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Visions of Entanglement and Escape: In-Visible Voice in the Films of Terrence Malick and George Lucas

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Visions of Entanglement and Escape: In-Visible Voice in the Films of Terrence Malick
and George Lucas

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis juxtaposes the unexpectedly parallel careers of the filmmakers George Lucas and Terrence Malick. Both popularly and academically, Lucas and Malick are typically conceived as divergent practitioners and are framed in oppositional terms. The goal of this thesis is – in part – to break down this oppositional understanding of Lucas and Malick as filmmakers. This traditional understanding of Malick and Lucas collapses when we consider their respective relationships to sensation and abstraction. Affirmations of sensation and Malick abound, as do critiques of abstraction and Lucas – all the while it is Malick who is aligned with abstraction and Lucas with sensation. To make sense of these contradictions and propose an alternative to understandings based on binary oppositions, I turn to the phenomenological philosopher and theorist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I extend Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the “in-visible” to voice – specifically voice as it is articulated in the films of Lucas and Malick. Lucas and Malick both articulate concerns about bodily confinement and feelings of alienation and aesthetically foreground *in-visible voice* in response to that confinement and alienation. However, this project also identifies a key difference between how Lucas and Malick [deploy *in-visible voice* in their films. Lucas articulates escape as the answer to societal problems while Malick argues in his films that only by recognizing the entangled relationality between all living things can we begin to address societal issues such as feelings of confinement, isolation, and alienation.

Introduction

This thesis juxtaposes the unexpectedly parallel careers of the filmmakers George Lucas and Terrence Malick by examining the use of voice in their films in an effort to rethink contemporary attitudes towards the perceptual experiences associated with technological mediation. Both popularly and academically, Lucas and Malick are typically conceived as divergent practitioners and are framed in oppositional terms. A key aspect of this oppositional understanding of Lucas and Malick reductively links Lucas with sensation and Malick with abstraction. Sensation is often understood in relation to an embodied physicality, while abstraction becomes linked to distance. Lucas becomes defined by the sensuous, bodily thrills of the special effects driven Hollywood blockbuster that he helped to codify in *Star Wars* and is often decried for the purported simplicity of his “thrill rides.” Meanwhile, Malick – affirmed for his moral and aesthetic complexity – is positioned as a challenger to the dominant blockbuster as his films such as *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* traffic in formal and philosophical abstraction and wandering, meditative depictions of the natural world.

Much like Lucas and Malick themselves, sensation and abstraction are often understood in oppositional terms. Theorists ranging from Friedrich Nietzsche to Vivian Sobchack have decried the supposedly alienating distance of abstraction. The purported alienation of abstraction is frequently pitted against sensation – whose embodied sensuousness, tactility, and proximity is often affirmed as our savior from abstraction’s distance. By now, several contradictions have come into focus. Affirmations of sensation and Malick abound, as do critiques of abstraction and Lucas –

all the while it is Malick who is aligned with abstraction and Lucas with sensation. Matters are further complicated when you consider the abstract nature of the special effects tools Lucas uses to create the bodily thrills often associated with his films and that Malick's use of close-miking and subjective camerawork imbue his films with a sensuous tactility.

To make sense of these contradictions and propose an alternative to understandings based on binary oppositions, I turn to the phenomenological philosopher and theorist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. My primary focus is on his final publication – *The Visible and the Invisible* – which Merleau-Ponty was working on at the time of his death in 1961. In that final publication, Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of the in-visible. The in-visible belongs to consciousness, even as it springs from the visible, from the body's status as a body. At the same time the in-visible evokes that in the visible world that ever precedes and exceeds what perception, consciousness and the lived body can ever see or know of it. Merleau-Ponty confounds stark divisions between body and world, mind and body, and visible and invisible. For Merleau-Ponty, these fundamental conditions of being are defined by their relation and not their negation. Merleau-Ponty's articulation of the in-visible explicitly calls for intertwinement, for entanglement. I argue that this framework, which forgoes binary oppositions in favor of entanglement, helps us reframe persistent theoretical conceptions of both sensation and abstraction and the films of Lucas and Malick. This can be achieved by turning to sound, rather than image as Merleau-Ponty does in his work.

Returning to Lucas and Malick more specifically, Merleau-Ponty's concept of the in-visible is best exemplified by the use of voice in their films. These two seemingly

divergent filmmakers converge in their mutual – if not identical – articulation of in-visible voice. Voice is, by its very nature, invisible in the colloquial understanding of that word. However, voice also discloses the in-visible as first articulated by Merleau-Ponty. Invisible in the traditional sense and yet in-the-visible world, voice for both Lucas and Malick is simultaneously associated with a sensuous body and abstractions that exceed it. The films of Lucas in the 1970s – *THX 1138*, *American Graffiti*, and *Star Wars* – represent a shared preoccupation with overtly mediated voices. Whether filtered through speakers, screens, radios, or helmets, voice in the films of Lucas is consistently and overtly filtered through a layer of mediation. The voices of entities such as Darth Vader or the robot police officers in *THX-1138* become figures for the process of mediation – which always mediates sensation and abstraction even if this relation has been historically denied. The sensuous qualities of voice – which is itself coded as bodily – are abstracted through mediated forms in the films of Lucas. While I argue that voice operates as an extension of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the in-visible in both the films of Lucas and Malick, Malick achieves this in a slightly different way. For Malick, this primarily plays out in his use of voiceover. In his early films *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, the voiceover featured in each film comes from an ambiguous space and time that is at once looking back on the events of each film and yet feels contemporaneous to the events seen onscreen. The ambiguous temporal and spatial source of the voiceover is revelatory of the in-visible as the voiceover is both invisible and about that which is in-the-visible world. Furthermore, Malick’s use of close-miking simultaneously engenders a sense of proximity and bodiliness and is a stark reminder that it too is a mediated voice. For example, the fuzziness of Linda’s closely-miked voiceover in *Days*

of Heaven is itself reminiscent of Darth Vader's infamous mediated breathing in *Star Wars* – combining a distinctly bodily and almost tactile sound and a form of mediation that abstractly draws away from the onscreen body.

The consistent entanglement of bodily sensation and distancing abstraction through voice in the films of Lucas and Malick stems from a shared and overt concern regarding a sense of bodily confinement. For Lucas, his central characters express a desire to escape from their current positionality which is expressed through a sense of immobility. In *THX 1138*, the titular character seeks to escape the oppressive society in which he lives. In *American Graffiti*, Curt desperately wants to escape the “boredom” of his small hometown in southern California. And, finally, in *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker dreams of leaving his family farm to join a rebellion. While male characters at the heart of Lucas's early films desire escape from the mundane, the main characters in Malick's *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* – Holly and Linda respectively – are women who are forced to live a life constantly on the move due to violence and volatility of the men in their lives. Lucas and Malick respond to these different and highly gendered forms of bodily confinement by, in part, turning to voice – an in-visible voice. While their shared concern regarding a sense of bodily confinement and use of in-visible voice represents a convergence of Lucas and Malick, it is important to note where they diverge as well. Both filmmakers use voice to mediate sensation and abstraction, however Lucas cultivates a *cinema of escape* that exploits yet denies this relation while Malick proposes an alternative *cinema of entanglement* that fully embraces it.

For Lucas, movement is escape. If the main characters in all of his films share a sense of bodily confinement, then the only answer Lucas is able to articulate is,

essentially, run. THX must escape society entirely if he wants to be free. Curt must fly away from Modesto to pursue his dreams. Luke must leave his family farm to join the Rebellion in order to defeat the Empire that killed his aunt and uncle. Lucas narratively and aesthetically highlights the movement of bodies through a physical space. He wants you to feel the movement in your body – as if you were on a thrill ride – because how can a character or an audience member feel confined if they are experiencing the sensation of movement? However, Lucas' sensuous thrill rides are achieved through abstract means – both narratively and practically. The characters of his films use abstracting technology (cars, planes, spaceships) to escape confinement and Lucas used abstracting special effects techniques to depict those escapes. Lucas wants the audience to focus on the thrill ride, the movement, the escape rather than the abstract tools used to create those sensuous thrills – and judging by the academic consensus of his work he has largely succeeded. This desire on Lucas' part is only further exacerbated in the latter half of his career.

