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Applying Martin Buber's ideas of relationship to Terrence Malick's pictures.”

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An Outline

The aim of this paper is to bring Martin Buber's understanding of relationship to Terrence Malick's pictures. I want to look at where the two intersect and how a written theory can find itself animated in an audiovisual art form. This written thesis will be accompanied by an artistic piece, which I will create in a further step to apply the theory to my own filmic vision of relational storytelling. But first I will give a brief overview on the structure of this paper.

The thesis will start out by taking a look at various ideas that are presented in Malick's pictures of how one puts themselves in relation to the world. Reoccurring throughout the narratives of his movies they challenge the understanding of separateness and duality not only in human identity, but also in how that identity relates to what it believes itself not to be. In that, the films are questioning the nature of self by proposing the possibility of a worldly interconnectedness and by suggesting a relational element to our being in the world. Beside looking at a quote from *The Thin Red Line*, a concept that represents that connection between the self and the world is the one of Grace and Nature that is illustrated in Terrence Malick's 2011 film *The Tree of Life*. This concept will create one of the guideposts on which this paper is based on and will form a direct link to Buber's twofold understanding of relationship.

Before diving into the philosopher's thoughts on relating to the world, I am going to look at different aspects that constitute the self, such as the ego, a sense of identity, the belief in a soul, an understanding of the mind and the perception of a physical body, which are all often perceived as separate entities. This is to illustrate how even the self is often finding itself in separation and caught between various forms of duality. Recognizing that one can have different approaches to relate to seemingly separate parts of the self will help to better grasp the characters during the film analysis, as every protagonist follows different aspects of themselves, which ultimately impact their state of connectedness and relation within and toward the world.

Subsequently, the ways of relating to the self and the other will be looked at through the lens of Martin Buber's book, which builds the theoretic core of this thesis, and which I am going to break down into the three forms of relationship that are presented in *Ich und Du* (trans.: *I and*

Thou). After explaining the theory behind the I-Thou and I-It word pairs, I will tie the philosopher's ideas and beliefs about the self, particularly the self in relation, together with what I believe Malick's understanding of the self could be, due to his narrative filmic suggestions priorly discussed in this paper, to have a steady theoretic framework to refer back on during the film analysis. As Buber and his understanding of relationship are a part of the Jewish Renaissance of the 20th century, in which the visual culture of cinema was established, I believe that his word pairs and his relational understanding of the world would have influenced the moving image and made an impact on how relationships are visually communicated- weaving philosophical thought into a rising visual culture. This is what brings me to Terrence Malick's filmmaking, which in my eyes is embracing the I-It and I-Thou concept and using it as a foundation to create his relational gaze and to challenge the common narrative and visual structures of cinema. To explore this working hypothesis I am going to look at how the relational duality is apparent and suggested on a textual as well as visual level in his films by applying Buber's theory and elements of classical film analysis as my chosen method for this thesis's film and character analysis that focus around the dualities that live within *The New World* and *Song to Song*. The characters Captain John Smith and Pocahontas from *The New World*, 2005 and Faye and BV from *Song to Song*, 2017 will constitute the primary focus of this analytic part of the thesis. Within these two films I want to find moments that portray and maybe even expand the ideas of an I-Thou and I-It relationship that Buber speaks of as well as explore the duality that lies underneath the concept of Grace and Nature. Therefore the relating self will build the center of the character analysis through which I will set out to explore the possibility of a relational gaze in Malick's pictures when applying Martin Buber's theoretic framework.

The final step will be the creation of my own filmic representation of the merging of the two, on the one hand incorporating Buber's ideas of the self in relation which are on the other hand visually inspired by Malick's mosaic-like free flowing filmic style. The final audiovisual form will be the practical puzzle piece accompanying this written thesis and will be linked to the institute of Visual Contemporary and Cultural History of the University of Vienna.

*"In the fall of 1969, I realized I wasn't a good teacher and should leave teaching, but I didn't know what to do next. I'd always liked movies without ever being a true cinephile. When I heard that the American Film Institute had just opened and was accepting applications for their master's program, I decided to apply. Today I would certainly not be accepted, but at the time it wasn't well known, and they accepted just about anyone. I'd never made any films. At the end of my second year at AFI, I started to work on Badlands."*¹

After *Badlands* had earned wide critical acclaim at its premier at the New York Film Festival in 1973², Terrence Malick would go on to make *Days of Heaven*, which earned him the award for Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979. In 1998 Malick would return to the screen with his film *The Thin Red Line*, an adaptation of James Jone's book of the same name. It was shot a year before in the Australian rain forest despite its early challenges to find producers and financing. Even though the picture is set against a war backdrop, it is not a typical war movie, which might have been one of the reasons why it commercially failed to bring in the revenue the studios had hoped for.³ Just like the rest of his films, especially Malick's later work, this picture relied heavily on natural light and improvisational scenes with the actors as well as voice-over work. Through these various elements the filmmaker gains more freedom during the post-production process and allows room for the movie and its narrative to unfold more naturally without being completely mapped out in pre-production. Also the classical linear narrative format finds itself challenged by those different, more experimental ways of storytelling. Within the stories Malick confronts his characters with identities that find themselves questioning their own actions and sense of being in the world, which leads them to start looking for a deeper underlying unity, a relational aspect that connects the self with the

¹ Terrence Malick, in Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick. Contemporary Film Directors*, Urbana: University of Illinois, 2009, p.105f.

² Canby, Vincent, "Malick's Impressive 'Badlands' Screened at Festival", in: The New York Times, originally published on print 15. October 1973, web version: <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/10/15/archives/malicks-impressive-badlands-screened-at-festival.html>, 24.02.21.

³ Flanagan, Martin, „Chapter Ten: ‚Everything a Lie‘: The Critical and Commercial Reception of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*", in: *The Cinema of Terrence Malick. poetic visions of america*. Edited by Hannah Patterson, New York: Columbia UP, second edition 2007, p. 136.

world it is imbedded in. This idea is the spark that sets this thesis in motion. A relational gaze that is visualized through the artist's way of incorporating, seeing and observing the unfolding of nature and human identity alike, as it encapsulates the understanding of an I-Thou relationship. This is where I see the beginning of Buber's and Malick's visions overlapping, intersecting and complementing each other.

"More than the first two films, *The Thin Red Line* transcends the immediate setting and action of the narrative to ask questions that penetrate to the heart of the Western mythos, such as the source and nature of evil, the existence of the spiritual, and the role and meaning of love."⁴ Within that, the movie presents and explores the question of human identity. Who am I, and do my actions define who that I is going to be? How do I choose to relate to myself and the other? How do I perceive myself compared to the other? These questions present the viewer and the character with an underlying current of being able to be and decide for being either the good or the bad. Even if the good and the bad are not specifically defined, there is an objective idea about what either of them should or might be. With that idea of good and bad *The Thin Red Line* does not only proposes a duality in which mankind is presumably rooted in, but also challenges that exact duality by offering a choosing self. When speaking of challenging duality I believe that in the moment a duality is introduced, an inevitable search for what lies behind that duality sets itself in motion and therefore starts to question its assumed place and quality. The gaze wanders from a notion of good and bad, of an us and them, of a me and the other to find itself looking for the reason behind that perceived separation. This digging deeper and searching occurs in many of the protagonists throughout the film. One man's contemplation can be heard through his voice-over, "Darkness and light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh, my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining."⁵ Is it possible that the good and the bad both come from the same source? From the same identity? From one person who is caught between that thought duality?

⁴ Mottram, Ron, "Chapter One. All Things Shining: The Struggle for Wholeness, Redemption and Transcendence in the Films of Terrence Malick", in: *The Cinema of Terrence Malick*. poetic visions of america. Edited by Hannah Patterson, New York: Columbia UP, second edition 2007. Directors' Cuts, p. 20.

⁵ *The Thin Red Line*, R.: Terrence Malick USA:1998, 02:42:01min-02:42:56min.

When calling upon the soul, I believe the contemplator reaches for a sense of unity, of meaning and connection that lies beneath the individual sense of self and therefore behind the seemingly given duality that he finds himself presented with. Exploring the question of a unified origin, this question reaches through any thought duality and finds everything, “All things shining”⁶, interconnected by letting the soul, the essence connect with its surrounding. Since the person who contemplates the duality can also question it, it can be assumed that there is something that can observe the duality within the contemplator. This something is able to see beyond the limits of the physical form and beyond the structures of a rational mind to see the underlying roots that connect everything with one another. This something therefore always has a choice in how to relate, as it lies behind the concept of separation.

A similar paradigm awaits in Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*. The movie premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011, earning Malick the *Palme d’Or* and setting him off on a more experimental path of filmmaking. This picture is one that has been in the workings since the 1980s⁷ and depicts the creation of the world at a meta-level. It questions the self in the world, morality, freedom of choice, the duality of grace and nature, the evolution of the self and explores the belief in a higher power. The film was produced by two smaller studios, Riverroad Entertainment and Plan B Entertainment, which was originally founded by Brad Pitt, who also starred in the movie. The main crew members remained the same to Malick’s previous projects, including Sarah Green as the main producer, Jack Fisk as production designer, Emmanuel Lubezki as cinematographer and Jörg Widmer as Steadicam operator. Pushing the boundaries of traditional linear narrative storytelling even further, *The Tree of Life* became the most abstract, mosaic-like picture of Malick at the time. *“This movie stands stubbornly alone, and yet in part by virtue of its defiant peculiarity it shows a clear kinship with other eccentric, permanent works of the American imagination, in which sober consideration of life on this continent is yoked to transcendental, even prophetic ambition. More than any other active*

⁶ The Thin Red Line, R.: Terrence Malick USA:1998, 02:42:01min-02:42:56min.

⁷ Jack Fisk, in Dominik Kamalzadeh/ Michael Pekler, *Terrence Malick*. Köthen: Schüren Verlag, 2013, p.152.

filmmaker Mr. Malick belongs in the visionary company of homegrown romantics [...]"⁸

The Grace and Nature concept introduced in *The Tree of Life* extends the question of one's own identity and lends yet another face to a shared connection when assuming a given duality. Its idea is introduced through the voice-over of the mother, Mrs. O'Brien, in the very beginning of the movie, when she says: *"The nuns taught us there are two ways through life. The way of nature, and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself, accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself, get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them, to have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy, when all the world is shining around it and love is smiling through all things. They taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end. I will be true to you. Whatever comes."*⁹ This concept is offering the viewer and the characters a duality that is understood to be inherent in living life, while it might even be asking for a potential balance between the two extremes. Grace and nature, just like darkness and light, as well as strife and love offer a duality that is balanced on the edge of good and evil. Meaning that one is approached as the good one and the other one is seen as bad. Here I believe the duality is tangled up within its unity a little more, meaning it makes their difference more difficult to grasp as this concept seems to be more nuanced than a clear good and evil structure. And yet grace, just from looking at Mrs. O'Brien's description, is clearly the one perceived as good and nature understood as the bad one of the pair.

