, not everything is visible, neither is everything captured on the screen.

Pocahontas's invisible voice will return immediately after the credit sequence that follows, and the film will continue to include such stretches of speech from the three main characters (Pocahontas, John Smith, and John Rolfe), in a practice that has become a certain trade mark of Malick's filmmaking. A unique use of voiceover narration is employed in all of Malick's films, mostly as a feature of incongruence, where what is heard, or the manner in which it is said do not fully correspond to what is seen. What is underlined by such incongruence is the very significance of this formal device, opening another ontological level between the fiction and the outer reality of the viewers. For where does the voice come from? Not directly from the world viewed, but neither from the viewers' world; it is a cinematic convention that, when accounted for, reveals an other, invisible dimension of the cinematic world. In its conventional use, that is, when its use is not specifically qualified from within the fiction, this device necessarily departs from representation's "realism" that pretends not to be aware of its observers. Voiceover narration, just as the position of a storyteller in literary fiction, signifies an awareness of a listener, an audience, for the benefit of which the narration is voiced. It reserves for language a special position in a world dominated by light and sight.

The first image, following the quote from Captain Smith, and prior to the credit sequence offers a powerful visual declaration: Water, Sky, Clouds, Trees appear all in one frame, on one plane. A statement is made here, a statement about the integrity of nature, its integration of up and down, sea, sky, and land into one, its being whole. Even as I am using here a linguistic term—"statement"—what the cinematic medium is displaying in this image is a unique, extra-linguistic ability of visually *showing*, rather than merely "stating" this integrity, this oneness, in an image, one image, a single picture. It is this non-compound aspect of the means of expression, along with the visual iconicity of the items presented in the visual statement, that make for the force of the expression, the demonstration of the idea of the unity and integrity of nature in the unity and integrity of the single frame, in which concept and image finally meet. And this is done without using any of the technological

manipulations that are available to the medium, the manipulations that will be next demonstrated in the opening credits sequence that follows.

There is a decisive difference between stating verbally “Nature is one,”²² and an image, such as this one, that expresses such a concept in the concretely visual, displaying oneness without resorting to the metaphorical or the abstract. Such an image, *this* image, belies the persistent claim made by some analysts of the medium, that film can only *illustrate* ideas already formulated in language, not construct them.²³ Here we have a concept that achieves its generality by not presenting a specific sky, cloud, sea, or tree—they are here anonymous, out of context; they are *any* sky, cloud, sea, or tree, and the generality of the *any* is seen directly. We need not *abstract* in order to move from the particular image to the general; we need not *imagine* in order to apply the concept to the particular and sensible. And if images, films, can produce concepts, they can philosophize in their unique, visual way.

But there is more happening in this frame: the unity of nature displayed is achieved by virtue of visual reflection, of a compilation of reflected images upon the river surface, upon a water-screen. In other words, even as we pass through the level of cinematic image and enter into the diegetic world of the film, the elements of the natural world—sky, clouds, trees—are still *also* images, the water a screen. Yet this is not a reduction of the reality of these elements and of this world, not a demotion of their ontological status from things to mere images. On the contrary, it is a *promotion* of the ontology of image, demonstrating how being image—the reflections in the water in this case—does not come at the expense of being a thing in the world, the world displayed by the film; a thing can be both thing and image. Furthermore, both reflected image and thing, these natural elements testify, by virtue of their dual citizenship, to the semantic richness of things and images: *that they carry meaning*.

Let me explain why. We are observing this frame phenomenologically. This means that we, as observers, are internalizing the cinematic image as an inner phenomenon, an image of (or for) consciousness, which is the very site of meaning. Meanings, phenomenologically, occur in the meeting point of consciousness and world, that is, in the image we call phenomenon. This means that in the phenomenological context, images, by definition, are semantically or hermeneutically saturated.

22. As, for example, Heidegger does in a statement such as: “the thing stays the united four, earth and sky, divinities and mortal, in the simple onefold of their self-unified fourfold” (Heidegger 2001, 175–76).

23. See, for example, Paisley Livingston (2009), especially Chapter 1, “Theses on Cinema as Philosophy.”

We are passing here through several layers of image: our inner phenomenon, which displays a screened cinematic image, which displays in image a segment of the natural world: the river surface, upon which elements of the natural world appear as reflected images, and the water itself is all at once: thing, image, and screen surface. The integrity of the natural world we discovered in the statement of this frame appears here as the integrity of images and things, more precisely: of images, things, and consciousness. The ecological integrity expressed and demonstrated by the image continues further as the phenomenological integrity of consciousness and the objects of consciousness.