After directing *THX 1138*, *American Graffiti*, and the first *Star Wars* film in the 1970s, Lucas took an extended hiatus from filmmaking. Lucas returned to the director's chair in 1999 – the height of Hollywood's digital age – with the prequel film *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*. Lucas would go on to release *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* and *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* in 2002 and 2005 respectively. In his return to filmmaking with the *Star Wars* prequels, Lucas doubles down on the *cinema of escape* that he established in his films from the 1970s. More than ever, Lucas wants you to feel the movement in his films and to be able to “escape” via the thrills his films depict. This is best exemplified by the changing

presentation of “The Force” in the prequels and the abilities associated with it. The Force is perhaps the most ethereal and abstract aspect of the original *Star Wars* film from 1977 – allowing characters to see the world around them with their eyes closed or to speak after their death. In the *Star Wars* prequels, however, The Force is presented as distinctly corporeal – flowing from and grounded in the body and its movements. Lucas’s distinctly corporeal presentation of The Force in the *Star Wars* prequels downplays the abstract qualities of The Force that he established in *Star Wars* (1977), but even in the prequels voice remains Lucas’s “tell.” Voice is where Lucas reveals that he is always mixing bodily sensation and abstracting technology and views – consciously or not – that mix as essential in combatting feelings of bodily confinement.

In contrast to Lucas, Malick does not believe that movement and confinement are necessarily opposed. In Malick’s films, movement and escape are not the answer to the sense of bodily confinement felt by his characters. Violence and feelings of confinement are, in fact, explicitly tied to movement in his earliest films *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. The main characters of Malick’s early films – Holly and Linda – are both forced to live life on the run because violent acts committed by Kit (Holly’s boyfriend) and Bill (Linda’s hotheaded older brother) have made them fugitives. Holly and Linda travel hundreds of miles over the course of their respective journeys – and yet – they remain isolated. Malick’s films are filled with movement and atheistically highlight modes of transportation – cars, motorcycles, planes, trains, and boats are all heavily featured in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. However, this constant movement is not freeing as Lucas would argue. It actively shapes Holly and Linda’s isolation and sense of confinement and prevents them from, initially, forming meaningful social connections.

Movement may allow escape from the mundane, average life as Lucas suggests in his films. After all, being forced to live a life on the run allows Holly to escape the suffocating confines of 1950s suburbia and Linda to escape the monotony of the factories in 1916 Chicago. However, this movement just leads to a more isolating confinement. For example, Linda is able to escape the confines of suburbia but while living in the woods with Kit they simply recreate the suburban lifestyle that made her feel so confined in the first place. The trappings of suburbia are everywhere in her new forest refuge – a radio, makeup, a mirror, a landscape painting. Movement – *escape* – didn't solve Holly's problems. It just isolated her further. So what, then, is the answer for Malick? In short, *entanglement*. To better explain, let's turn to Linda in *Days of Heaven*. Throughout the film, Linda tells stories (in voiceover) about the people she has met along the way. It is in these moments, when she acknowledges the interconnectedness of human existence, that she is able to break free – even if just for a moment – from the isolation created by her brother. Rather than escape, Malick views the recognition of entanglement – achieved through storytelling – as the response to a sense of bodily confinement.

Much like Lucas, Malick took an extended hiatus from filmmaking and returned more emboldened than ever. After directing *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* in the 1970s, Malick all but disappeared from the film industry until he began work on *The Thin Red Line*. *The Thin Red Line* was released in 1998, just months before Lucas released his own return to filmmaking – *The Phantom Menace*. Malick has released films consistently since his return to filmmaking including the films *The New World*, *The Tree of Life*, and *Voyage of Time: Life's Journey*. Just as Lucas doubled down on his cinema

of escape, Malick sought to push his cinema of entanglement even further. Beginning with *The Thin Red Line*, Malick introduced multiple voiceovers in his films that further emphasize the entangled reality and interconnectedness of perception. In addition, Malick began to extend his ethic of entanglement to very fundamentals of film form. With *The Tree of Life* and *Voyage of Time*, Malick set out to blur the line between documentary and fiction filmmaking as part of his larger effort to resist binary oppositions and recognize the inherent entanglement of perception.

Scholarship that positions sensation and abstraction as opposites rather than discussing sensation and abstraction *together* is simply looking for an easy, clear-cut “escape” as Lucas has done in his films. Arguments that boil down to “if we embrace sensation and reject abstraction then we won’t feel as isolated” are no different than the “escape/movement away from society is the answer to societal problems” ethic that can be found throughout the films of Lucas. Both arguments, are reflective of a “take your ball and go home” worldview. You cannot abandon abstraction for the comforts of sensation because the two are always intertwined. You cannot abandon society to fix it because you are a part of the social fabric of that society. Sensation and abstraction together make up the reality of perception. It is how we all perceive the world around us. You and every other individual in a society are entangled with each other – the fates of all are tied together. After all, communal entanglement is what makes a community. We must recognize, as Malick does in his films, that in order to make change of any kind we must first embrace the inherent entanglement of existence. This potentially long-winded exploration of sensation and abstraction and the films of George Lucas and Terrence Malick boils down to a simple idea, a simple argument: Lucas articulates escape as the

answer to societal problems while Malick argues in his films that only by recognizing the entangled relationality between all living things can we begin to address societal issues such as feelings of confinement, isolation, and alienation.

The “Traditional Story” of Lucas and Malick

To begin, let us turn to the initial connection between Lucas and Malick that served as the basis of this project: their parallel fame in the 1970s, hiatus in the 1980s and early 90s, and return to filmmaking in the late 1990s. With that in mind, the films of Lucas and Malick are firmly rooted in a broader discussion of analog and digital cinema. Both Lucas and Malick began their careers in analog cinema with the release of seminal films such as *Badlands* and *Star Wars* respectively – only to take an extended hiatus from filmmaking as the 1970s came to a close. Both men returned to filmmaking during the final days of the 1990s at the height of Hollywood’s digital turn. The aforementioned trajectory of the careers of Lucas and Malick forges an unmistakable connection between them and uniquely positions their films to provide insight regarding the relationship between and discourse surrounding analog and digital cinema. Both popularly and academically, the current digital age has seen the rise of a nostalgic yearning for analog cinema – which becomes linked to materiality and contiguity – while digital cinema is frequently decried as an immaterial, distancing abstraction. For spectators, journalists, and academics, the division between analog and digital cinema – unwittingly or not – becomes about culturally constructed conceptions of sensation and abstraction that affirm the former and are anxious and suspicious of the latter.

Although Lucas retired from filmmaking after selling his production company Lucasfilm to Disney and was uninvolved in the production of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, that film and its marketing campaign are indicative of the broader analog nostalgia that has gripped our current cultural moment. Writing for *Technobuffalo*,

journalist Danny Zepeda says, “One of the key marketing techniques that J.J. Abrams pushed during the pre-release cycle for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was the space saga’s return to practical effects. If you remember, the original trilogy used practical effects quite masterfully while the prequel trilogy reveled in CGI to the detriment of the films” (Zepeda). To start Zepeda’s description flatly attributes the negative reaction to the *Star Wars* prequels to their use of CGI and digital effects, while – in part – connecting the success of the original *Star Wars* trilogy to the practical effects employed in those films. This stance is reductive for a number of reasons, but most importantly it reveals the framework that structures analog nostalgia. Analog nostalgia is inherently built around a value judgement – one that positions analog as positive and digital as negative. To borrow terms from *Star Wars* itself, a light side and a dark side of cinema. The tools of digital cinema become that which must be hidden, while practical effects are venerated and foregrounded in marketing campaigns as the previous quote from Zepeda illustrates. In his *New Yorker* article “Hollywood’s Turn Against Digital Effects”, Bryan Curtis quotes Andrew Jackson – the visual effects supervisor on *Mad Max: Fury Road* – who said, “I’ve been joking recently about how the film has been promoted as being a live action stunt-driven film. The reality is that there’s 2,000 VFX shots in the film” (Curtis). Digital effects are everywhere in the high-flying blockbusters that dominate the box office, and yet discussion of these effects have become something of a taboo as studios seize analog nostalgia and practical effects as marketing tools. A nostalgic return to analog has become a warm embrace amidst the cold alienation of digital abstraction – or so the story goes.