Why is looking at this concept important when looking for a shared core and relational understanding? Again, just like in the example of *The Thin Red Line*, looking at the concept is important, in my opinion, because when a duality is introduced our gaze sharpens to find its origin, and the origin always lies in a form of unity. Within this concept, the choosing self is the origin of calling forth either grace or nature. This means that the self must have both roots inherently within itself, as it is the one who decides "which one to follow"¹⁰. Therefore both good and evil, grace and nature, and however else they can be described as, are two ways of

⁸ Scott, A.O., „Heaven, Texas and the Cosmic Whodunit“, in: The New York Times, published on 26. May 2011, web version: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/27/movies/the-tree-of-life-from-terrence-malick-review.html>, 24.02.21.

⁹ The Tree of Life (Extended Version), R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2011, 00:02:15min-00:04:22min.

¹⁰ The Tree of Life (Extended Version), R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2011, 00:02:15min-00:04:22min.

looking and relating to the world outside and inside of the self, interconnected within the person choosing. Just like strife and love they are “the features of the same face”¹¹ and therefore it is just depending on how the individual chooses to relate to either one of them. It is in relation that the choosing occurs and the definition of good and evil arises. My belief is that Malick introduces those dynamics of duality to underline the unifying element that lies behind them. The pictures do that, at least in my opinion, by focusing the viewer’s attention on both ends of the spectrum after having been made aware of the inherent duality through the voice-over, so they know what to look for within every frame. The movie will show big raging currents intercut with the fluttering of a butterfly, a father who gets aggressive toward his family as well as the same father tenderly kissing his baby’s feet. Building a relational gaze with those images, not merely within the story but also toward and within the viewer. Even though both extremes find themselves clearly visualized, the frames will eventually bring the two back together, find grace in nature and something natural in grace. In my opinion they illuminate the connection between all things, the good and bad, the grace and nature, by suggesting what they can and cannot be and offering the viewer an individual, a character, who is trying to relate to both sides, which leads them struggling to find their way - observing duality before looking into unity. The characters and viewers will come to realize at some point that both sides are relatable, therefore they both have to be anchored in themselves and a bigger interconnectedness, which makes it possible to see the world, the connection that lies beneath the seemingly separate duality, “smiling through all things”. It is possible to see the good and the bad only if there is something that sees it, that is connected to both things, therefore has to be a part of something else than either the good or the bad, grace or nature. Both sides are inherently living inside of the character, who chooses to either live the one or the other reality. It is in remembering that self that lives behind the duality that holds the ability to choose how to relate to the world.

¹¹ The Thin Red Line, R.: Terrence Malick USA:1998, 02:42:01min-02:42:56min.

The concepts of duality are mere guideposts, to open the viewer up to the conversation of identity and freedom of choice. Because identity, just like the concept of Grace and Nature or the I-Thou, is rooted in duality, in a word pair that speaks to a relational concept of identity and non-identity.¹² It defines what the self is and what lies outside of it. The self and the other. Identity and alterity. The mere concept of identity underlines the necessity to refer back onto oneself, to see oneself in relation to the other and experience oneself as something else than that.¹³ In this case to choose grace or nature is just a way of referring back onto oneself and a way that enables one to name one's experience. As aware conscious beings, we have an idea of who we are and what our identity looks like, a sense of self-consciousness that we are able to rely on when we are in need of defining ourselves. This is where concepts that are set up in dualities are very efficient as they make it easier for us to tell ourselves who we might be.

Outside of the personal and the collective sense of self¹⁴, there is also an understanding of a physical and non-physical self. A body and mind, a physical human form that is filled with consciousness. *"In other words [...] the world fundamentally consists of two altogether different and reciprocally independent types of things, 'things with extension' (res extensa) and 'thinking things' (res cogitans). In this framework, man seems to be the peculiar being that, as reason and body, has part in both the mechanistically determined universe of corporeal things and the spiritually free universe of thinking things. Man is his consciousness, his 'inner', and has his body as a functioning tool for his actions and expressions in the outer world, a tool that also delivers the sensory material out of which man creates all his spiritual 'representations' of reality."*¹⁵

Things with extensions, a physical form that is capable of being literally in touch with the rest of the world, and thinking things, in this case a mind that thinks about its own identity, including

¹² Landwehr, Achim, and Stefanie Stockhorst. *Einführung in Die Europäische Kulturgeschichte*. Paderborn Wien: Schöningh UTB, 2004, p.194.

¹³ Landwehr, Achim, and Stefanie Stockhorst. *Einführung in Die Europäische Kulturgeschichte*. Paderborn Wien: Schöningh UTB, 2004, p.194.

¹⁴ Landwehr, Achim, and Stefanie Stockhorst. *Einführung in Die Europäische Kulturgeschichte*. Paderborn Wien: Schöningh UTB, 2004, p.197.

¹⁵ Eriksson, Johan, "The form of the soul — on the body in Freud's psychoanalysis", in: *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 37:2, 99-106, 2014, online <https://doi.org/10.1080/01062301.2014.978172>, p.101.

what the physical could say about the non-physical and how the world, the other, relates to the self. The one informs the other and that goes both ways.

This mind – body dilemma has been discussed and puzzled over for a very long time. It seems that, for some reason neither a separate nor a unified idea of the self is one that explains what we are desperately trying to understand. This might be an ego problem. Human ego, just another puzzle piece that influences our identity. It can be translated to “I” from its Latin origin and describes one’s sense of self-importance and personal identity, one’s need to set oneself apart, to be different from the other. A selfish drive striving for approval and worrying about its own survival and existence in the world. “[...E]go first and foremost has the character of a ‘bodily ego’ [...] that stands in contact with the structures, limitations and demands of external reality”.¹⁶ “Bodily” is interesting in this context, as it describes a part of the mind (ego) that appears to be tightly knit to one’s physical reality. In this case it is made clear that material and immaterial structures of identity are interconnected and codependent on each other. The physical informs the non-physical and the non-physical informs the physical. An interplay between the different parts of self, the inner and outer. Therefore it can be assumed that the inner world shines through to the outer world, the mind impacts the body and the body impacts the mind.

So what else is there in this undefined, infinite, immaterial consciousness apart from the ego, when one comes to think of identity? The unsolved problem of the mind-body connection was not just concerned with human ego, but was mostly struck by the idea of the possible existence of a soul, an essence, a consciousness that inhabits the physical structure of a being. A part that was independent of a bodily form, and yet could animate it.¹⁷ Going back to the Classical Era, after the assumption of the existence of multiple souls within a body faded through philosophers such as Heraclitus, the idea of a physically independent soul, and with that the mind-body problem, started to rise.¹⁸ Along came Plotinus and Plato’s idea of a world soul, a

¹⁶ Eriksson, Johan, “The form of the soul — on the body in Freud’s psychoanalysis”, in: *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 37:2, 99-106, 2014, online <https://doi.org/10.1080/01062301.2014.978172>, p.104.

¹⁷ Von Stuckrad, Kocku. *Die Seele Im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine Kulturgeschichte*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019, Web. Schöningh and Fink Literature and Culture Studies E-Books Collection 2019, p.8.

¹⁸ Von Stuckrad, Kocku. *Die Seele Im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine Kulturgeschichte*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019, Web. Schöningh and Fink Literature and Culture Studies E-Books Collection 2019, p.8.

cosmic soul of which the human soul was a mere reflection. In their mind the human soul was part of the bigger cosmic soul, and yet still separate from it.¹⁹ Through philosophical ideas of the scholastic, the notion of an existing dualism between body and soul got reinforced during the Middle Ages and made its way into catholic theology.²⁰ Since then it has been discussed and puzzled over throughout history, building a focus for René Descartes, German idealism and Transcendental philosophy.²¹ This is to say that the idea and possibility of a soul has touched lots of minds for centuries. How it relates to the body, or how the body relates to it is an unknown and I am not here to tell you otherwise. But what is essential is that the belief in a soul exists and has existed throughout history. The belief in a part of the self, a part of one's identity that cannot be touched, measured, grasped or analyzed, but roots in an understanding of connection, in a bigger idea of unity. For the further analysis throughout this paper, this is how the soul will be approached and related to, as a formless part of a human being that is not concerned with what the ego needs or longs for, but strives for connection in every interaction. The soul as the part of the self that is reaching for an I-Thou, the soul as the part that is in relation to the self and the other. Looking at how this reaching into the I-Thou materializes visually will be one of the main parts of the film and character analysis.

This is to underline that the notion of an identity, an ego and a soul are important when looking back on the duality concepts that have already been touched on in *The Thin Red Line* and *The Tree of Life*, as they are choosing where on the spectrum of good and evil, grace and nature the self will find itself relating from. And by that the different aspects of self give an understanding to how and where from the self finds itself relating to its surrounding.

It is difficult to dissect one concept from the other, as they are so tightly knit to one another and are therefore interconnected. For example the "bodily" ego can be understood as tied to the larger concept of self and in some form or another to the nature aspect that Malick talks about. Consciousness on the other hand can be tied to the soul and with that to the idea of

¹⁹ Von Stuckrad, Kocku. *Die Seele Im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine Kulturgeschichte*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019, Web. Schöningh and Fink Literature and Culture Studies E-Books Collection 2019, p.8.

²⁰ Von Stuckrad, Kocku. *Die Seele Im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine Kulturgeschichte*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019, Web. Schöningh and Fink Literature and Culture Studies E-Books Collection 2019, p.8.

²¹ Von Stuckrad, Kocku. *Die Seele Im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine Kulturgeschichte*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019, Web. Schöningh and Fink Literature and Culture Studies E-Books Collection 2019, p.10.

grace. At the same time there is nature in grace and grace in nature, because it is inevitably all rooted in one interconnected web, therefore the physical is connected to the non-physical and so on. Basically they are all different approaches leading to the same search, the search for unity. This is why Buber's theory of the I in relation has to be explored next, as I believe it gives a clear framework to understanding how the various aspects can be understood together.

Buber's I in Relation

Finally the relational concept of the I-Thou and I-It word pair, which is presented in the book *Ich und Du* (trans.: *I and Thou*) written by the Austrian Jewish Israeli philosopher Martin Buber will be explored in this section of the paper. It ties the already explored concepts of identity and its duality together, offering a broader and at the same time more concrete framework when talking about the relating self and the I in relation.