Our eco-film-phenomenology here—as it seems always to be the case with hermeneutic phenomenology—discovers itself. It discovers that the units naming this very approach, posited and aligned, with or without hyphens, become continuous in our phenomenological gaze that reveals or produces the integration of a continuous flow, the movement of meaning through *ekos*, *film*, *phenomenon*, and *logos*. We discover the intertwining flow of observer, screen, image, nature, consciousness, and we are only at the film's first frame.²⁴

One more shot before the credit sequence displays the bearer of the voice that has just invoked "Spirit," "Mother," to "help us sing the story of our land. . . . We, your field of corn, we rise from out of the soul of you": Pocahontas is stretching her arms to the cloudy skies in a visual invocation that complements the verbal one. Two birds fly high against the clouds.

The opening credits that follow are interspersed with images of land, sea, native Americans and British explorers, separately and together, at peace and war; there is action. But unlike the film that has already begun, these are graphic, drawn images—maps, etchings, drawings, and three-dimensional computer graphics—artistic and artificial representations of the world (that we are about to see) and of people in the world. While standing in contrast to the transparent images of film stock, that preceded and will follow, the drawn images of the credit sequence also mark the shared quality of image, captured by or displayed on one and the same screen. The artful artificiality of the graphic maps and drawings, whose relation to the world is symbolic rather than iconic, reminds us of the constructed nature of images, that they are human-made, hence *an expression*. Even as an expression of a vision, they are filtered through human making, through human consciousness, and we must remember this reminder as we move back to film images: that they too

24. See also Mark Cousins (2007): "The first shot, of the rippling surface of a pool, is scored to the ululation, twitter and squawk of a gigantic aviary. A Darwinian world, shoals of fish or eels, seem to slip and swim beneath the pool's surface, breaking and convulsing it. To stare at water in cinema is to expect a Spielbergian shark or contemplate a Tarkovskian void, but here, in the first moments of this film, we are looking at a gene pool, the origins of life" (194).

are filtered through human making. This sequence reminds us that we enter the world of image, rather than the world itself. We enter the world of image in which the world is made image, and we enter it by sight.

Following the credits and the pictures, we return to the water, where again a powerful visual statement is made: From a surface screen, the water gains back its depth and volume; we see naked bodies in the water, bathing and exploring the world underwater. The visibility of the water and its transparency enable a concrete display of human bodies *touching* the natural world, envired by it, wrapped in it in a full and immediate contact of visible body and visible world. The materiality of the enviring world is made here visibly concrete by the visible water that touches and is touched by the characters' naked bodies. The image underscores a relation that easily goes unnoticed when it is invisible air that environs the human body, when the physical contact of body and world is characterized by a certain functionality, or when the image of humans-in-the-world is subordinated to narrative action. Here, we see clearly that Man—or in this case, and pronouncedly, Woman—is not *on* the world, not just *facing* the world as in the condition of vision; she is *in* the world, continuous with it in the continuity of a full bodily contact. With this image a visual statement is made about human-world relation, a relation that is continuous, contactual, physical, concrete. At the same time, this image, still anonymous, delivers a conceptual, general understanding of the world-immersion of human being, its being-in-the-world, which is the starting point and a central theme of phenomenological investigation in both its Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontidian modes.

What follows is a set of exchanges between images of seeing and images of sights-seen, starting out with a view from within the water: We see the natives, standing above the water, pointing into the distance. By doing so they are demonstrating the act of seeing and describing their line of sight with their extended arms and pointed fingers. What they are looking at are ships, and on the ships are the British settlers and soldiers, who are looking back, in a mixture of consternation and excitement. The film-image alternates between the looking of the natives and the looking of the settlers. We see them looking, and we see what they see: on the natives' side, the gaze travels through the trees to peer across the water. On the settlers side the gaze travels through the ship's ropes, across the water to scan the land. The settlers' view is filtered through and incorporates elements of their means of transportation, while the natives' view is filtered through and incorporates elements of their technology, natural surroundings.