The aforementioned story posits that abstraction – particularly digital abstraction – as that which must be comforted by a sensuous warm embrace which is best achieved through analog means. In detailing this story, I am not offering a blanket critique of sensation or analog cinema. Rather, the point is to highlight how technological mediation and perceptual experience are defined in oppositional terms. These oppositional terms confine meaning and offer implicit judgment. Analog and digital cinema are indeed distinct – as are sensation and abstraction – but they need not be treated as diametric opposites or be defined as a positive or a negative inherently. Academic suspicions of the digital run deep, and these suspicions often bring with them their own brand of analog nostalgia. This can be seen in the work of scholars such as Sobchack and Scott Bukatman. In summer of 2009, the *Journal of e-Media Studies* published a conversation between Sobchack and Bukatman during which they specifically addressed the implications of “fully integrated digital production for the materiality of the image” (8). Sobchack herself articulated a notion of analog nostalgia when she said, “Nonetheless, I do mourn the loss of the qualities of the analog: the quality of light, the difference in depth, a certain existential blur between things in the world that we come to notice against the sharpness of the digital” (11). Sobchack’s description of the digital’s sharpness implies a certain coldness or detachment and her sense of mourning for the analog becomes an implicit critique of the digital. Bukatman meanwhile offered a direct critique of the digital when he referenced the current wave of superhero films which he said, “on the one hand are very corporeal and physical, and on the other are exactly not that – these are not real bodies--they don't count” (11). Bukatman identifies the physicality of the superhero subgenre, while decrying the

abstracted, digital bodies of these heroes and villains as “not real.” Sobchack and Bukatman, in this discussion, have gotten to the heart of the dominant conception of analog and digital cinema – analog cinema should be mourned and longed for while the digital mistrusted as “not real.” Ultimately, analog cinema becomes linked to sensation, indexicality, and tactility while digital cinema linked to distancing abstraction. Turning back to Lucas and Malick specifically exposes an underlying issue in this conception of analog and digital cinema as Lucas is first and foremost associated with digital cinema and sensation while Malick is often linked to analog cinema and abstraction.

Returning to Lucas and Malick, the paradoxical nature of popular and academic understandings of analog and digital cinema as well as sensation and abstraction come into greater focus. First, however, it is necessary to establish the existing story told about these two filmmakers. As previously stated, Lucas and Malick are traditionally conceived as opposites – divergent filmmakers with little in common historically, aesthetically, or personally. The most reductive telling of this story positions Lucas as one of the key architects – along with his close friend Steven Spielberg – of the blockbuster that redefines cinema as a “simplistic” thrill ride. Malick meanwhile becomes known for his engagement with the natural world, philosophical complexity, and status as an auteur in the age of the blockbuster. These conceptions of Lucas and Malick are, as I said, reductive and hyperbolic. They are, however, the starting point for understanding Lucas and Malick together – and from this story a number of logical fallacies reveal themselves.

Both popular and academic sources align Lucas with the neoliberal blockbuster that he helped to codify in *Star Wars*. Lucas becomes conceived as a filmmaker who

rose from art cinema but quickly abandoned its intellectual complexity in favor of the purportedly simplistic neoliberal blockbuster with its special effects and emphasis on bodily thrills. Andrew Gordon, writing in 1978 shortly after the release of *Star Wars*, described the critical reaction to the film, “Lucas’s film has been almost universally praised for its costuming, sets, technical perfection, and wondrous special effects, its plot has been largely dismissed as corny or hokey, strictly kids’ stuff” (314). Gordon himself did not share this view, but his account speaks to the initial reception of *Star Wars* and demonstrates that even at this early moment the film – and, by extension, Lucas – were primarily discussed in terms of visual effects. Lucas and his production company, Industrial Light & Magic, furthermore become aligned with sensation as expressed by the aforementioned emphasis on bodily thrills. Julie Turnock explains that for the team behind *Star Wars* the “blockbuster was meant to appeal more directly to the senses. More sensory appeal combined with photorealism provided the vivid kinesthetic experience that would take the spectator beyond the spectacle and narrative of conventional Hollywood features” (178). As Turnock states, a key component of the blockbuster aesthetic that Lucas helped codify is an emphasis on sensation. However, it must be said that positioning Lucas and the neoliberal blockbuster as fundamentally aligned with sensation and bodiliness fails to provide a complete picture. Both neoliberalism and the blockbuster that Lucas fostered are constructed and upheld by fundamentally abstract mechanisms – global finance and markets and special effects and CGI respectively. As Scott Ferguson details in his book *Declarations of Dependence: Money, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Care*, the neoliberal blockbuster suppresses the fundamentally abstract nature of cinematic movement and instead

“contract experience around sensations of friction, falling, and impact” that reinforce neoliberal values (9). As Ferguson articulates, Lucas’s blockbusters take part in this repression of abstraction. While Lucas becomes associated with sensation, sensation and abstraction are entangled in his films – even if he seeks to repress their abstract nature.

Meanwhile, Malick is both popularly and academically understood as a practitioner of aesthetic and philosophical abstraction in films that are rooted in the work of Martin Heidegger. Working from this claim, Malick and the aesthetic that he cultivates in his films come to represent a direct challenge to the neoliberal blockbuster that Lucas had helped to construct. Marc Furstenu and Leslie MacAvoy argue that Malick’s film *The Thin Red Line*, “continued his ongoing philosophical project; indeed, it is a film that aspires to the status of a philosophical treatise, manifesting key themes and issues specifically from the work of Martin Heidegger” (1). Malick’s link to Heidegger, grounds his cinema in philosophical abstraction. Robert Sinnerbrink builds on this idea in his article *Heideggerian Cinema: On Terrence Malick’s The Thin Red Line* and argues that the “love letters’ featured in that film represent an embrace of abstractness (31). Furthermore, Michel Chion recounts that in 1974, after the release of *Badlands*, Malick – who rarely discusses his films – said, “I wanted to keep a distance from my characters” (Chion, 8). Abstraction, ever associated with relating at distance, is linked to Malick’s approach to character in the preceding quote. Malick’s films traffic in and are linked to abstraction. However, just as with Lucas, it is not as simple as that. Malick is well known for depicting and engaging the natural world, and does so in part through floating camerawork. The description as “floating” might engender notions of distance.

However, this particular stylistic trait highlights that Malick understands abstraction and sensation as distinctly entangled. The aforementioned floating camerawork summons notions of distance, and yet engenders a sensuous, fluid connection to the natural world.

When we reexamine the “traditional story” of Lucas and Malick, it becomes clear that sensation and abstraction are conceived as opposites much like the men themselves. Just as was the case with analog and digital cinema as we have detailed previously. Clear and impermeable divisions between them – Lucas and Malick, sensation and abstraction, analog and digital cinema– begin to break down when we look at the traditional narrative of Lucas and Malick more closely. Positioning Lucas and Malick, sensation and abstraction, and analog and digital as opposites ignores their entanglement – and how they are positioned in relation to each other piles up contradictions. The contradictions themselves do not represent the entirety of the problem. In her article “Analog Nostalgia and the Promise of Props in the Digital Age”, Amy Rust also deals with suspicions of abstraction when she writes, “Still, if abstraction proves dangerous, then so, too, does contraction; or, better put, the trouble lies in efforts to oppose them” (Rust). The trouble, precisely, lies in efforts to oppose them – Lucas and Malick, sensation and abstraction, and analog and digital cinema.