Buber was part of the Jewish Renaissance of the 20th century and introduced a relational structure and element to a belief system that priorly relied heavily on a chastising perception and image of god. His understanding of a relating world and a life giving eternal presence within every being that is not demanding or punishing must have immensely effected the idea of relationship as a joint union of equals. Because his theory and work coincided with the emerging visual culture of cinema and storytelling, I believe this new idea of relationship and entering into a higher divine power through connection must have impacted the way stories were told. This is why I see a connection between his theory and visual communication.

In his book Buber introduced two word pairs which are dependent on the I, the I-Thou, which opens up the world of relation, and the I-It that concerns itself with the world of experience. He claims that the world appears twofold to human beings, depending on which I of the word pairs one uses to relate to their surroundings, the other part of the pair will follow along and create one's subjective experience of relation.²² One can either relate in a way that is in relation to the

²² Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.3.

other, where both meet in a mutual selfless bond, an equal subjectivity that does not know the other as such, or one can relate in a way that creates a subject-object reality, in which one is the subject experiencing the other as an object.²³

This as Buber claims does not mean that one only has either I-Thou or I-It relationships throughout their life, but that both kinds of relationship exist and occur at different times with different beings and things throughout ones lifespan. While occurring at different times, the author also reckons that I-Thou relationships eventually always move into a subject-object reality, therefore becoming an experience to our subjective sense of self and convert into an I-It relation.²⁴ This consequentially means that I-It experiences can also transform into I-Thou relationships, losing their sense of thingness and growing into a mutual subjectivity, a mutual you.²⁵ Therefore neither I-Thou nor I-It relations are simply established nor everlasting, but they are in constant flux and depending on how one chooses to relate to an “other” time and time again. This also makes sense when looking at the idea of choosing grace or nature in Mrs. O’Brien’s voice-over when she says, “You have to choose which one you’ll follow”²⁶. One could argue from Buber’s perspective that she simply refers to the active individual choice that defines in what way one wants to relate one’s I to the world, stringing either the Thou or the It along with the decision. Does one want to relate from a point of view where oneself is the subject experiencing the object, or does one want to meet the world in a mutual you? Same with identity, does one find oneself in a position where one harnesses a firm understanding of one’s own identity and therefore perceives the world in its separateness, where there is the self and the other or does one enter into union with everything else so there is no firm identity left to be defined? Within this framework of an I-Thou and I-It, the dualities that have been opened up and explored earlier can now be put into a relational understanding, which helps to grasp them in context. They are never fixed in one position as an I-Thou relationship moves into an I-It experience and the other way around. The relating to the world is in constant flux as it always depends on the choosing self to relate anew. Buber argues that the only true I-Thou

²³ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.25.

²⁴ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.18, 94.

²⁵ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.18.

²⁶ The Tree of Life (Extended Version), R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2011, 00:02:15min-00:04:22min.

relationship that never changes into an experience is the relationship to god, the eternal you.²⁷ In his belief, every I-Thou relationship we enter into reminds us of the eternal Thou, which is present within us at all times.²⁸

Therefore there are three different kinds of relationship that Buber introduces us to through his word pairs in *Ich und Du*.

The I-Thou, which opens up the word of relation and knows of three realms of life in relationship, the one with nature, the one with humans and the one with spiritual beings.²⁹ They differ in how language is used as a participant in the giving and receiving aspect of the connection between the beings,³⁰ but the distinction of the three realms can be put aside for now, as I won't go into further detail on them in this thesis. Important to understand is that the I-Thou is always living in the present moment, in movement and in mutual beingness.³¹ Therefore the I and Thou are interchangeable as they are equally effecting each other in the I-Thou relationship.³² Stressing the sense of unity and equality. With that Buber claims that the I can only know and truly become itself through the encounter with a thou.³³

“Stehe ich einem Menschen als meinem Du gegenüber, spreche das Grundwort Ich-Du zu ihm, ist er kein Ding unter Dingen und nicht aus Dingen bestehend. Nicht Er oder Sie ist er, von andern Er und Sie begrenzt, im Weltnetz aus Raum und Zeit eingetragener Punkt; und nicht eine Beschaffenheit, erfahrbar, beschreibbar, lockeres Bündel benannter Eigenschaften. Sondern nachbarnlos und fugenlos ist er Du und füllt den Himmelskreis. Nicht als ob nichts andres wäre als er: aber alles andre lebt in seinem Licht.”³⁴

The second one is the I-It experience, which exists in space-time and can be overcome by the mind through realization or change of perspective.³⁵ It is always tied to the past and lives in stagnation, as it is interacting with things and objects, which carry a lack of relationship

²⁷ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.71, 108.

²⁸ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.71.

²⁹ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.6,97.

³⁰ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.6,97.

³¹ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.13.

³² Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.16.

³³ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.28.

³⁴ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.8,9.

³⁵ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.96.

inherently within them. This is because they are not actively becoming or taking part in an interaction, but are only passively being experienced in order for an I to have a subjective experience.³⁶ These experiences are then able to be structured, described and aligned in space-time. The experiencing subject can describe the object that is being experienced.

“Der ichhaft gewordene Mensch, der Ich-Es sagt, stellt sich vor den Dingen auf, nicht ihnen gegenüber im Strom der Wechselwirkung; mit der objektivierenden Lupe seines Nahblicks über die einzelnen gebeugt oder mit dem objektivierenden Feldstecher seines Fernblicks sie zur Szenerie zusammenordnend, sie in der Betrachtung isolierend ohne Ausschließlichkeitsgefühl oder sie in der Betrachtung verknüpfend ohne Weltgefühl [...].”³⁷

Lastly there is the connection to the eternal Thou which is always present within us and only knows true subjectivity. Buber claims that through every I-Thou relation that a subject enters into it is reminded of their connection to the eternal Thou, a higher power, or god as the author phrases it, that lives within everyone at all time. One is only able to access that bond to the eternal Thou by stepping into relation with another thou. This relationship is one that is innate to every being and is the only relationship that never changes into an I-It experience.

“Es ist ein Finden ohne Suchen; ein Entdecken dessen, was das Ursprünglichste und der Ursprung ist. [...]”³⁸

If we take Buber’s I-It and I-Thou and compare them to Malick’s terms of grace and nature, we could argue that the physical realm of experiencing that lies in an I-It relation is synonymous to the element of nature, and the realm of inclusive relation of the I-Thou is synonymous to the element of grace. As stated above, both forms are fluid, so grace can enter into relationship with nature and nature with grace depending on how one is able to perceive and relate to it. “Oh, my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining”³⁹, the soldiers contemplation could be understood as a calling forth of the eternal Thou, a remembering of the innate connection to a bigger unity that flows through

³⁶ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.13.

³⁷ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.29, 30.

³⁸ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.76.

³⁹ The Thin Red Line, R.: Terrence Malick USA:1998, 02:42:01min-02:42:56min.

all beings.

The I-It is always an experience that includes something separate from the self, whereas an I-Thou doesn't know any kind of separation, it only knows unity. It is this line that I believe Malick is walking, the line between the I-It and I-Thou that is merging together at times, while growing apart at others. This field of separation between and within grace and nature is crossed, it is a growing, an anticipation, an understanding, a questioning and an experiencing of those two entangled with one another that holds the gaze of the camera and shares moments of a remembered eternal Thou.

Throughout the narratives the characters of *The New World* and *Song to Song* are trying to define their own identities, but because the true I only reveals itself thorough the encounter with a thou, they are inevitably in search of connection.⁴⁰ Moving through various stages, the frames show us this reaching into connection by following their individual journeys. An I-Thou is always movement, motion, presence, the I-it is stagnation, it is a stopping of life, a past.⁴¹

Therefor the subject, the real I in the constellation of the I-Thou pairing can only be understood in the dynamic experience of connection itself.⁴² I believe that this form of searching and reaching, this form of connection and connecting, even though it is lost and found throughout the movies, this is what Malick conveys within and through his mosaic-like merging of word, sound and image. There is no either or, good or bad, grace or nature, but a room for exploration of the opening of spaces that meet between and behind established dualities.

That said I am going to give a brief overview of two of Malick's films, *The New World* and *Song to Song*, which are going to be the subjects of the film analysis. Using the framework of the self in relationship that Buber presented, to see how his understanding can be used visually to create a relational gaze between the characters and the world they find themselves in.

The two movies are very different from one another when looking at them from the outside. *The New World* is a semi historic, more narrative driven visual depiction of the first English settlers arriving to Virginia. Within that framework, the story focuses on the loose retelling of

⁴⁰ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.28.

⁴¹ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.13.

⁴² Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p. 61.

not only the encounter between Captain John Smith and the Powhatan tribe but also between him and their princess Pocahontas. The relationship between the two builds the emotional core of the story and is what the movie revolves around. *Song to Song* is also built around a love story, which is set against today's Austin music scene. This movie focuses even more on the emotional drive of the main characters Faye and BV, it is jumping from moment to moment without really introducing a set narrative or a clear structure. I would argue that its essence is about exploring forms of relationship, not only with another but really with oneself. Therefore these two movies might seem like a peculiar match, but at their core they are both concerned with the question of looking for the inner in the outer world, searching for an I-Thou relationship within an I-It experience driven reality, which in my opinion makes them perfect candidates for an exploration of Buber's twofold worldview.

"What else is life, but being near you [...]"

*Two no more, one. One. I am. I am."*⁴³

- Pocahontas

The New World

Shot in 2004 the movie premiered in December of 2005 and then got rereleased in theaters in January 2006 with a shorter version of the first cut. To date there are three different versions of *The New World* available, The First Cut, the shortly later released Theatrical Cut and The Extended Cut, which I will be analyzing in this section. The narrative is set around the first English settlers arriving in what would become the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia. The vivid, seemingly boundless virgin land is setting a hopeful scene that would soon turn into a prison for the Englishmen. Captain John Smith, portrayed by Colin Farrell, is ordered to head up the river and explore the new land further, when he finds himself attacked and captured by the Native people of the Powhatan tribe. His life is spared due to the king's daughter Pocahontas, portrayed by Q'orianka Kilcher, who convinces her father to let Smith live and with that, a love

⁴³ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 00:50:14min/ 00:51:12min.

story is set in motion. While the unfolding relationship between the two is the emotional core of the narrative, the story is embedded in the belonging Smith finds in the gestures, motions, in the rites, the community and in the land of the Native people, which leaves him torn between his old and this new world. There is hope with the Naturals, as they are referred to in the picture, hope that does not exist within the fort the English had built on the shores of the new land. There is sickness and pain, greed and anger living within his people. Disoriented, the love between the Captain and Pocahontas starts to drift. As the Naturals realize that the English came to stay, a fight breaks out between the two camps, their crops left destroyed and Pocahontas sold to the settlers in an attempt for peace. Unable to endure seeing this creature of the wild that he had fallen in love with roam along his people in the fort, trapped, made to adapt to the Western ideals, civilized, robbed of herself, Smith leaves for England. Alongside an already marvelous cast, including Christopher Plummer, August Schellenberg, Ben Mendelsohn, David Thewlis and Raoul Trujillo, Christian Bale joins the plot at this point of the story to portray John Rolfe, Pocahontas's soon to be husband. Left in the belief that Smith had drowned, she finds herself agreeing to the union. Groomed for a western life, her appearance has changed drastically as she adapts to the settlers ideals. After their wedding, the couple finds themselves invited to England by the queen. As the so called princess of the new world' she strides through the alleys of London into the groomed courtyards, presented to the King and Queen of England. She is creating the link between the old and the new, the tamed and the wild world. Pocahontas, now baptized Rebecca, brings to this dull world a bit of color, a sense of curiosity and humanity.