We pause here to note that nature seen, just like nature screened, maintains a certain ontological status, pre-utilitarian, *seen* rather than *utilized*, *vorhanden* rather than *zuhanden*. Nature seen is object of my sight, object of my consciousness, and while it is related to me as object of my sight and

consciousness, it is not an object of my physical manipulation. While looking at nature can serve as a prelude to conquering it, as is the case with the Baconian state of mind of these early seventeenth-century settlers, it is also a relation at a distance with an autonomous nature, nature *in itself*. Nature screened, then, if we allow it be or allow ourselves the attentiveness that looks at things in their non-utilitarian visual being, not even the utility of plot and diegetic action, displays the very mode of a non-intrusive relationship with the natural world: that it is *sight* prior to being a field of action. This, indeed, is what makes Malick's cinema in general an "environmental cinema," that it so often reserves for visual nature an autonomy and an in-itselfness, refusing its subordination to the concerns of the narrative.

The exchange of seeings and sights in the scene we are looking at now includes a certain mode of seeing, *and the showing of this seeing*.²⁵ These are the sights seen through the ship's rectangular porthole, displaying the seeing of Smith, who is imprisoned inside the ship and whose first view of the New World is visually framed by the porthole. This type of framed view will recur several times throughout the film, cutting a rectangular—hence, non-natural—vista onto the world.²⁶ The framing of the European's view of this New World bears the dual effect of emphasis and discontinuity: the visual and attentive emphasis on that which is within the frame and the discontinuation of this view from the rest of the world cut out by the frame. There is a reflexive reminder in such framing, a reminder that we, too, are watching all this through and within a frame, a cinematic frame, and that nature screened is also nature *enframed*, cut out from the continuity of the land and from the continuity of our own immediate visible surrounding. But if two lateral continuities are disrupted by this framing, a third continuity is opened up: the continuity between viewer and screen. The vista accentuated by the frame opens up as a corridor, a distance separating *and* connecting viewer to image through the distance of space and in the immediacy of intentionality. Film and viewer maintain their bodily distance while, in the phenomenological attention, they rise as interrelated, interconnected, inseparable, intentionally connected.

25. Sobchack: "Seeing is an act performed by both the film (which sees a world as visible images) and the viewer (who sees the film's visible images both as a world and the seeing of a world)" (Sobchack 1992, 56).

26. Mark Cousins writes: "As in *Badlands*, *The New World* uses doorways and gateways to contend that the built world frames human beings in a different way to the bowers of the natural world, and causes us to re-see them because of this framing" (Cousins 2007, 193). Yet we should note that what is framed here is not the human being *in* the frame, but the human being who is seeing *through* the frame, or the human seeing that *enframes* what it sees within its imported and projected cultural contexts and conceptual paradigms.

Soon the settlers enter the space seen and immediately its elements become utilities, *zuhanden*: the river water is scooped for drinking, the tree is made an anchor for tying the boats. When they step from shore onto tall grassed fields, the image on the screen shows weapons first entering the land, followed by the armored people that draw them.²⁷ The ship's captain looks around in caution, suspicion, and consternation. We see: invisible wind blowing visibly through the green bushes.²⁸

We are looking phenomenologically at this sequence, at this film, that pronouncedly emphasizes the medium through which the encounter with the new, natural world is displayed: the medium of vision in which the medium of film is contained. Looking phenomenologically, which also means looking ecologically, i.e., in terms of binding relations, directs us further from the seen to the seeing, from the image-object seen to the consciousness-environment in which seeing and thinking take place. It directs us back, as indicated earlier, to ourselves as conscious viewers, disallowing the source of seeing, its inversed vanishing point, from vanishing. In the full picture of the phenomenology of the experience of viewing nature screened, *we are positioned*. We are positioned as the seers of these sights, regardless of the actual location in space and time of Virginia's beach or of ourselves when watching these sights, seeing these images, which now become *our* images as the contents of our sight. In the full phenomenological picture of the film experience, we become part of the picture.

27. In an essay impressive for its breadth as well as its caution, precision, and insight, Martin Woessner summarizes the thematic implications of the encounters between the settlers and the New World, first glimpsed in this scene: "What The New World recounts is the transformation of the natural world into an artificial world. Scenes of indigenous dwelling are juxtaposed with scenes of colonial misery, the former depicting balance and harmony with the environment, the latter only struggle and strife—an existence against, not with nature" (Woessner 2011, 154). And later: "America emerges out of the interaction of these two worlds—that of the 'naturals' and that of the colonists—but it bequeaths to us a view of the environment drawn primarily from the latter, which sees it as little more than a region full of exploitable resources, of passive object awaiting manipulation and domination" (155).