This project originated with a quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty – “Meaning is invisible, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible” (215). Throughout *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty consistently disavows rigid oppositions and definitions built on contradictions. Merleau-Ponty tackles fundamental conditions of existence that have, at times, been coded as opposites – visibility/invisibility,

body/world, subject/object – and argues that none of these should be defined as the negation of the other. For example, Sobchack writes, “As it is articulated by Merleau-Ponty on the common existential ground of both body and world that is the general medium or element of materiality he comes to call flesh, the question suggests that, in their material being, the subjective lived body and the objective world do not oppose each other but, on the contrary, are passionately intertwined” (286). This ethic of passionate intertwinement – or entanglement – is fundamental to Merleau-Ponty’s worldview. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is not built on oppositions nor is it universal and homogenizing – rather he recognizes it as a state of entanglement. Merleau-Ponty’s ethic of entanglement is best expressed through his conception of the in-visible. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “The visible itself has an invisible inner framework, and the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it” (215). For Merleau-Ponty, the visible and in-visible are necessarily intertwined and are defined by mutual dependence rather than defining one as the negation of the other.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty roots this notion of the in-visible in corporeality and is keenly interested in the body. However, the move from Merleau-Ponty to Lucas and Malick occurs not through the body, instead this move is made through voice. Chion begins his book *The Voice in Cinema* by writing, “The voice is elusive. Once you’ve eliminated everything that is not the voice itself – the body that houses it, the words it carries, the notes it sings, the traits by which it defines a speaking person, and the timbres that color it, what’s left?” (1). I argue, to answer Chion’s question, that which is left is the in-visible. Voice is, by its very nature, invisible in the colloquial understanding of that word. However, voice also discloses the in-visible as

first articulated by Merleau-Ponty, despite the fact that he was primarily interested in the visual rather than the sonic. Voice when visually untethered from the body – as both Lucas and Malick articulate in their early films – becomes both invisible in the traditional sense and in-visible as it defies embodied confinement and in that defiance forces the spectator to, ironically, see the in-visible relation between subject and world.

To further develop this notion of voice as in-visibility, we must return to the writings of Chion, who investigated voice in the films of Terrence Malick directly. He described voice in *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, and *The Thin Red Line* when he wrote, “All three allow one or several of their characters to be not just a finite body in space and a psychologically defined character but also an inner voice, a strange voice that speaks outside of space, giving these characters a different, more general personality, located between themselves and all other human beings” (Chion, 8). Although Chion does not use these terms, Chion is implicitly articulating voice as that which mediates sensation and abstraction and as representative of in-visible entanglement. The finite, sensuous body meets the abstract voice that resides outside space and between all human beings. Chion’s notion of a voice located between the characters themselves and all other humans renders that voice traditionally invisible and yet still in-the-visible.

Malick in the 1970s

Any exploration of this idea of in-visible voice in the films of Lucas and Malick would be incomplete without a deep-dive into their respective filmographies. To begin, let's start with Malick's early career in the 1970s. Malick started his career by releasing *Badlands* in 1973. Malick released his second film – *Days of Heaven* – in 1978. *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* share several thematic and formal preoccupations including central female characters who feel isolated due to the violence of men, extensive use of voiceover, and a wandering, almost meandering visual and narrative style. For the purposes of this exploration of in-visible voice and the ethic of entanglement that drives Malick's films, *Days of Heaven* will be the primary focus.

Days of Heaven follows a teenaged girl named Linda, her older brother Bill, and Bill's partner Abby. The three of them are forced to go on the run after Bill kills his boss in a Chicago steel mill. Seeking a fresh start, Linda, Bill, and Abby find work at a farm in north Texas. Bill sees an opportunity when he learns The Farmer is dying and encourages Abby to accept The Farmer's marriage proposal so they can inherit his money. However, things become even more complicated when Abby develops genuine feelings for The Farmer. This ultimately leads to The Farmer's death at the hands of Bill and the original trio of Linda, Bill, and Abby are forced to go on the run again. After Bill kills his boss in Chicago, he tells Abby and Linda, "Things aren't always going to be this way." Despite Bill's claims, patterns of violence emerge in *Days of Heaven* and the lasting effects of those violent patterns are filtered through the character of Linda and the presentation of her subjective experience. With *Days of Heaven*, we can clearly see

Malick respond to the notion of bodily confinement, articulate in-visible voice that consciously foregrounds the intertwinement of sensation and abstraction, and cultivate a cinema of entanglement that sees storytelling – achieved through in-visible voice – as Linda’s response to isolation, confinement, and patterns of violence.

In *Days of Heaven*, Linda’s voiceover and the images captured by Malick and cinematographer Néstor Almendros work together to reveal how Linda processes the violence that surrounds her in her most formative years. In a violent world, Linda continually finds solace in *connection* – both with new people and nature. Linda’s flowing, wandering voiceover expresses the physiological effects of the violence she witnesses and illustrates her desire for connection by sharing the stories of her travels and the people she meets along the way. The opening credits of *Days of Heaven* quickly establish the film’s central thematic and formal preoccupations. The opening credits feature a series of still photographs that depict urban life in the early 20th century. Many of these photographs were taken by Lewis Hine, whose work focused on the social experiences and working conditions of child laborers and immigrants during the early 1900s (Blasi, 68). As still photographs of faces and places dissolve into each other, the film sets up Linda’s desire for personal connection in an isolating world. The organization of the photographs and the use of dissolves visually connects people and chronicles moments from their lives – just as Linda’s voiceover will do throughout the film. Furthermore, by ending the opening credits with a picture of Linda the film clearly aligns the thematic and formal preoccupations explored in these opening moments with her character. In these opening moments, Malick has already begun to establish a cinema of entanglement. Here and throughout the film, Malick uses Linda to gather and

collect the stories of a wide variety of people, places, and animals – reminding her and the audience that feelings of isolation and confinement can be combatted by recognizing the interconnectedness of all living things.

As the film transitions from the still photographs of the opening credits to the diegetic world of Linda, Bill, and Abby, the sound of Saint-Saëns' *Aquarium* from *Carnival of the Animals* fades away and is replaced by the metallic clanging of the steel mill where Bill and Abby work. The film establishes the steel mills of Chicago as a world without music that is largely devoid of connection and communication. The metallic clanging of industry replaces the forward momentum of *Aquarium* with repetitive, one-note sounds that are stuck in a loop. The majority of the movement in the scene set in the steel mill is also stuck in a repetitive loop as the workers repeat the task of shoveling steel into the furnace and do so by walking in a circle. The argument that ends with Bill killing his boss is entirely inaudible. The audience's inability to hear the argument simultaneously positions the violence of the scene as a breakdown of the human connection and communication in a mechanical environment and underscores the trivial nature of the argument's content. It does not matter what the argument was about in terms of narrative. What is important is that Bill escalates the situation with violence and a man winds up dead. Linda's voiceover enters the film for the first time as Bill's boss takes his last breath, deliberately positioning the voiceover as response to violence and death. Linda's voiceover seeks to correct the loss of communication and connection by directly communicating with the audience and expressing previously inaudible emotions and thoughts. In addition, having the voiceover enter as Bill kills his boss allows Linda to insert her voice in the moment that Bill's violence uprooted and redirected her life.

Linda's voiceover begins with her lamenting a lost connection between herself and Bill when she says, "We used to do things together." The crisis Linda faces in the beginning of the film is one of isolation. There is a loss of human connection. A loss of communication. Even with people in her life, Linda is alone and feels confined by this isolation and her brother's actions. Forced to go on the run, Bill, Abby, and Linda hop on train in search of a fresh start. As they board the train that will take them to the prairies of Texas, Linda muses, "In fact, all three of us been going places, looking for things, searching for things, going on adventures." Rather than shutting herself off from the world after Bill's violence uprooted her life, Linda turns to the world for the connection she feels that has been lost with her relationship with Bill. During her journey aboard the train to the farm, both Linda and the film seek to forge connections. The film cuts between Linda, other passengers on the train, birds in the sky, fields of wheat, and animals roaming those wide-open prairies. Linda's voiceover and the presentation of images connect people to each other and the natural world around them. Part of Linda's (and the film's) response to the violence in her life is to pass on the stories of others, as she does with Ding-Dong's story of flames that will engulf the Earth. Linda's retelling of Ding-Dong's story represents Malick devotion to entanglement through in-visible voice. Linda's voiceover is closely-miked – giving it a sensuous and almost tactile quality – all the while abstracting away from the onscreen body. Malick is foregrounding the fundamental mix of sensation and abstraction, and then extends that deliberate entanglement to Linda and Ding-Dong. We never see or hear Ding-Dong in the film – we only know him through Linda's voiceover. His story is now forever and deliberately entangled with Linda and her own moment of storytelling. It is a reminder from Malick

that humanity is built on connection. Linda's story is incomplete without Ding-Dong's and the reverse would likely be true if Ding-Dong was our narrator instead of Linda. Linda's response to feeling isolated is to collect and pass on the stories of others. Through voice, Malick fosters his cinema of entanglement by reminding the audience that we are an amalgamation of the stories we pick up throughout our lives.