The montage of the movie is very fragmented, but still follows the outlines of this narrative, which really falls into the background of the emotional storyline. The camera seems an observer more than a capturer of direction and barely buys into conventional shooting patterns, weaving an occasional shot- reverse or over the shoulder shot of the two lovers in, to give a feel of the back and forth eye gazing that exists between the two. On screen dialog is rare and usually just creates the backdrop to sparsely engaging voice-overs that are used to express the internal world of the characters. The feelings conveyed through voice-over, but also through the unconventionally captured and cut imagery of people and nature, as well as an

incredible sound design that is filled with an array of classical music, are all part of breathing new life into this loosely retold historic event. It is more so a feeling that is told not a story per say. The film flows like the river that comes to be an essential character and takes the viewer from the people to the land. Shots of human interaction are intercut with birds in the sky, chickens in the yard, water flowing steady or trees reaching up for air. The visuals are in tune with one another and lie outside of conventional storytelling, exploring the realms of feeling and conveying the characters sense of reality.

The sense of reality and tangibility I believe also comes from and speaks through the production design by Jack Fisk, which is respectful to how the Jamestown settlement and the Powhatan tribe are supposed to have lived at the time.⁴⁴ “Terry liked Jack Fisk to create the houses and the locations so that he could shoot 360 degrees. So the crew had to be ready for that as well, because unlike most movies where they absolutely know the camera is locked between these two positions, that’s it. With Terry you never knew, it could be there and then suddenly he’s spinning around and looking there. [...]”⁴⁵ “Well I guess this is Malick’s genius if you like, that he sees it as he works. That’s the feeling that I’m getting from it anyway.”⁴⁶

The world created and the process of making it and being authentic and respectful in portraying the Native people and Algonquin language seems to have been one of the production’s main focus points with *The New World*.⁴⁷ At the same time it is still a movie made within a commercial, capitalist, patriarchal entertainment system, looking back at history from a today’s modern, white, American male’s point of view, and not a Native one. Therefore othering and alterity are inherently woven into the structure of the film, which I think is important to keep in mind. It is a very idealized and romantic piece of art, not a historic documentary on the Jamestown settlement and shouldn’t be confused as such. The beautiful, dreamlike images of *The New World* mark the first collaboration between Malick, cinematographer Emmanuel

⁴⁴ Making “The New World”, R.: Austin Jack Lynch, Criterion Collection, USA: 2005.

⁴⁵ Christian Bale, Making “The New World”, R.: Austin Jack Lynch, Criterion Collection, USA: 2005, 01:08:30min.

⁴⁶ August Schellenberg, Making “The New World”, R.: Austin Jack Lynch, Criterion Collection, USA: 2005, 01:09:35min.

⁴⁷ Making “The New World”, R.: Austin Jack Lynch, Criterion Collection, USA: 2005.

Lubezki and Steadicam operator Jörg Widmer. It also introduces Hank Corwin as one of the main editors of the film who would become another long term collaborator of Malick's. Sarah Green with *Sarah Green Films* was the main producer on the movie alongside *New Line Cinema*, *First Foot Films*, *The Virginia Company* and the filmmakers own production company *Sunflower Productions*.⁴⁸

As this thesis is in its core concerned with dualities, I believe it is important to explore the innate duality that lives within *The New World* to find the I-Thou and I-It structures ringing through. An obvious duality can be found within the depiction of the opposed camps of the settlers and the Naturals, as well as in the decay on the one and the blooming of nature on the other hand. Those are some of the narrative and visual elements that clearly communicate the existence of two sides. Within them we find an open boundless village, surrounded by green and trees, filled with working and playing people in community, engaged in rituals, physical touch and painted skin on the one side whilst we can also witness the building of walls, wearing of shields and armor, the distrust and separateness, the greed and envy and the sickness that exists in the fort amongst the settlers. "*The New World* shows that the first impulse of European settlers in America was to enclose space rather than to dwell in its openness. As much as Malick understands this impulse as tragic, he envisions more than a return to nature as a response." ⁴⁹ In this sense, returning to nature in an I-It manner, in separation does not offer any new possibilities. It's a mindset change that has to occur within the settlers from an I-It, a subject-object to an I-Thou relationship, meaning Malick doesn't just call for a return to a thought harmony, but asks what harmony could look like and how it can be lived.

Contrary to the Grace and Nature duality from *The Tree of Life*, here it seems as though the depiction of nature is what carries grace within it, as if they had the same qualities. Both grace and nature lie on the opposite spectrum of colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism and all their material lusting for more. It very much amplifies how a character is choosing to relate, whether they are framing their surrounding as an object or an equal subject.

⁴⁸ Kamalzadeh, Dominik / Michael Pekler, *Terrence Malick*. Köthen: Schüren Verlag, 2013, p.177.

⁴⁹ Gunning, Tom, „*The New World: Dwelling in Malick's New World*“, online The Criterion Collection, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4161-the-new-world-dwelling-in-malick-s-new-world>, 25.07.2016, 10.05.21.

Nature is grace, is connection and unity, and seems to find itself personified within Q'orianka Kilcher. She is the opposite of everything the settlers and their fort stand for, the hording, the judgment and stagnation. She seems boundless through her connection to her surroundings. She bleeds into everything and everyone she touches, embraces oneness, unity and equality between all things. She is present. She endures the pain and even as an outcast never seeks comfort in aggression against anything or anyone, but finds strength and wisdom in nature and her connection to it. A connection to a deeper wisdom that is comparable to the eternal Thou Buber speaks of, a bond that lives within each being and is accessed through connection, through presence.

Pocahontas has an openness the settlers are foreign to and physically shielded from. Open not only in her heart and mind as the voice-overs indicate, but in her body, almost translucent the viewer is always able to see her skin, see through to her, reach beneath the surface. Open in how she gestures, her hands reaching from the third eye to the sky, constantly connecting with and calling upon the mother, her source. "You are our mother, we your field of corn. We rise from out of the soul of you."⁵⁰ The soul, the essence. This belief toward a higher power itself is another aspect that separates the Naturals from the settlers. Their village is filled with meaning, with feathers, totems, animals, rituals, dance, with colors, everything is unique and every person of the tribe looks different. They are all painted differently, wear their hair differently from the others, and are all decorated with their own distinct ornaments and animalistic, natural elements. They are all unique, whereas the settlers are very much alike, not only in their attitude, but in their looks and movement, in their clothing, the colors the same, in their unawareness of anything that is outside of them, outside of the walls of the fort and outside of their own desires. Everyone seems to be very engaged with their ego and bodily needs, there is no deeper sense they are reaching for, no curiosity. On top of that the characters in the fort aren't very distinct, nor have unique ideas or mindsets towards the situation they find themselves in. When looking at it from this angle, their human sense of self and identity, their

⁵⁰ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 00:01:11-00:01:29min.

survival instinct, their anthropocentric understanding of the world is in another way also very tightly knit to Mrs. O'Brien's description of nature.⁵¹ Grace lies far away from it.

Another element that the two camps actually have in common is that they both have a member that isn't quite like the rest. They get introduced and reappear in the fort throughout the narrative. The Natural's unique character is defined by his curiosity, kindness, loving nature and desire to touch and connect to the people and things around him. He doesn't seem like an outcast, nor is he treated differently by his own people. He is graceful, and just like any other of the Naturals very unique in looks and color patterns on his skin, which in his case is kept in shades of black and white. The colors themselves empathize duality, and might question how a society treats and approaches people and minds that work differently from the masses. The colors suggesting that he is in between black and white, he's wearing them both on his skin, but isn't either or. Meanwhile the settler's unusual character is declared crazy by his community, he is loud and aggressive, secluded, visually not appealing, dirty, rotten teeth, seen talking to himself and seems to be a separating force within the fort. The English settlers are seen talking about him behind his back, judging, discussing to take his life, to get rid of him. Not wanting to have someone like him amongst them, not tending to him, not listening, but declaring him as unworthy. I think this example is perfect in showing the real underlying duality of separateness and connection, the choosing of separation over the choosing of unity that weaves itself through every visual, every sound and voice-over in *The New World*. As a viewer we can observe who is choosing which way in life, while we are also able to explore how the movie makes us choose. There are different symbols that lead us to feel pulled toward the one or the other in certain moments. The montage plays a big part in underlining the twofold nature of the camps as well in showing us what the Naturals choose to lead with and what the settlers hold on to. For example we see strong, healthy physiques interacting with one another in a loving and playful way, whether that is by training together or painting each other or dancing around the fire pit. All these images create a sense of unity, a sense of connection of respect and belonging. While on the other hand we witness sick, skinny bodies, whose faces are covered in

⁵¹ The Tree of Life (Extended Version), R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2011, 00:02:15min-00:04:22min.

scabs and dirt, screaming and talking over one another. These images create a feeling of separateness, of discomfort, of loneliness, of hostility, blame and disrespect. Nature is depicted in a way that feels light and loving, in constant motion, in flow and in unity with all things, while the walls and buildings, the outline of the fort create a sense of stagnation, of past and clinging, holding on to somethings dead and gone, creating a feeling of disconnect and isolation, just like England does when Pocahontas visits. The movie is constantly playing with these opposites and gives us two characters who are very engaged in their way of seeing the world either in union or in separation. Pocahontas is introduced through her connectedness, to the people around her, the nature, how they all look out over the river to see the ships come in. They are in unity, in the way they move and align with the trees and the earth. John Smith arrives in separation, he is locked away, held captive in the darkness of the boat. Separate from nature and his own people. What happens then is that the person who was used to the separateness now comes to question it, and we follow Captain Smith down that path of trying to connect throughout the unfolding narrative on the shores of this new land. He is searching for the I-Thou connection within his framework and comes to find it in nature, in Pocahontas. Not always and forever, but in glimpses he seems to remember, "There is something I know when I am with you, that I forget when I'm away."⁵² Curiosity and freedom are forces driving the characters into an I-Thou, into a relational approach toward their surroundings, even in a seemingly separated Western world that only knows of an I-It, a subject-object driven reality glimpses of connection can be felt. The spaciousness and the unconventional free flowing piecing together of image and sound, the constant arising of profound questions from within the characters, all of these elements allow and suggest an exploration and an experience that goes beneath what the film itself is able to show. This beneath, this more profound layer that is communicated between and through the lines and images, could be understood as the eternal Thou that Buber is speaking about. The mother Pocahontas refers and relates offers one kind of that bigger unity, that higher power that is connected to all things, which is referred to as god in the book. Pocahontas depicts that connection as if it was flowing through her from the source, like a human embodiment of worldly consciousness. In touch with that eternal Thou she takes Smith

⁵² The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 01:13:10min.

on a journey to reconnect, while the camera is constantly establishing a relational understanding of either an I-Thou or I-It.