28. One more element needs to be accounted for in the analytic description of this scene, and that is the film's soundtrack, forcefully playing the prelude to Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, the first opera in the *Ring of the Nibelung* cycle. The prelude, suggesting a musical rendition of the river Rhine and its flow, introduces to viewers familiar with the opera cycle the themes of a clash between gods, men, and other creatures for world dominance, and the actual and symbolic force contained in the natural element of gold, forged into the artifice of a ring. On another, extra-diegetic level, the musical theme here, alongside Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23, both of which recur several times in the film's soundtrack, contrasts these cultural achievements of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European high art with the naturalness of pre-colonial North America and its original inhabitants. For more on the role of Wagner's *Rheingold* in this film, see Sinnerbrink 2011, 189–91.

Heidegger would not like this, as his scathing critique of “The Age of the World Picture” (1938) is precisely directed at the kind of representational thinking, which he blames Descartes for establishing, in which beings are reduced to objects, and the world, as the entirety of beings, is reduced to a picture, with the human thinker as its authority. In such representational thinking, “man ‘puts himself in the picture’” (Heidegger 2002, 69) as the “norm giving” viewer of the world-as-picture, further distancing and separating himself from a world reduced by representation.²⁹

Merleau-Ponty is more helpful here. The embodied positioning achieved by sight, according to Merleau-Ponty, is based on the potential reciprocity of vision: the position from which one sees also discloses the seer as a potential object of sight. Everything I see potentially looks back at me, and hence the act of looking establishes our inherence in the world, an inherence that is further established with the reciprocity of sensing that enmeshes us in the world:

[M]y body simultaneously sees and is seen. . . . It is a self through . . . inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees, and through inherence of sensing in the sensed—a self, therefore, that is caught up in things, that has a front and a back, a past and a future. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 162–63)

The claim of being positioned by sight is central to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and can be found in many of his works. For example, in “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” he writes: “My body must itself be meshed into the visible world; its power depends precisely on the fact that it has a place *from which* it sees” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 166). And in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty invokes the aesthetic and artistic context to describe such inherence and disclosure: “the vision [that the seer] exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139). Of course, the world presented as image on a screen cannot see me, and yet it does *disclose* me; it discloses me to myself as the seer who belongs to these images just as much as the images belong to me as their seer. The enclosed disclosure renders a certain continuity constituted by sight and therefore achieved even across mediation in relating, even *binding* the seer to her sight. We can claim, then, that the technological mediation of camera, projector, and screen does not merely separate viewed world from the world viewer³⁰ but, in fact, brings the two

29. Cf. Heidegger 2002, 68–70 and 80–84.

30. In the reflections on the ontology of the cinema presented in his book, *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell famously suggests: “What does the silver screen screen? It screens me from the world it holds—that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me—that is, screens its existence from me. That the projected world does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality” (Cavell 1979, 24). I am suggesting above that this is only half the picture, and the silver screen also screens me *in*.

together in the intentional immediacy of consciousness and phenomenon, perception and image.

The images of nature presented in *The New World* position us as its viewers, but what could we further say about such a position of viewers who cannot act upon what they view, who cannot enter the world opened up by sight except by means of intentionality, viewers whose positioning is thus “limited” to apprehension and comprehension? What else can we make of this relation? Heidegger, whom we have found less than helpful in his critique of representational thinking, seems to become relevant again even as he reiterates the same critique of representational thinking in “The Thing” (originally delivered in 1950). The lecture opens with a critique of technology’s abolition of distance with its airplanes, radios, television, and, yes, film, which is here addressed specifically in its manipulative screening of nature. “The germination and growth of plants,” Heidegger writes, “which remained hidden throughout the seasons, is now exhibited publicly in a minute, on film” (Heidegger 2001, 163).