Linda's desire to connect with other people and the world around her as a way of coping with patterns of violence grows complicated and more cynical as the film progresses. She can still turn to these connections in the face of violence, death, and Bill's actions, but the accumulation of violence over the course of the film has taken a toll. Violence and a fear of death can more easily corrupt or influence these desired connections. When describing the people, they could see onshore from the boat later in the film Linda said, "They were probably calling for help or something, or they were trying to bury somebody or something." This quote demonstrates that while she seeks connections with other people, Linda has become less trusting. As their journey down the river continues Linda remarks, "We seen trees that the leaves are shakin', and looks like the shadows of guys coming at you and stuff." The natural world that Linda saw as a refuge from the violence in her life now reflects and takes on the shape of the violence and threat of men. As the boat circles a group of people standing around a fire, Linda describes a spooky feeling and the sensation of hands on her neck. She says, "It could be the dead coming for me or something." Linda goes on to talk about a man named Blackjack who died and speculates that he may be the one responsible for the spooky noises. Although she is not responsible for any of the deaths in the film, these lines from her voiceover reveal that Linda feels haunted by the deaths she is connected to through

Bill. Linda's explanation of Blackjack's death and possible ghostly presence continues her desire to carry on the stories of others, but further intertwines this practice with thoughts of death. Linda's preoccupation with death catching up with her is mirrored in the next scene as the foreman and the police catch up with and kill Bill.

In the film's final moments, Linda and a new friend run away from boarding school and wander to the outskirts of town as Saint-Saëns' *Aquarium* plays a final time. Deciding to follow her new friend Linda says in voiceover, "This girl didn't know where she was going or what she was going to do. She didn't even have no more money on her. Maybe she'd meet up with a character. I was hoping things would work for her. She was a good friend of mine." Linda's anxiety surrounding feelings of uncertainty have begun to fade away in Bill's absence. As Linda has broken away from the patterns of violence that shaped her childhood, she relies on what gave her comfort and confidence in her most difficult years. Linda begins another adventure to connect with others.

Lucas in the 1970s

With Malick's early career trajectory established, let's turn our attention to the first half of Lucas's career. Lucas made his directorial debut in 1971 with the film *THX 1138*. Lucas's first film is deeply fascinating, filled with contradictions, and is the key to understanding the trajectory of his career, worldview, and the Hollywood Blockbuster that he would later codify with *Star Wars*. Much like Linda in *Days of Heaven*, the titular character in *THX 1138* represents feelings of isolation, alienation, and bodily confinement. The first half of the film clearly mediates sensation and abstraction and cultivates in-visible voice in response to these feelings of bodily confinement felt by THX. By aesthetically foregrounding a constant chatter of mediated and disembodied voices, the film imagines a visual world that is not tethered to the body. However, as the film progresses, Lucas's style shifts away from the overt mix of sensation and abstraction represented by the cacophony of disembodied voices to what can only be described as a test run of the Hollywood Blockbuster phenomenology. This proto-Blockbuster phenomenology is predicated on visions of escape and exploits yet denies the fundamental entanglement of sensation and abstraction – wanting you focus on sensuous thrills first and foremost.

Roughly the first third of *THX 1138*, and particularly its opening moments, represents an embrace of and openness to formal abstraction and disembodied voices. Working within the Hollywood Renaissance and its embrace of formal experimentation, abstraction, and discontinuity, Lucas enters the diegetic world of *THX 1138* on decidedly abstract terms. The willingness here to embrace abstraction and specifically

disembodied voices is in line with the abstract potentialities and disembodied voices that linger in *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* and are associated with the Force in that film. As previously mentioned, *THX 1138* is the key understanding Lucas as a filmmaker – I argue it functions as something of an allegorical roadmap. Positioning *THX 1138* as an allegorical roadmap for understanding Lucas, his worldview, and the Hollywood Blockbuster is in line with the original intent of the film. As author Mark Decker details in his article, *They Want Unfreedom and One-Dimensional Thought? I'll Give Them Unfreedom and One-Dimensional Thought*, Lucas did not envision the film as a speculative warning about what society might become in the future (421). Instead, Lucas stated that the film was an “abstraction of 1970” and sought to reflect the sense that “while no one was having fun, no one was unhappy either” (421). The allegorical framework of the film and its abstraction of a specific time and place allows it to be easily reinterpreted in *both* abstract and sensuous terms. In addition, the notion that “no one was having fun, but no one was unhappy” is useful in supporting the argument that Lucas – in part – sought to articulate a cinematic thrill ride aesthetic that he would codify with *Star Wars* and the Hollywood Blockbuster.

The starting point for *THX 1138*'s allegorical roadmap is the film's opening moments. The film begins with clips from the classic serial *Buck Rogers* that appear to be entirely separate from the diegetic world of the film that follows. By beginning the film this way, Lucas is prompting the viewer to become conscious of the fact that they are watching a movie – thereby demonstrating a stark rejection of the immersion that is key to both the Hollywood Blockbuster phenomenology and this film's final sequence – in addition to showing an acceptance of formal abstraction and making room for

disembodied voices in the form of the voiceover featured in this sequence. Disembodied voice itself is an abstraction that eschews notions of embodiment – which is key, since the central problem of the film is THX's sense of bodily confinement. The jarring inclusion of clips from the time of Classical Hollywood Cinema and the disembodied narration represent an embrace of abstraction and its ability to open up new potentials that can transgress boundaries of the body, space, and time. This continues in the next several frames as we are presented with clearly mediated figures who interact with another disembodied voice whose source is unclear. In these opening moments, we also see a visual representation of voice in the form of abstract sound waves and a security footage of some kind that is broken up by a flickering grid. This alternative visual representation of sound and voice demonstrates the potentials associated with an embrace of abstraction – sound and meaning do not have to be confined to the body in this case. The embrace of abstract potentialities and disembodied voice – of in-visible voice – in the opening here sets up Lucas's commitment to disembodied, mediated voices that will carry through all of his films. Voice will forever be Lucas's "tell" that he is always mixing sensation and abstraction – even as he tries to downplay the importance of abstraction.

THX 1138's final sequence can best be described as a melancholic thrill ride. THX steals a police car and begins his escape from the society in which he feels so confined and isolated. The sequence features direct visualize parallels - from framing to the use of computers and the design of the car - to attack on the Death Star that will become the centerpiece of Lucas' *Star Wars* in just a few years. Despite a melancholic and ambiguous end that sees THX escape to a barren landscape, this sequence

becomes about sensuous thrills. The screeching tires, the visual and sonic focus on the car crashing through a barrier, and the clang of falling material all work to build the basis for the Hollywood Blockbuster phenomenology Lucas will help to establish. Lucas ultimately positions a thrilling escape from society as the answer to the isolation, confinement, and alienation felt by THX. However, the film's final scene demonstrates that Lucas had yet to fully buy into his *cinema of escape* as THX escapes to a barren, lifeless landscape. *THX 1138* represents a filmmaker still figuring things out. The film and Lucas are stuck between embracing in-visible voice that foregrounds the mix of abstraction and sensation as Malick does, and simply turning to thrilling escape that downplays abstraction's role. That's melancholic edge in *THX 1138* – the uncertainty and unease about embracing *both* sensation *and* abstraction in response to feelings of bodily confinement, isolation, and alienation.

Lucas Releases *Star Wars* in 1977

If *THX 1138* establishes Lucas's uncertainty about how to respond to bodily confinement, the presentation of "the Force" in his *Star Wars* films represents a filmmaker has gained confidence that *escape* is the answer.

"The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together."