Reconnecting to the Eternal Thou

Every second of this film would be perfect for an analysis of an I-It and I-Thou relational understanding as it is woven so deeply and profoundly through every element, every sound, through the heart of this picture.

As I am particularly moved by Pocahontas's reaction and the explored dynamics that follow the news of John Smith's death, and as I feel they incorporate all three kinds of Buber's relationships, I am going to analyze that sequence more closely. It incorporates three scenes that are patched together and only separated by a black screen. Together they inform both, the I-It and I-Thou as well as the eternal connection to the higher source that lives within each being. The scenes focus around Pocahontas and her losing herself, through losing Smith and adapting to a new world, and communicate her finding a way back into connection, into union.



01:55:57min



01:56:13min



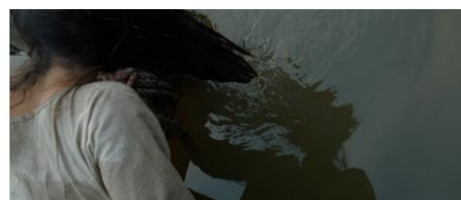
01:56:21min



01:56:41min



01:57:05min



01:57:12min

Pocahontas is in her house in the fort when Ben Mendelson's character delivers the news of Smith's drowning.⁵³ At first she is still, she doesn't move, taking it in, she looks down, her head slightly tilted, her hair dark and long and open flowing down her chest over her greenish-grey night gown. She blinks and starts turning her head a little, her eyes searching in disbelief, her nostrils breathing heavier, eyebrows moving into a shocked frown. Eyes watery. Cut to her hands reaching into a bucket of light grey ash, rubbing her face in it. A ritual gesture, she buries her face in ashes. Cut to her in the fort, reaching up into the sky, met with settler's confused stares and acts of rejection and disregard. Her new community is blanketing her search for connection in humiliation. She is in the center, the attraction, everyone looking at her from the distance. Like a zoo animal. Captured, trapped she walks in circles. The settlers looking away when she gets too close to them, not wanting to touch her or be in contact with her. They don't know what to do with her, what to give her, how to react to someone lost. Like a ghost she tumbles around the inner workings of the fort. No one offers a hand, a shoulder, empathy. Letting her be. Their captured princess. Gown soaked in dirt, hair in ashes, just like their outcast in the beginning, she had taken the roll of the lost one. The crazy, out of her mind one. Unworthy. The cuts are faster at times, then slowing down a little, all giving impressions of her confused search for connection, for unity. She can't seem to find it in this dull, grey, natureless, lifeless fort of theirs, nor is it given or offered to her by her new community. Led astray. Now and again there are glimpses of sympathy rushing through some faces, but they are left just that, glimpses never acted on. Only growing colder. Her in the mud outside the settlement's walls. Pocahontas voice-over comes in from the off throughout the whole section of her searching, "Unwed. Where is your love now? Where is our child? You have gone away with my life. Killed the god in me."⁵⁴

Her hands running along a pile of rope that is lying on the dirt floor. Kneeling on it. Cut to her dipping her head in the river off the dock. Her hair long, soaked, building the connection between her and the flowing element. Pushing herself back up. Her image mirroring vaguely like a shadow on water's surface. Black screen.

⁵³ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 01:55:40min.

⁵⁴ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 01:56:34min.

This section once again underlines the innate difference between the Naturals and the settlers, but this time it does so on a very personal level, which translates to the bigger universal one. While there is not only a ritual element to loss, there is also a searching for community and connection within Pocahontas after receiving the bad news. Her hands constantly engaged and reaching into the sky or the earth, trying to grasp, to hold on to something, but the new community she finds herself in is not attuned to her behavior. She is unable to find connection, or more so, it is not offered to her. She is secluded - time seems to be standing still while she is trying so hard to escape it. Losing her connection to the mother, nature, to the eternal Thou. Losing her I-Thou relationship with everything around her that she is usually so engaged in. Dropping into an I-It, into the experience of loss and loneliness, of abandon. The colors and lighting support that idea. The greys on her and the bleakness surrounding her don't leave any space for growth or life. There is no nature, no sun, not even the sky or water are really blue, but seem to have adjusted to the hopeless greyish atmosphere. There is nothing outside of her that offers shelter from the isolation she is feeling. Pocahontas's inner monologue is blaming, even if it is not clear whom she is addressing, whom she's speaking to. In my mind it could be Smith or more likely the eternal Thou, the mother she so relied on and celebrated, who now seems to have left her. Frustration and the remains of defeated anger are ringing through as she says, "You have gone away with my life. Killed the god in me."⁵⁵ Through Buber's eyes, these words refer to her being unable to connect, to put herself in relation, to be in union again. Killed that spark that each and every one carries, which connects them to the eternal Thou within them. But as she is unable to connect, to step into an I-Thou, she is therefore unable to remember that spark within her. Hopeless, trying to center, to find her way back to herself, she is dipping her head in the water. This I would read as a sign, an attempt of reconnection, to regain herself, to follow nature, be aligned with the elements after having been cut out from them. Because without this quality, this ability to be in relation, to connect, to be herself it would not be life anymore, just like she says, "You have gone away with my life."⁵⁶ Gone away with that connection she had felt.

⁵⁵ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 01:56:58min.

⁵⁶ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 01:56:58min.



01:57:30min



01:58:03min



01:58:16min



01:59:14min

There is a hard cut and a change of scenery. The Natural's village is being burned by the settlers. Houses are caught on fire, devoured by flames, breaking to the ground, forcing the people to leave their homes. To stray. Saving what they can, wrapping mats, fur, baskets and their children around their bodies in search of a new life. A new foundation. The shots show them walking, running through the fields of crop, of burned tobacco leaves, through the village of huts caught on fire, falling to the ground. The king, Pocahontas's father, leaving his hut behind just like the rest of the Naturals. There are symbols and a ritual he engages in before leaving. Panic in the village. Baskets tied to every back, to save just a little of what has been taken from them. Chased from their own land, their world, for the idea of someone's new one. Sacrificed for the dream of a commonwealth. Where is it now?

"Their dogs come about us. Like wolves, they devour our soul. Does the sun see this? Save us. Despise us not. Man cannot spoil it. He vanishes like the dew. On the bed of fate, we lie. We can enter you. Question you. I mourn. I grieve. Take my hand, father."⁵⁷

As Pocahontas's voice guides the viewer through the scene, the camera moves through a burnt,

⁵⁷ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 01:57:52min.

dark, smoked out field of crop. The colorful landscape, the green and sun and sky have now turned almost into the same bleak colors as the fort has. Smoke washing away the life of the Naturals. Black screen.

This is a very short description of that scene which is intercut with Pocahontas's search for belonging and unity. I feel it visualizes her personal experience and puts it on a meta level. Showing that this loss that she experiences within herself is not restricted to her, or her belief in a deeper connection, but that this uprooting and the loss that comes with it is happening on a grander scale. On a generational scale. Of course this is not only the narrative of this story, but is speaking of the history of the land and the people who lived there, who got brutally robbed not only of their heritage and culture, but of themselves. While the tribe still has each other, still seems to be a union, still has its rites and rituals that can be shared, Pocahontas is personifying the core of that loss, that being robbed of one's own identity by finding herself totally estranged and alone in someone else's land. This scene is putting it into a broader perspective, mixing fiction with history. Her voice-over is targeting that line between the two. She speaks of a soul, which I think is important here, because in a way it could only apply to the Naturals, to that essence they are so aware of and are honoring within themselves and everything around them. Soul would be out of place to use for the settlers, they are the man who "vanishes like the dew"⁵⁸. Irrelevant and fleeting as this could suggest, out of place, not connected, not lasting. Not engaged in the I-Thou predicament of relation, as he himself is unable to enter into it. On a duality level it is told very clear which ones the good ones and which ones the bad ones are. "Does the sun see this?"⁵⁹, Pocahontas is reaching into that higher, that eternal connection to the Thou, by addressing the life giving planet.



01:59:36min



01:59:55min



02:00:10min

⁵⁸ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 01:57:52min.

⁵⁹ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 01:57:52min.