Interestingly, Malick exhibits this very same image in his second film, *Days of Heaven* (1978), which is characterized not only by its opulent displays of nature—wheat fields and wide landscapes, running horses and birds of many kinds, endless skies and various bodies of water—but also of every possible type of motorized vehicle, from train to car to truck to tractor to motorbike and mechanical plough and early planes, always cutting through the fields, splicing nature with technology. The public exhibition of a plant germinating underground lasts here only fifteen seconds, using time-lapse photography, in an extremely rare employment for Malick of special effects, which have as their own formal effect the foregrounding of the medium’s technological character. If technological tools are exhibited throughout this film alongside and *in* nature (including a scene in which a telescope, a microscope, and a calculating machine are displayed on a table in the middle of a wheat field), in the underground shot of the germinating plant the technological tool is absent from the picture. Instead it is invisibly featured as that which enables this picture, “shrinking” the “distance in time,” as Heidegger writes in the opening sentence of “The Thing,” by using a temporal scale different than the human one, rendering the slow process of hidden germination humanly visible.³¹

The trope of distance and nearness runs through Heidegger’s text, which refers to the cinematic medium and other technologies of mobility and communication with the apparently derogative term, “the distanceless.” But we

31. Note, also, that Cavell, in his Foreword to the enlarged edition of *The World Viewed*, writes about Malick’s *Days of Heaven*, “The particular mode of beauty of these images somehow invokes a formal radiance which strikes me as a realization of some sentences from Heidegger’s *What Is Called Thinking?*” (Cavell 1979, xv).

are not expecting from Heidegger to positively theorize the cinema for us, nor to find, with us, the contribution cinema can make for the understanding of nature and of being. We are seeking to be assisted by his formulation of a relation to the world that could account for both the separation and immediacy in which we find ourselves positioned by the phenomenology of the cinema. This assistance comes with Heidegger's use of the term "vigilance," with which we "step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls" (Heidegger 2001, 179). Loyal to his own call to refrain from explanation, Heidegger further develops the position of stepping back in terms that are more suggestive than explanatory: "The step back," Heidegger writes, "takes up its residence in a co-responding which, appealed to in the world's being by the world's being, answers within itself to that appeal" (ibid.). Even as it arises from a critique of representational thinking and ocular conceptual models, the idea presented here seems to chime with the notion of identity and continuity we find in Merleau-Ponty's visual phenomenology, further developed in the notion of a world "flesh," of which we are a continuous part.³² Heidegger's statement suggests that the being of the world is identical to the being of the thinker (or of "thinking"), that there is a continuation (to use a spatial term) of the world in the thinker, and of the thinker in the world. If the appeal of Being is heard from within and answered within, that is because the human thinker is in-the-world in a more fundamental way than that of spatial inherence.

Heidegger's "co-respondence and answer to the appeal" helps us qualify further the position of the viewer in relation to the world-as-nature-screened we found ourselves in, a relation of continuity or extension by means of vision and/as intentionality. We are positioned as the seers of the sight of nature, which lies beyond our reach as it is presented in image and yet is bound to us as *our* image, the contents of *our* sight. It is a unique position of powerlessness and exposure: we see but we are unable to act, subject, subordinate or transform nature from vision to resource; we are disclosed but are unseen by the nature that we see. If we qualify the possibilities left for us in this relation as appeal and co-respondence, may we not push the implications further and accept that the terms of such relation are *ethical* terms, suggesting an ethic prior to action but which conditions actions from the outset, an ethical responsibility prior to ontological determination? In other words, may we not appeal to Levinas's notion of responsibility, of which Heidegger will not speak, and which Levinas develops in exclusively anthropocentric terms?

The scholarly work to adjust Levinas's anthropocentric responsibility to make it apply to an ecological one is ongoing,³³ but we should note that what

32. *The Visible and the Invisible*, Chapter IV.

33. Ed Casey has pointed out the general direction in stating: "if there is indeed an

makes Levinas's ethics of responsibility inherently ecological is not a question of its field of application but its very structure as *relational*. What Levinas draws out is responsibility as the fundamental structure of human existence, a structure that does not find its justification within the sphere of existence or that ties together pre-existing and autonomous entities. Instead, responsibility is offered as a constituting relation, the very *relationality* of one's existence that conditions human existence in the social world. As Levinas summarizes in conversation:

I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. . . . Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. (Levinas 1985, 95–96)