The quote featured above comes from the Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* and represents our first true understanding of the Force in the *Star Wars* saga and the role it plays in organizing the diegetic worlds of these films – which themselves have become cultural touchstones. Based on Obi-Wan Kenobi's description, it appears the Force is – at least in part – understood in relation to the body and specifically feeling through the body. This notion is further illustrated by Kenobi telling a young Luke Skywalker to "feel the Force flowing through" him. The Force's underlying preoccupation with feeling through the body is mirrored in the Hollywood Blockbuster's own preoccupation with that subject. Ferguson outlines the phenomenology of the Hollywood Blockbuster when he writes, "Prefigured by *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) and inaugurated by *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977) and *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), the blockbuster replaced the flickering and often ambiguous ephemerality of Hollywood's "dream factory" with "rollercoaster" or "thrill ride" aesthetics. More important, it contracted the experience of screen movement to an immersive kinematics— a hyper- Newtonian phenomenology" (170). Through films like

Star Wars and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, pioneers Lucas and Spielberg cultivated the hyper-Newtonian phenomenology of the Hollywood Blockbuster by grounding “onscreen action in a material here-and-now” (Ferguson 9). In doing so however, the Hollywood Blockbuster and its hyper-Newtonian phenomenology repress the fundamentally abstract nature of onscreen movement and instead “contract experience around sensations of friction, falling, and impact” (Ferguson 9). Returning to the Force more specifically, we can see the aforementioned hyper-Newtonian phenomenology reflected in the Force itself. The Hollywood Blockbuster desires immersion and wants the audience to feel this immersion in their bodies when they sit down in a movie theater. The hyper-Newtonian phenomenology works to ensure that the audience feels the Blockbuster “flowing through them.” The Force’s underlying connection to feeling through the body would therefore position it as an expression of the Hollywood Blockbuster’s Hyper Newtonian phenomenology that desires immersion and is preoccupied with falling, impact, and a material physics.

While this is true, it should be noted that the Force – as it is presented in *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* – also leaves room for abstract potentialities and even aesthetically and narratively celebrates a form of disembodiment within the broader hyper-Newtonian framework as it has been discussed up to this point. However, as the *Star Wars* franchise evolved so did the Force itself – both in its conception and how it is presented phenomenologically. To understand this evolution and what it means for Lucas’s cinema of escape I put *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* and *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* in dialogue with each other. By viewing these two films side by side, the codification, evolution, and accentuation of the Hollywood

Blockbuster phenomenology can be seen and is mirrored in the evolving nature of the Force that I have identified. While the Force flows through us, penetrates us, and binds us together in *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*, it is presented as a largely invisible and abstract force – one that becomes separated from time, space, and even body at various points in the film. However, in *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*, that same Force is rendered visible and becomes more distinctly embodied. Through the evolution of the Force in the *Star Wars* franchise, the evolution of the Hollywood Blockbuster itself can be understood as well. In *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*, both the Force and the emerging Hollywood Blockbuster are preoccupied with feeling through the body but leave room for abstract potentialities and disembodied voices. By the time of *The Phantom Menace*, the Force and the Hollywood Blockbuster have become inescapably tethered to embodiment and physicality on a molecular level. Lucas's articulation of in-visible voice remains his tell that he is always mixing sensation and abstraction, but as time passes Lucas doubles down on sensuous escape as the organizing ethic of his films.

The Force in *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* is indeed tied to the body and specifically the notion of feeling through the body. However, the Force as it is presented in *A New Hope* is a largely abstract and in-the-visible force that is not confined to or defined by the body. In fact, in a film that is largely responsible for codifying the hyper-Newtonian phenomenology of the Hollywood Blockbuster, the Force represents a remaining playground for abstraction and is in actuality the only route to escape pre-determined containers and confinements such as the body, death, and time. To illustrate the Force's abstract potential in *A New Hope*, we can turn to the Obi-Wan

Kenobi's confrontation with Darth Vader. To begin, unlike with what we see later in *The Phantom Menace*, the Force is not visually presented through the depiction of onscreen bodies. Although there is a certain degree of heaviness to the movement of Vader and Kenobi that is a constant reminder of gravity and the hyper-Newtonian phenomenology that does indeed organize the film's aesthetics, the bodies in this sequence are remarkably stationary and maintain a level of distance that prevents physical contact and bodily expression from being an overt preoccupation of the sequence or connected to expressions of the Force. In this sequence the Force is not expressed or understood through the body but by the *lack of it*. Obi-Wan Kenobi decided to sacrifice himself so Luke Skywalker and the other heroes could escape. In the seconds before Vader's blade penetrates Kenobi's body, the Jedi Master vanishes into thin air. The disappearance of Kenobi's body upon his death positions the Force as the tool in this universe to open up abstract potentialities and escape generally accepted confines such as embodiment and death. Kenobi's death is an aesthetic and narrative celebration of abstraction via the Force – a decidedly in-visible force. Furthermore, this allows Kenobi's essence – or force – to continue on in a diffuse, free-floating state that thwarts the notion of bodily confinement. If descriptions such as "diffuse" and "free-floating" sound familiar, they should. They should draw your attention back to descriptions of the voiceovers used in Malick's films *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* and even his wandering camerawork.

Despite the Blockbuster's general repression of and ambivalence towards abstraction, through Kenobi's death – which is understood as an expression of the Force – abstraction is celebrated for its freeing potential to move beyond bodily

confinement. Prior to his death, Kenobi says to Darth Vader that “If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.” This line of dialogue, coupled with the presentation of Kenobi’s death and his vocal role later in the film, represents an aesthetic and narrative celebration of abstraction and in-visibility.

Turning to *A New Hope*’s famous assault on the Death Star is also useful in illuminating the Force’s role in injecting a freeing abstraction into a world that largely seeks to deny it phenomenologically. As many scholars and filmgoers alike have pointed out, the aforementioned sequence is often discussed and analyzed in terms of special effects, how they were achieved, and the role they play phenomenologically. In her book *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics*, Turnock describes the special effects in *Star Wars* by writing, “*Star Wars*’ special effects tend to be based in kinetic qualities of speed, movement, and bodily impact or of being acted upon” (186). Turnock’s comments detail the key role of special effects play in cultivating the hyper-Newtonian phenomenology that has been discussed previously. However, in reading this scene I hope to make it clear that the Force functions as an in-visible force. It is an in-the-visible force that reminds us that even though Lucas is foregrounding sensuous thrills here, sensation *and* abstraction are ever-entangled and *together* are essential to Lucas’s efforts to grapple with feelings of bodily confinement – whether he is conscious of that or not. In the middle of Luke Skywalker’s hyper-Newtonian thrill ride that is his assault on the Death Star, he hears the disembodied voice of the recently deceased Obi-Wan Kenobi. While the Force upholds and is a part of the hyper-Newtonian phenomenology that was – at least in part

– codified in this film, there is also room for it to bring abstraction, disembodiment, and in-visibility to a concrete, embodied, and photorealistic world.

Lucas's Return to Filmmaking

In *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*, however, the Force does not just flow through bodies as Obi-Wan Kenobi described in *A New Hope*. From seemingly impossible leaps to harrowing falls, in *The Phantom Menace* the Force becomes defined by – and confined to – the body. The Force is inescapably linked to the body and does not blatantly permeate that boundary as the disembodied voice of Obi-Wan Kenobi does in *A New Hope*. Lucas positions the Force as a bodily expression more directly than in previous entries in the *Star Wars* saga by highlighting and playing with displays of gravity. To illustrate this idea, we can turn to the climatic confrontation between Obi-Wan Kenobi, Qui-Gon Jinn, and Darth Maul. Consistently throughout this sequence, Lucas and his team have chosen to aesthetically elevate gravitational forces. In a wide shot, Darth Maul can be seen wobbling as he stands at the very edge of a platform. Maul's wobble is a visual reminder that he can fall, and narratively foreshadows his eventual death. In a series of successive shots, Obi-Wan Kenobi is knocked down by Maul and we see him fall and hit two separate platforms. Immediately after Kenobi falls, Maul is knocked down by Jinn and hits a lower platform in a shot that is nearly identical to the one featuring Kenobi that preceded it. After Maul's fall, Jinn jumps down to meet his foe on the lower platform. The falling bodies of Maul, Kenobi, and Jinn are further highlighted through the film's use of surround sound as each body lands with a resounding thud and each body blow, kick, and example of physical contact are aesthetically highlighted through the soundtrack. The formal preoccupation with falling bodies and physical contact is certainly representative of the Hollywood

Blockbuster's hyper-Newtonian phenomenology and works to clearly link the Force to an embodied physicality. The falling bodies of Kenobi, Maul, and Jinn only make their seemingly gravity-defying jumps more pronounced. The aforementioned jumps see Kenobi and Maul do what would be considered impossible outside of the diegetic world and are understood as expressions of the Force. Displays of the Force then become about the body – the falling and leaping body. Although the Force as understood in *A New Hope* was preoccupied with feeling the Force in the body, the Force in that film did not require a body for representation. When Obi-Wan Kenobi dies in *A New Hope*, we do not see Vader's blade penetrate his body, Kenobi's body simply disappears, and he is able to communicate with Luke Skywalker after his death. In contrast, when Jinn dies in *The Phantom Menace*, the camera lingers on the blade penetrating Jinn's body and his body remains after his death. In *A New Hope*, the Force offers an alternative to embodiment and proposes an abstract relationality that transgresses the boundaries of embodiment and death itself. In *The Phantom Menace* however, the Force becomes distinctly aligned with the body – even in death.