02:00:23min



02:00:30min



02:00:43min

Once again the scenery changes, takes the viewer out of the burning village, back to Pocahontas, who is lying in a ditch of dirt between two buildings of the Jamestown settlement. Cut to her shadow moving, to her worn out self, her heavy body slowly walking through the fort. Black screen. A title card states “A Proposal”.⁶⁰ The scenery has changed, dipped the settlement into warm sunlight, lets nature come back in, out of the grey fog, out of the bleakness. The camera follows Pocahontas, whose face is still covered in sadness, across the main square toward a man who is standing in the pillory. Birds and atmospheric sounds from the fort are building the soundscape. In her left hand she’s carrying a bowl of water, holding it close up to his for mouth for the guy to drink. Showing the viewer that her kind, loving nature is slowly seeping back into her bones. As she is helping the man in the pillory, she catches the attention of John Rolfe, to whom the film cuts to for a couple of seconds in a close shot. The camera now in front of the girl as she walks back across the square. A small group of Naturals can be seen in the immediate background behind her. There is a cut to the only woman out of that group. In a medium shot she looks straight into the camera, which in this case could be read as a look toward Pocahontas, as she is lifting up her right arm while holding on to her long dark hair. The Naturals behind her are seen trading with the settlers. The woman’s face is painted in a slightly darker brown and reddish color. A close shot to one of the men out of her group follows, that shows him looking straight into the lens, curious or astonished, that’s hard to tell. Community is being built or at least the feeling of it is being communicated. Pocahontas, who’s been ignored and not dared to be touched in her dirty dress and ash covered face, is now being seen, not only by Rolfe but by her roots, her former community. A cut to a very different angle shows her standing somehow elevated, her hair glowing in the sunlight, Rolfe in the

⁶⁰ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 01:59:50min.

center of the frame standing in the middle of the square, the settlement below and behind her as her voice-over comes in. “Scorned. Cast out. Cut off. A dog.”⁶¹



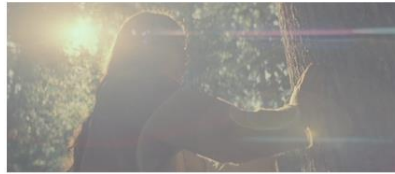
02:00:49min



02:01:23min



02:01:57min



02:02:00min



02:02:14min



02:02:24min

Another cut follows, framing her bare feet from behind, her long grey dress touching the earth. The forest under her feet, she is finally back in nature, walking toward a tree. Her body language lifeless, trotting slowly and heavily. She does not move the way she used to move earlier on in the film. There is no playfulness, no lightness, no quick steps or jumps and no joy in her. Head low, holes in her sleeves, her long black hair is tied loosely together as it is falling down her back. “Come, death. Take me. Set me free. Let me be what I was.”⁶² The camera ending its motion parallel to Pocahontas, who stops to stand in front of a tree. She bends down to pick a white mushroom that is growing close to the foot of the tree. Lifting it up, the sunlight hits her hand, her face seen in a close up shot, she hears a bird sing. The sounds grow bigger, more colorful as if through them she was reminded and slowly awakened. Someone whispers in Algonquin, a woman’s voice vaguely heard from the distance. Pocahontas looks up, around her. A tear sitting right underneath her eye. A single small braid is decorating her hair. Her eyes searching, her head lifting up. She puts the bright white mushroom back in its place, she rises. Touching the tree, aligning with the rays of sunlight shining through the forest behind her. Shining through the frame. Through her. Pocahontas takes a step back, lifts her head toward the treetops, a tear runs down her cheek, her eyes hushing from one thing to the next, scanning what she’s been missing for so long in a close up shot. In awe as if she was seeing the trees and

⁶¹ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 02:00:35min.

⁶² The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 02:00:48min.

hearing the sounds for the first time. The following wide shot shows her walking into the forest, her physique like a tree out of the many as she joins them not as a separate one, but as a part of them into unity. A bond - a reconnection - is made. She, not as a subject walking among her objects, but as an equal, an I-Thou, a relation. Present with them all, present with herself again.

“[...] und die Freundschaft der Elemente geleitet den Menschen in die Stille des Sterbens und Werdens.”⁶³



02:02:26min



02:02:33min



02:02:39min

Cut to her in the river next to the shore, washing herself, as if cleansing her spirits she pours water over her face. Ritual gestures, just like the ashes on her face that started her decay, the water washed it away. Reviving her. The emotions, which before have been doubtful, saddened and lifeless, have now turned into lightness, into a smile, her eyes clear and focused. She gestures up toward the sun and sky, repeating the motion she used to do. A quick opening of her hands and fingers toward her face, whilst her arm is stretched out wide, imitating the sun. Looking up at something, connecting. Aligning. Her being is present again, no longer in the past. A wide shot shows her from behind, standing in the water. Her silhouette a part of the scenery, she looks like a tree, like something that belonged right where she was. She melts into nature, becomes one with it again.

*“[...]]; kreaturhaft – und kreatorisches. Da hattest du nicht mehr das eine, vom andren eingeschränkt, sondern beides schrankenlos, und beides mitsammen.”*⁶⁴

These last scenes speak of an awakening, first within Pocahontas herself to then allow her in a next step to awaken to the connections around and through them to the connection that lives within her. Through the surrounding that has changed from hopeless greys and a disconnected

⁶³ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11. Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.65.

⁶⁴ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11. Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p. 78.

group of bystanders in which she had felt like an outcast, to a scene and feel that had turned into a new morning with Pocahontas literally waking up outside. The sun hopefully gracing the fort with it's light tones and long shadows. The first indication of change that arises within her occurs when the camera focuses in on her shadow and then moves to her as a separate being from it in one shot. Indicating the shedding of an old self, of a shadow, a burden. The next hint lies in her willingness and ability to relate to someone else, to connect to someone else's hardship, by giving the man in the pillory water to drink. Through that action she no longer seems to be invisible to her surroundings even if she still can't seem to see herself. John Rolfe and the Naturals start to notice as they are offered a glimpse into her self.

She walks into the forest, the place that once was her home, the place that nurtured her spirit and her being, as she arrives she seems blind at first. Pocahontas's voice-over suggests that she came here to die, came to find her last resting place, "Come, death. Take me. Set me free. Let me be what I was."⁶⁵ In opening up her life, she starts to see, starts to remember and reconnect. The I-It relation that she has been living in as a subject to her own experience now changes back into something more as she reaches into an I-Thou. Through touch, sound and smell she enters further into that connection until she seems to completely be merging with it by stepping into the river, by gesturing toward the sun, by smiling with her head held high. Reentering into and remembering of the eternal Thou that lives within her and within all that is around her. She steps into oneness.

Establishing Connection

This next sequence is a lot shorter and focuses on John Smith's introduction into the Naturals community. Compared to Pocahontas who is living and breathing the Thou connection, through her walk, smile, gesturing and communication, which are all very present, playful and free flowing, he comes very much from the separateness that is lived in his culture. His clothes shield him from his surroundings, prevent him from getting in touch, his language separating one thing from the other, by having learned to communicate through speech alone without connecting or feeling into what is expressed.

⁶⁵ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 02:00:48min.

The scene opens with a close shot of a crop of corn against the clear blue sky, glowing in front of the sun, after a title card that states “Pocahontas”.⁶⁶ It makes visual the fertility, the growth, the richness of the land besides being the trademark for America. Water can be heard in the background, cut to a field of high reaching crops of corn, which gets picked and collected by women of the tribe. With a big weaved basket under their arms, feathers in their hair and brown paint covering their faces they make their way through the field. The colors are of very lush greens. The next shot shows men of the tribe training in various ways, with bow and arrow in the front, shooting parallel to and out of the frame, and with their bodies and natural weapons in a circle closer to the back of the frame. They are surrounded by green, by the forest, which builds a contrast to the lighter green of the pasture they are standing on. A field of crop between the wood and them. The next shot frames Captain John Smith, shirtless with his dark hair down, walking through tobacco leaves, which have been arranged and hung up to dry. The camera follows him as he touches the plants left and right of him, until he comes out of the rows of leaves to stop and inspect them further. Compared to his earlier appearance he seems as though he is slowly aligning with the Naturals, just on a visual level. He still looks different from them, as his skin is not painted and he is still wearing regular western pants, but with him showing more skin and the way the camera only frames his upper body in this shot, it appears as though his layers of thingness are slowly coming off. There is a big and detailed tattoo decorating his right shoulder and upper arm, and a leather necklace falling on his chest.



00:33:39min



00:34:02min

Smith turns around as a woman of the tribe approaches him with a peeled corn cob, offering it to the newcomer, who is slowly integrating. He bows his head slightly in respect and gratitude. The medium shot gives an insight into the village, which is unfolding in the background. Various

⁶⁶ The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK:2005, 00:33:23min.

people following various tasks, a fire burning, a building in the making on the right edge, and a completed hut on the left edge of the frame. He is becoming a part of it all. A part of the village life, while the focus of the frame still lies on him. The following jump cut shows the same scenery, the same angle, but this time Raoul Trujillo's character Tomocomo comes up to Smith. His face painted in red, black and white. His hair shaved on the sides around a smaller patch in the center that goes down all the way to the back of his head, from which the remaining dark hair is sticking up in the middle. There are strands of braids coming off the back of his head and feathers and leather decorating them. A long necklace is falling down his chest, his neck painted with white more carelessly than his face, his arms and shoulders kept in a dark grey. The two colors collide on his chest, lighter on the top, darker on the bottom. He smiles, wrinkles around his eyes as he approaches Captain Smith with a short stick in his hand. At the end of it, a butterfly is sitting in its profile. Tomocomo hands it to his friend, who lifts it up and observes the insect even closer. Cut. The two are now shown from the back, as the Natural is lifting up a tobacco plant, untangling its leaves to show the newcomer the fine textures. A tattoo of spread out wings graces the man's back. Smith reaching up to touch the leaf, leaning in to smell it. Trees in the background. Cut. Tomocomo is now turned facing the camera as he is rubbing a tobacco leaf between his hands, emptying it into Smith's and animating him to follow his motion. They lift their hands up to their faces and inhale. A deep inhale. The Natural goes on to send his hand up in the air as he exhales. Looking at his mentee and repeating the motion. They communicate through looks and gestures mostly, no common language spoken between them. After Smith seems to have understood the hand motion and follows it, his mentor nods in agreement. He is using a feathers to fan himself as he turns and walks off. Cut to the next frame. The two walk around a fire pit and a wooden construction that is built over and around it for curing meats and vegetables. Smith takes a bite off the meat. Beside the meats there is a handful of corncobs and leaves lying on the construction as well. Birds chirping in the background and people chanting is all there is to hear. No music, no spoken word. Tomocomo changes his body language in this medium wide shot to imitate an animal, his hands pointing up over his head, fingers sprawled like antlers, communicating to Smith which animal he is eating. He gestures toward the fire. Cut.

A closer medium shot shows him, again facing the camera, framing the scene slightly over Smith's shoulder, as he wraps a leather band around a small rock. After he is done, he covers it with his hand and puts it in a fist up to his forehead. His third eye. Lifting his head up toward the sky, the stone planted in his hand on top of it. His other hand held around his solar plexus. The Natural's hand leaves its position on the forehead and shoots up further into the air until he brings it back, palm facing down, offering the wrapped up stone to Smith, who takes it, wrapping his own hand around it, and led by his mentor he as well puts it up against his forehead. Tomocomo nodding his head in approval, knowing what he communicated has been received and understood. Cut.