"In the traditional teaching of idealism," Levinas writes in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, "subject and consciousness are equivalent concepts. The *who* or the *me* are not even suspected. This one is a nonrelation, but absolutely a term . . . it is a term not reducible to a relation" (Levinas 1981, 103). Levinas's own efforts, even as it limits itself to the relation to the other human being, revives subjectivity as relationality, where one fully becomes oneself in one's relation to an other. This relation, that makes one into a self, is named responsibility as the obligation to that which precedes me and enables me to be me: "[T]he identity of the subject comes from the impossibility of escaping responsibility, from the taking charge of the other" (Levinas 1981, 14). But the same can be applied to the relation with the world at large, the world of nature that precedes and sustains me, that enables me to be. This ecological-existential fact would determine my responsibility for the well-being of the world on which I depend as a matter of practicality. But in the cinematic relation, in the position of the viewer facing nature screened or the world viewed, it is not practicality that informs my relation to a world that is not-here, not-now, and not real. This visual-intentional relation, from which practicality

ethical relation between human beings, there is also an equally (but differently) ethical relation among all members of the natural environment—to which Levinas's ethical posture remains relevant *even if it calls for revision and expansion*" (Casey 2003, 205; italics mine). For another adjustment of Levinas's ethical-existential structure to the wider ecological sphere see Christian Diehm (2003), as well as the recent collection, *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought* (Edelglass, Hatley, and Diehm 2012). Ted Toadvine's article, "Enjoyment and Its Discontents: On Separation from Nature in Levinas," included in *Facing Nature*, specifically attempts to bridge over issues of separation in Levinas's ethics with the assistance of Merleau-Ponty's notion of an "intertwining" or "chiasm," that ties humans back into nature along phenomenological lines.

and utility are bracketed out, their eclipsing effect muted, is exposed as the relation of co-respondence or ethical responsibility.

Face-to-face with what I see, we would say in revision or even subversion of Levinas, I am tied to that which I see, that which discloses me in the ethical-existential tie of responsibility. Having seen, taken in, been tied to, intermingled with the contents of my sight in an inseparable, ecological continuity, how could I turn away? Positioned by sight, I find myself *here*, intentionally bound with nature screened. If I am here, already here, is not the only response possible at the outset the Levinasian upholding of responsibility, even in, *especially* in the position of powerlessness: *Here I am?*

And if Levinas discovers the binding structure of responsibility through a critique, which is not unlike Heidegger's attack on representational thinking, directed against the imperialism of knowledge that tends to colonize any other it encounters by reducing it to the level of the Same as known and as content of consciousness,³⁴ do we not detect a similar realization in *The New World's* very first utterance, the quote from Captain John Smith's diary: "How much they err, that think everyone who has been at Virginia, understands or knows what Virginia is"? Here "being at" or being-in precedes yet does not necessarily enable knowledge and understanding. Still, if "being at" or being-in produces a blank for understanding, it also forms a binding, the binding of the "at" or the "in," i.e., of a *position*, which by definition defines me in relation to a surrounding, an environment, which I may not fully know or understand, and which need not be my immediate physical space in order to environ me.

Prior to knowing and alongside knowing there is a positioning, a positioning by sight, across space, along the continuity of consciousness that renders what I see co-extensive with me as both body and consciousness, embodied consciousness. It is an ecological extension of the relationality of all things. It is a phenomenological bind of the intentionality that ties thinker with thought, seer with sight. And it is an ethical positioning that locates me in relation to nature, nature screened, revealed in its non-utilitarian being as object of sight, object of consciousness, which is already in me as consciousness and which positions me in a relation of an "answer to an appeal," a "co-respondence" that deserves the name of responsibility.

Our eco-film-phenomenology has brought us into *The New World* with eyes seeking the bond of thought and sight, it has landed us in the binding of responsibility. It was able to travel across absences and mediations as the contact that it seeks for the reflective viewer is not the one of body to body

34. For a condensed critique of knowledge as containment or appropriation, which stretches out throughout the body of Levinas's work, see the first section of "Ethics as First Philosophy" (Levinas 1989).

but of consciousness and meaning. An eco-phenomenology, we might remind ourselves in conclusion, seeks to understand our relation to nature, not to roll in the grass. Facing the image of nature, even through mechanical mediation, perhaps *especially* through mechanical mediation, our understanding of our understanding of nature becomes manifest. Nature screened does not remove us further away from nature; it brings us closer into the distanceless proximity in which we are bound to what we see in the binding of responsibility.

We rise.

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