In an earlier sequence from *The Phantom Menace*, Jinn explains the Force to a young Anakin Skywalker. Jinn's explanation of the Force and how it functions encapsulates how the Force has become more distinctly physicalized and embodied from *A New Hope* to *The Phantom Menace*. Jinn and *The Phantom Menace* redefine the Force in terms of Midi-chlorians – small, microscopic lifeforms that can be used to gauge an individual's strength in the Force as Jinn does when he has Anakin's blood tested for a Midi-chlorian count. Jinn begins to explain Midi-chlorians to Anakin by saying, "Midi-chlorians are a microscopic lifeform that resides within all living cells and

communicates with the Force.” Jinn continues by explaining that Midi-chlorians live within cells and that they are symbionts with their host. Jinn continues his explanation by saying, “Life forms living together for mutual advantage. Without the midi-chlorians, life could not exist, and we would have no knowledge of the Force. They continually speak to you, telling you the will of the Force. When you learn to quiet your mind, you will hear them speaking to you.” This understanding of the Force represents a stark contrast to the Force that allowed Obi-Wan Kenobi to escape embodiment and communicate through disembodied voice after his death in *A New Hope*. In *The Phantom Menace* and through the Midi-chlorians, the Force has been redefined in biological terms. The Force no longer flows through the body, but instead becomes part of the body itself. With the introduction of Midi-chlorians, the Force becomes unmistakably confined to the body on a molecular level.

Returning to some of our broader concerns, if Lucas was so concerned by bodily confinement in his early career – then why did he tether the force to the body in his return to filmmaking with *The Phantom Menace*? The reason for this shift is that the uncertain filmmaker we first met with *THX 1138* has become emboldened to double down on this idea of a *cinema of escape*. Lucas no longer wanted the audience to feel the sensuous thrills of the blockbuster flowing through their bodies – he wanted their bodies to become extensions of the sensuous, thrilling escapes shown onscreen. A symbiotic relationship perhaps. The Force is still filled with abstract potentials and Lucas still uses distinctly abstract technology to create sensuous thrills – Lucas has just worked to visually repress this abstraction. So desperate for escape, Lucas has ended up participating in what he defined as the problem of 1970 – bodily confinement. But the

abundance of overtly mediated voices in the *Star Wars* prequels serve as the final site where Lucas drops the mask and admits that yes, sensation and abstraction are always working in tandem – ever-entangled. Battle droids, speakers, helmets, and holograms all carry on the legacy of Obi-Wan Kenobi’s disembodied voice and the soundwaves of *THX 1138*.

Malick's Return to Filmmaking

Much like Lucas, Malick returned to filmmaking in the late 1990s more emboldened than ever and doubled down on his signature aesthetic. While Lucas descended further into the idea of *escape*, Malick pushed his *cinema of entanglement* to the very foundations of film form. Malick first expanded his cinema of entanglement by introducing multiple voiceovers in 1998's *The Thin Red Line*. This move takes Linda's process of seeking connection by collecting stories in *Days of Heaven* and applies it to the narrative structure of *The Thin Red Line*. The film becomes an amalgamation of storytellers all forcing the audience to recognize their inherent entanglement. Malick pushes his ideas of perceptual entanglement even further with the release of his films *The Tree of Life* and *Voyage of Time: Life's Journey*. This duo works to move the idea of in-visible voice from the level of voiceover to a dialogue between fiction and documentary filmmaking.

The pioneering documentary filmmaker John Grierson famously defined the documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (216). Using Grierson's broad yet insightful definition as a jumping off point, the goal here is to understand the figure of the documentary in relation to the films of Malick. Before moving to a specific analysis of Malick's more explicit foray into documentary filmmaking with his more recent films, it first must be stated how the figure of the documentary and the practices of documentary filmmaking helped shape Malick's earlier and distinctly fictional films such as *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. In these earlier films, Malick fostered a wandering visual aesthetic through fluid camerawork that often turned to, lingered on, and reveled in images of the

natural world as it unfolded. This wandering visual aesthetic and preoccupation with presentations of “nature” have remained as stylistic and thematic constants throughout Malick’s career. From the wind the rustling through the wheat fields of *Days of Heaven* to the volcanic eruptions of *The Tree of Life*, the films of Malick are preoccupied with observing and presenting the world around us – not just the world that his characters inhabit but also the world we all inhabit. The aforementioned flashes of the world – typically images of plants, animals, and natural events – represent moments in which Malick punctures fictional stories and lives with bursts of actuality. In other words, Malick has been working with creative treatments of actuality and documenting the world within fiction filmmaking for decades. The point is not to argue that Malick’s fiction films such as *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, and *The Tree of Life* are in reality documentaries. They are not. However, Malick’s use of moments that could be mistaken for footage from a documentary – bursts of actuality – reveal his understanding of the documentary’s unique ability to speak about the world we all share and fosters a playful and constructive dialogue of film form that allows for new and polyvalent understandings of our world and the nature of perception.

Conscious of documentary form and history, Malick weaves bursts of actuality into his fiction films in service of the larger ethic that drives much of his work – an ethic of in-visibility. Malick’s interest in documentation and documentary form – as evidenced by the bursts of actuality that have been under consideration so far – represent an underlying desire to render that which is in-the-visible, but often overlooked or missed, visible. The bird that soars by so quickly that your eye almost misses it. The crocodile that quietly descends into the murky depths of a swamp. Wheat rustling in the wind. All

of these and more are examples of Malick shining a spotlight on aspects of the world that are already in the world – in the visible – but can be easily overlooked on first glance. Most importantly, Malick desires to render the connection between all of these things – the bird, the crocodile, the wheat, the characters of his films, the spectator, and Malick himself – visible and does so in part through his relationship to the figure of the documentary film. In his films, Malick seeks to remind the viewers of the interconnectivity of life – recognizing the inherent entanglement of existence. The bursts of actuality that have been under consideration so far work both to underscore the interconnectivity of existence and render that which is in-visible visible. When Malick turns the camera towards a white bird gliding above the wheat fields in *Days of Heaven*, it is a gesture towards a larger world that extends beyond but includes the immediate concerns of Linda, Bill, and Abby and grants visibility to the bird itself.

With all that being said, I want to return to what has anchored this project as a whole – voice – and dive into Malick’s first full-fledged documentary – the 2016 film *Voyage of Time: Life's Journey*. *Voyage of Time* is a fascinating film for a number of reasons. First, two versions of *Voyage of Time* exist. The first is a forty-minute version narrated by *The Tree of Life* star Brad Pitt that was released in IMAX theaters and was presented in a more straightforward and educational manner. The second version adds nearly an hour to the running time and the questioning, searching, and more distinctly philosophical voiceover was provided by Cate Blanchett. The extended version narrated by Blanchett will be under consideration here. The second fascinating element of *Voyage of Time* is its connection to Malick’s fiction film *The Tree of Life* from 2011. In regard to themes, style, construction, and even specific images and sequences, *Voyage*

of Time borrows heavily from *The Tree of Life*. Both *The Tree of Life* and *Voyage of Time* are concerned with and depict the nature of existence and the origins of life. Both films are also representative of the in-visible ethic that I have previously outlined. By creating two films that are so similar, Malick has more directly and consciously than ever before created a dialogue of film form.