00:34:15min



00:34:37min

Now he is observing his mentee's tattoos, touching his upper arm, his eyebrows in a studying frown, his fingers running along the ink lines. Captain Smith is calm, looking at his mentor's face, while patiently letting him observe his body. The angle of the next shot shows his front body with the tooth that sits in the middle of his leather necklace and the tattoo decorating his left chest. Tomocomo now observes it up close. One hand on Smith's arm, one on his stomach. Physical touch, something that is not seen within the settlement, especially not skin to skin. It is opening up a very intimate and vulnerable as well as equal ground between the two opposed camps that the men come from. Meeting in the middle, in unity, present with one another and curious about the other. The following shot reverses the action with John now observing and touching his mentor's body. The village still creating the background. He moves his hands along his back and shoulders and then touches the feather ornaments that are tied to his braids. Tomocomo looking at Smith, his face in a smile.



00:34:52min



00:34:58min

„Der Mensch empfängt, und er empfängt nicht einen >>Inhalt<<, sondern eine Gegenwart, eine Gegenwart als Kraft. [...] die ganze Fülle der wirklichen Gegenseitigkeit, des Aufgenommenwerdens, des Verbundensein; ohne daß [sic!] man irgend anzugeben vermöchte, wie das beschaffen sei, womit man verbunden ist, und ohne daß [sic!] das Verbundensein einem das Leben irgend erleichterte – es macht das Leben schwerer, aber es macht es sinnschwerer.“⁶⁷

This I believe is what happens to John Smith in that scene, he gets introduced to a life that grows heavy in meaning as he is taught how to be present, how to engage, how to choose to connect with something and someone that is seemingly so different from the self. Different from his ways of communication. Tomocomo and Smith merge into an I-Thou relation as they are meeting as equals in a mutual you. No one the object of the other's subjectivity, but both present with each other.

“The world builds a fence around you. How do you get through?

Connect.

There is something else. Something that wants us to find it.”⁶⁸

– Faye

Song to Song

Song to Song was shot in 2012 and premiered as the opening film at the Austin SXSW (South by Southwest) film festival in 2017 before its initial US release on the 17 of March of the same

⁶⁷ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p. 105f.

⁶⁸ *Song to Song*, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:34:24min.

year. It loosely revolves around the Austin music scene, as that scene is creating the backdrop and emotional setting for the main characters Faye and BV. Both of them are singer/songwriters trying to make a name for themselves and fall into the hands of the producer Cook, portrayed by Michael Fassbinder. Beside these three characters who build the emotional pillars of the plot, a lot of music icons such as Patti Smith, Iggy Pop, Val Kilmer and Lykke Li make an appearance along the way, informing the Rock'n'Roll, adrift and intensely experimental feel of the movie. Anxiety about the quiet loneliness lurking on the opposite side of that lifestyle creates an ever present fear to shy away from. Within that realm and seemingly afraid of the other end of excitement, Faye finds herself exploring the boundaries of her physical and emotional body by giving herself over into various romantic relationships, in which BV and Cook also play a part in offering two very different ideas of love relationships and experience. The movie takes us through the inner monologue of the three of them, it jumps through time and space, through relationships that the characters are currently in and ones that they have been involved in in the past, remembering and dreaming a reality for each of them.

At this point Natalie Portman, Cate Blanchett and Bérénice Marlohe enter the narrative by portraying new relational dynamics for each of the three protagonists. A very youthful kind of hope can be felt within every exploration of the other and oneself in relationship, as there is romance and dancing and drifting until an inevitable awakening of the self awaits at the end of each encounter.

The narrative is loosely knit and even though it is structured and has clear sections, it does not provide a concrete linear storyline. It plays with fragmentation and time, which takes on different forms in every section so that sometimes a scene feels very scattered and fast, or almost stuttering as if happening repeatedly, while other times it demands a lot of presence and a waiting, to unfold slowly within its framework.⁶⁹ This feeling is supported by a very restless camera that always seems to be searching for something to be caught on the outside as well as on the inside of the character's world. On screen dialogue is very scarce, which leads the narrative to mainly unfold through voice-overs of the protagonists that guide us through their

⁶⁹ Dargis, Manohla, "Review: 'Song to Song,' Terrence Malick's Latest Beautiful Puzzle", in: The New York Times, 16.03.2017, online <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/16/movies/song-to-song-review-terrence-malick.html>, 20.03.2021.

inner landscapes, underlining the dismantled scenes and fast pace environment that they find themselves questioning, but simultaneously wanting to be a part of. Even though used slightly differently in this very experimental context, Malick's voice-over still holds a narrative quality that helps to guide the viewer through the unfolding story and therefor reminds of genre innate Film Noir like qualities.

The visuals are free flowing and don't find themselves standardized by conventional shot reverses-shot patterns, but rather embrace a moment to moment unfolding of life. From GoPro to Steadicam shots of butterflies, mosh pits and slammed bodies to an array of sensually framed female body parts, everything and everyone has a very tangible feel to it. At the same time this exact tangibility seems fleeting in the scattered, fragmented and ever changing attempt to capture life as it moves and unfolds. Therefor the film is not often able to reach beneath the visually perfectly aesthetically painted surface as it rarely allows the actors to display unfolding emotions on screen, even though it seems to be constantly reaching for it.⁷⁰

The picture seems to be exploring the balance between the fast pace, short lived experience of a moment and the ability to go deeper within its unfolding. While the images are taking on a more mystical quality and the montage creates the tempo and rhythm of the story, the film relies heavily on the voice-overs to bring depth to the characters and give form to the visually alluring ideals of life lived on the fly.

The astoundingly beautiful locations, whether it be a luxurious villa or an old Mexican monastery, add to the illusional, dream-like state that keeps the characters at distance and adrift. Music and soundtrack naturally also play an important role in creating the backdrop of the storyline and seem to be deeply rooted within the film. It is not merely put on top, but weaved through the diegetic and non-diegetic word by creating the footing of the narrative, which is grounded in musical expression and the lifestyle surrounding it. The whole setting and feel of the movie is very torn, restless and disrupted, and calls upon Malick's mosaic-like filmic style of his more recent work. Shot in wide angles and natural light by Emmanuel Lubetzki and Steadicam operator Jörg Widmer. The stunning production design of *Song to Song* is owed to

⁷⁰ Brody, Richard, " 'Song to Song': Terrence Malick's Romantic Idealism", in: The New Yorker, 16.03.2017, online <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/song-to-song-terrence-malicks-romantic-idealism>, 15.03.2021.

longtime collaborator Jack Fisk, while the movie was produced by Sarah Green and Nicolas Gonda, who had also already been involved in multiple previous Malick productions.

The analysis will focus on the characters of Faye, who builds the loose center of the film and is portrayed by the actress Rooney Mara, and her love interest BV, portrayed by Ryan Gosling. Throughout the analysis I will look for elements of Buber's idea of the I-Thou and I-It relationship and within that I will try to find out if those could potentially lead or transcend into a relational gaze.

Just like the I-Thou and I-It word pair, *Song to Song* offers a duality of inside and outside, a polarity between connection and experience. In my opinion it is not as easy to find here as it is in *The New World*. On the one hand we have the families of the characters and on the other we have them touring, performing, experiencing themselves in neon stroke lights. There is a duality between non-experience and very strongly heightened experience. Non-experience in this case is where connections occur, whether between BV and his mum in the beginning, or his father toward the end, or in Faye's case with her sisters' children and her father. All of them are bonds that gain more and more meaning throughout the film but seem like relationships the characters are trying to get away from in the beginning, to potentially find and feel themselves.

The movie starts out in a very strong subject object reality. A reality where something, anything has to be experienced, to be indulged in to be real.⁷¹ There is a clear sense of self and other, of distance and breaking through, which doesn't mean getting closer, but opening physical boundaries. Not just the characters themselves are introduced as separate beings who are very much standing alone, but the world they find themselves surrounded by doesn't seem to leave room for connection. Unlike *The New World*, where there are unknown endless terrains and wide open skies, the urban backdrop of *Song to Song* seems very explored and filled up, there is no room for an endeavor into the unknown, only room to explore the existing boundaries that are set in place. Those rooms tend to be extravagant mansions, festival and backstage areas, parking lots, modern lofts and the occasional suburb.

Every interaction that holds potential for soul and soulfulness is turned into an event, into an

⁷¹ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 00:04:40min.

experience, one to get high on, an opportunity to escape oneself and one's reality. Something happening in the outer physical world that seemingly leaves the inner world unchanged. When physical boundaries are opened and crossed, the inner emotional ones seem to be tightly held in their place. It seems as if especially Faye and Cook don't dare to enter into any form of relationship with anything or anyone but the experiencing self. The I-It is indulged in while the I-Thou isn't as much as occasionally flirted with. "Living just as fast as I can. Trying to understand", we can hear Cook's voice-over, then see him break into laughter.⁷² There are moments in which it feels like more is being accessed, but the characters paddle back into objectiveness, into untouchable tangible otherness and separation. Splitting the world into an object that has to be experienced by the subject of the character.

Multiple breaking points appear in this fragile outer world seemingly leading to partial knowingness, as if the characters are reminded that there is more to be found here. Opening up the realm of trust and comfort compared to distrust and discomfort, which introduce another duality that Faye finds herself caught between. There is BV, whom she can trust, but who doesn't offer a crazy exciting fragile lifestyle and then there is Cook, whom she can't trust, but who offers her that thrill that she thinks she is lusting for. Those dynamics cause a disrupting of identity and ideas, which at times lead to a momentary deeper understanding within her and toward her partner, but then after glimpsing into the I-Thou, she bursts back into a secure I-It. Within that physicality is used as a form to communicate an inner landscape, an emotional world that hardly finds itself expressed outside of the voice-overs. The two seemingly opposite concepts of body and soul are struggling to find common ground, while throughout the unfolding of the narrative it becomes clear something deeper, a reaching for connection, for unity expresses itself through the physical form. For each character their body creates an opening to the realm of feelings and struggle that lives inside, like symptoms that find expression on the outside, but tell a story about the inside.⁷³ "The life of our drives, it may be said, is what anchor us in the world. The drives establish a kind of pre-subjective or pre-

⁷² Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 00:27:00min.