Formally, *The Tree of Life* and *Voyage of Time* are inverted versions of each other. *The Tree of Life* is a fictional, narrative film that features a sequence that operates as an extended burst of actuality by embracing the practices of documentary filmmaking. Meanwhile, *Voyage of Time* is a documentary film which features an extended sequence that can only be described as fiction as it adopts the conventions of fiction and deviates from the form of the documentary film as it has been defined historically. In *The Tree of Life*, Malick first cultivated a jarring oscillation in filmmaking modes only to construct the inverse of that oscillation in *Voyage of Time*. In doing so, Malick has created a dialogue of film form – not only in each film but between the two films – in an effort to prompt a consciousness of film form within the spectator and to ground the *cinema of entanglement* and in-visibility that he desires in the very conventions of filmmaking.

To illustrate the dialogue of film form that has been cultivated by Malick and his collaborators, we need to delve into specific moments from *The Tree of Life* and *Voyage of Time*. Superficially, *The Tree of Life* focuses on a family from Waco, Texas, and chronicles the eldest son's loss of innocence as he grapples with the contrasting relationships he has with his mother and his father. On a broader level, however, the film is an exploration of the nature of existence and life itself, and as part of this

exploration, the film devotes nearly twenty minutes to an interlude that depicts the origins and evolution of life. This portion of the film is representative of an expansion of the bursts of actuality that were present in Malick's earlier films. More so than any of Malick's previous films, this portion of *The Tree of Life* revels in creative treatments of actuality as Malick combines images of sea life, volcanic eruptions, and crashing waves to tell a sweeping story of life and the birth of the universe. As part of this interlude, Malick deploys digital technology to depict one dinosaur slowly killing another and it is presented alongside and between images of the "real world" such as the volcanic eruptions that were mentioned earlier. Recreations themselves do not automatically render a scene or moment an example of fiction storytelling rather than documentary. However, the presentation of the dinosaurs in this moment is not a recreation of a specific event but rather a generalized interpretation of the past that forgoes documentation in favor of allegory. Bill Nichols discusses the documentary's relation to historical worlds and allegorical worlds when he writes, "They speak directly about the historical world rather than allegorically. Fictional narratives are fundamentally allegories. They create one world to stand in for another, historical world" (7). In constructing the scene with the two dinosaurs, Malick is creating one world to stand in for another. On a whole, *The Tree of Life* shifts from a fictional narrative about a family living Texas to an exploration of the origins of life that adopts the tools of the documentary – although even within this portion of the film there is an oscillation between documentary and fiction filmmaking – only to return to the decidedly fictional story of the O'Brien family. By jarringly oscillating between documentary and fiction filmmaking, Malick is drawing attention to that oscillation. In that oscillation, he finds

entanglement. The differences between documentary and fiction filmmaking are highlighted but it also points to their interconnectivity and dependence on the other for meaning. The same reality of entanglement can be extended to the way in which the story of the O'Brien family collides and mingles with a broader story of the development of life.

Voyage of Time in many ways functions as an expansion of and commentary on *The Tree of Life* and the "origins of life" sequence in particular. On the base level of content, *Voyage of Time* serves as an extended cut of the sequence from *The Tree of Life* as images and the order in which they are presented are nearly identical. Both *Voyage of Time* and the aforementioned sequence from *The Tree of Life* depict the birth of planets, volcanic eruptions, crashing waves, desert caverns, cellular reproduction, sea life, and dinosaurs before returning to focus on human figures in their conclusions. I have used phrase "dialogue of film form" several times by this point – and the choice of the word "dialogue" was intentional. In part, I argue that Malick is extending the idea of in-visible voice as I have defined it to a conversation – a dialogue if you will – between these two films.

With *Voyage of Time* and its connection to *The Tree of Life* established, now it is time to finally refocus on voice – the voices we hear in Malick's films. To begin, let us summarize the evolution of voice in Malick's films. In his earliest films *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, we met a single protagonist who collected and told multiple stories via a single voiceover. With his return to filmmaking in the late 1990s and early 2000s, we saw a shift in Malick's presentation of voice. In films such as *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*, Malick presented multiple protagonists telling multiple stories via

multiple voiceovers. In essence, further entangling the worlds and characters of his films. However, something unique happens with *Voyage of Time*. During a key sequence in *Voyage of Time* that tells the story of life and the birth of the universe, Malick takes away Blanchett's voiceover. It is an unprecedented example of an extended, voiceless sequence in one of Malick's films. In this section, Malick is explicating the conditions of being without humans and without voice.

To better understand what Malick is doing in this passage from *Voyage of Time*, I once again turn to Chion and his groundbreaking book *The Voice in Cinema*. It is here that Chion established the concept of *vococentrism*. According to Chion, voice is the central, organizing factor in cinematic sound and he establishes voice as a humanizing factor (5-6). More succinctly, Chion writes, "There are voices, and then everything else" (5). Chion goes on to write, "the presence of human voice structures the sonic space that contains it" (5). Malick's films prior to *Voyage of Time* provide a perfect case study for Chion's notion of vococentrism. Which makes it even more fascinating that when telling the story of the birth of life, humanity, and the universe as whole – Malick takes away voice for perhaps the first time. He withholds Blanchett's voice from us in this key moment. If, as Chion argues, everything that has a voice becomes humanized – then why take away voice when telling the story of humanity? I would argue that this is Malick at his most emboldened. In this sequence, Malick pushes his cinema of entanglement to its limits. Malick is moving away from storytelling as he presented it through characters like Linda from *Days of Heaven* and the soldiers in *The Thin Red Line*. Instead, he is attempting to articulate all life entangled together without the humanizing force of voice. He is attempting to present the essence and conditions of

being without humans. Humans are not the only life in the universe, and if voice is inherently humanizing, Malick recognizes that fact and removes voice. Instead presenting a common, shared articulation of *being*.

Conclusion

Over the course of this project, I have used the word “entanglement” often. I have done so because it is the most effective word to use when attempting to break down the longstanding binary oppositions that are the focus of this project. Lucas and Malick. Sensation and abstraction. Analog and digital. Long conceived as opposites, one goal of this project was to prove that these various elements are not opposites at all. Often, there are actually a number of similarities between them and/or they are actively working together. As I have demonstrated, Lucas and Malick both share similar career trajectories, articulate concerns about bodily confinement and feelings of alienation, and revel in in-visible voice in response to that confinement and alienation. Sensation always works with abstraction to make up the reality of perception. Binary oppositions break down and we are left with entanglement. I use that word because it is important to highlight that I am not attempting to collapse all difference. Lucas and Malick share more than most scholars and audiences have recognized – but they are not the same. This has been demonstrated through my articulation of Lucas’s cinema of escape and Malick’s cinema of entanglement. Likewise, I am not arguing that sensation and abstraction are one and the same. Each is distinct, but their relation to each other has been historically denied. That is what this project – in part – seeks to reclaim. The basic idea that the world, perception, and even specific filmmakers do not have to be understood in oppositional terms. We do not have to define Malick in opposition to Lucas and the Hollywood Blockbuster. We do not have to define the “tactility” of

sensation in opposition to the “distance” of abstraction. To define our reality more articulately, we should acknowledge difference but also the instances of crossover.

As a final note, I want to make clear that although I agree with Malick’s point of view that we should recognize the inherent entanglement of existence – I don’t want to give the impression that the simple recognition of that fact will solve all of the societal issues explored in the paper. Recognizing the entanglement between self and society or between sensation and abstraction will not cure all feelings of confinement and isolation. It is a starting point. Turning back to *Days of Heaven* specifically for a moment, we can see that entanglement is not all sunshine and rainbows. As I touched on briefly, Linda’s voiceover – which functions as a force of entanglement via storytelling – becomes darker and more based in violence and fear as the film progresses. Linda begins to talk about ghosts or shadows “jumping out to get her.” The entanglement represented by Linda’s voiceover gives her comfort when she is at her most isolated. However, the corrosive nature of violence stills takes its toll here. “Entanglement” on its own will not cure all of the world’s ills, but we should start there. Looking to escape as Lucas does in his films won’t solve anything. Recognizing the entangled relationality at the core of existence as Malick does, however, provides us an opening to address societal concerns such as feelings of confinement, alienation, and isolation.

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