⁷³ Eriksson, Johan, "The form of the soul — on the body in Freud's psychoanalysis", in: The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review, 37:2, 99-106, 2014, online <https://doi.org/10.1080/01062301.2014.978172>, p.104.

personal bodily 'pact' with the world [...]. The infantile desires [...], possibilities and limitations of the experienced and experiencing body offer a distinct kind of contact with the world, a contact that will establish the first 'categories' in accordance with which the world gets understood. Put briefly, the infantile, sexual body is not primarily an object in the world but rather is the opening of the world." ⁷⁴ This informs another aspect of duality, the physical and the non-physical that is portrayed very strongly in this picture. I believe that they are both used to connect to and to separate oneself from someone or something at different times during the plot and therefore hold both an I-Thou and I-It quality within their expression, as it is also an impression, an opening toward the world. An outer and an inner form of communicating oneself. Within this duality the mind-body problem is mirrored in the pictures in a way in which the material and immaterial parts can't be understood as separate entities, but one whole being that is in constant communication with itself and the outside world. Characters find themselves looking into the outer world for connection through the physical experience, by following their drives, their bodily passion. By following those they sometimes separate their mind and body, escaping themselves (the inner, the mind, thoughts and feelings) by engaging in physicality with someone else, as if mind and body together were proposing a problem that couldn't be solved. The mind is only visibly engaged in stillness, in thought and through voice-overs, while the body is able to be experiencing recklessly on the outside.

Grace and nature only literally appear in glimpses, in butterflies or insects and briefly in caged animals, just like in *The New World*. Again this specific concept of duality is harder to spot and translate over to this film than to the other one, but still nature could be the physical experiential part as it is described as the more selfish part in *The Tree of Life*, and grace could be stillness and connection as it is the part that sees the good and the unity within all things, which is framed as forgiveness in the end of this film. The wide angle lens opens horizons wide enough for these two ends to meet, with a free flowing edit that allows for unity and separation to change into one another in a matter of seconds. I believe that the inherent duality in this film lies much more in the physical individual than in the broader world that supports those feelings.

⁷⁴ Eriksson, Johan, "The form of the soul — on the body in Freud's psychoanalysis", in: The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review, 37:2, 99-106, 2014, online <https://doi.org/10.1080/01062301.2014.978172>, p.104.

Just like with Captain Smith it deals with a torn and disrupted self, but while Smith's realizations relied much more on the outside, on nature, the tribe, the river and Pocahontas, building on a broader sense and understanding of unity and connection between all things, Faye seems to be unsure of herself and her identity, leading her to chase after an exciting pipe dream, which bursts the closer she comes to reaching it (for example her relationship with Cook that doesn't provide what she had hoped for). Therefore unlike Smith (at first) she turns her back on unity and connection, closing herself off toward it as she is hoping to find connection in an experience, in excitement, in an I-It. BV seems to be her counterpart, not buying into the surface level impressions fame has to offer, but steering toward honesty and goodness. He seems to be true, while she is hiding the truth from herself and him.

So again the viewer is led by a young female protagonist, but this time unlike Pocahontas she is caught up in the external not the internal world, which is mirrored by the camera's gaze that finds itself focusing on communicating that I-It relation and just rarely hints at a unified I-Thou.

That said, I want to begin by looking at three reoccurring visuals that appear during different segments throughout the movie that capture the reaching of the physical into the non-physical. Visualizing the idea of an existing dance between the I-It and I-Thou relation when looking at the protagonists. Each of them expressing the reaching for unity very differently but all of them prioritizing it, as if pointing back towards the struggle of the character's understanding of the mind-body framework. The subject-object relational duality aspect between the characters gets visually interpreted. The first one of the set of reoccurring visuals that suggests this kind of interpretation can be found in the framing of the female stomach, which is repetitive in multiple scenes. The second one focuses around the visualization of hands, aligning or touching each other, offering a glimpse into the more connected spheres and layers of relationship. Lastly the almost static shots of Faye's face are repeatedly organizing the plot, as she finds herself in front of various backdrops caught in the stillness of non-experience.

These shots will be analyzed in their quantity to get a feeling for the visuals, therefore I will draw on screen grabs of the movie without interpreting the whole scene that accompanies every image. This should give a first glance into *Song to Song* and in how the physicality plays a major

part in understanding and dissecting the connections that are being formed and entered into throughout the narrative.

“Die Tatsache ist die Abgehobenheit des menschlichen Leibes, als des Trägers seiner Empfindungen, von seiner Umwelt. Der Leib lernt sich in dieser seiner Eigentümlichkeit kennen und unterscheiden, aber die Unterscheidung verbleibt im reinen Nebeneinander [...] das hervortretende Ich erklärt sich als den Träger der Empfindungen, die Umwelt als deren Gegenstand.”⁷⁵

Framing the Female Stomach

The image of the framed female stomach is one that is noticeably repetitive throughout the movie, *“Song to Song”* takes the idea of ‘navel-gazing’ quite literally, as characters and the camera all explore Rooney Mara’s belly button with fervent curiosity.⁷⁶ All of the shots above display Faye’s stomach, which is being touched by people she is romantically engaged with. Wide angle lens and explorative motion expose her in an intimate and yet distant way, which seems to alienate her body from the rest of her. Through fragmenting Faye by the camera (especially on the screen grabs, the film incorporates her whole body partially within those sequences, while still focusing on her stomach) she appears to be just another object decorating the room. Her face is not in the frame, therefore her emotions are only tangible through her hands and the way she leans into or away from an interaction or a person. Her belly builds the center of the interaction and is always on display. The shots show the existing power dynamics within her relationships as well as how she relates to the other person through and despite those dynamics.

The first two and the fifth picture show the woman with Cook, her producer. The third and the fourth picture show her with her Parisian lover Zoey, the last one with BV. Faye’s body seems to be the passive object to someone else’s experience that is simply going along with what is happening.

Building on Buber’s theory that the world appears twofold to us, I want to look for the visual

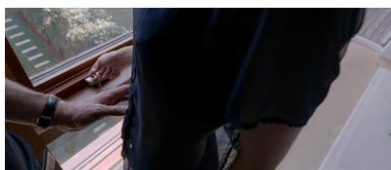
⁷⁵ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11. Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.23.

⁷⁶ Mayward, Joel, „Song to Song“, in: Cinemayward, 11.04.2017, online <https://cinemayward.com/review/song-to-song/>, 08.05.2021.

interpretation of that in these pictures. As they are still images I will focus on just them not the entire scene or montage that sets it up and follows it. So where do I see the representation of the I-It and the I-Thou in these specific shots? I see them both emphasized in the physical connectedness between the characters. That connection is what communicates their relational aspect to one another and as the images show that connection varies heavily in the shots. As these shots keep reoccurring in a very similar fashion, I take it that they are of importance in establishing and communicating the state of the different relationships. They, in my opinion, show a progression from the I-It, the drive toward a physical experience connected to ones bodily ego that is concerned with figuring out it's separate identity, to an I-Thou, a state of melting together as subjects without a desire to be fulfilled.

The stomach represents both those ideas, on the one hand the female on a surface level, an erotic, sexual image, while on the other hand it represents the deeper connection, the womb, the creation of life and home to life itself, which presents the ability to be one with another being before duality even exists. While it can be touched and experienced on the outside, within its gender-normative societal framework and expectation of femininity, it holds deeper wisdom and strength within it that doesn't only connect her to her body but to the past and future generation. In my opinion connection is what the image of the female stomach stands for. Within that the subject – object dynamic changes throughout the various shots but her belly is the focus point from where the connections are entered into and left from.

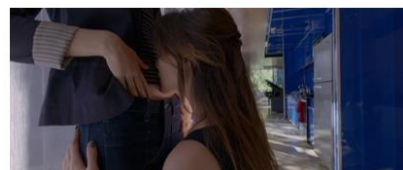
“[...] die Massierung beziehungsloser Mensch-Einheiten, die handgreiflich gewordene Beziehungslosigkeit des modernen Menschen.”⁷⁷



00:08:44min



00:19:09min



01:14:45min

⁷⁷ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p. 103.



01:21:58min



01:27:40min



02:02:26min

The first image introduces Faye and Cook's romantic relationship in the movie. It is a pan from her face down to her stomach, staying there in a slightly tilted down angle. Her shirt dark but translucent lets the gaze move toward the hint of bare skin underneath the light clothing. As her body takes up the majority of the frame it can be argued that she is the subject. Her experience is the one the camera focuses on as her body is the canvas that is offered up to be observed. Her mind visually not represented through her head as it is cut from the frame, maybe to show the disconnect that exists within her, between her emotional and physical body. Her arms, one lifelessly hanging down the side of her body, the other one fumbling with the window handle, not interacting with the other body present. Cook's hand resting gently on her stomach, engaging with her physically. "His hands were in everything. The money, the fame. I thought he could help me if I paid my dues."⁷⁸ Cook's hands touching, interacting, driving the unfolding physical interaction, which makes him the acting subject to her passive by-standing. He claims her physical form by touching it. Her body creating the beginning and the end of the frame, stuck in a closed environment. It seems a tight fit, stuck, not a lot of space for her to escape the situation if she wanted to. When looking at how the character is relating to her situation it clearly is within the realm of experience, of a subject – object reality. This is not just clear because of what she states in the voice-over, but is also communicated through the visual. The two bodies are in no way equals to one another. She is creating the center while he is just participating. The sense of an other is very obviously found within the boundaries of the bodies that aren't even close to one another, but merely each other's opposites. Her body never engaging in the interaction.

The dynamic is very different in the second screen grab. Faye and Cook take up about the same amount of space but in this one his active participation creates an even bigger contrast to her passive body. The backdrop is white and seems a little more spacious than in the first one. She

⁷⁸ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 00:07: 56min - 00:08:20min.

is wearing a crop top, which makes her petite figure appear even more vulnerable. Her skin blending in with the background. Cook is in a buttoned down maroon colored shirt and doesn't just have his hand on her belly and her hip, but also guides his head towards her stomach. His mind and intention therefore represented visually. Her hands seem to hold on to the back pockets of her black pants. His body feels like it leans into hers while hers seems to push away from his. She is not physically engaged in the experience, she just seems to be in the room for it. Her hands not on his body, not exploring his physical form, not even engaging with her own. His hands look big on her belly. Foreign. A big watch on his wrist that evokes the sense of time and space, of a measurable, describable experience. Her body seems very naked and open compared to him. Again her belly the center of the shot. An I-It relation as Faye is the subject experiencing herself as an object to his experience. Not merged in mutual subjectivity or an equal drive. The bodies relating by not relating to another.

The fifth frame shows another interaction between the two of them. Similar to the first one it is again mostly Cook's arm and hand that finds itself in the frame while Faye's body builds the center. Her head cut off just like in the other belly shots. She is not engaging actively with the other. Her body seems just like another piece of furniture in the room. This time her stomach is covered with a black shirt and a blazer. It is less exposed than it was before but her torso is visually stuck between her lover and the piano she is leaning against. Her hands resting on the keys while his are resting on her body. His arms the guideline pointing toward her stomach, underlining its given focus, building a kind of relation in tying the physical forms aesthetically together. His arm the connection between them. If she were holding on to his belly as well, I could see a kind of equality but that again is completely missing in this image. "I have fallen so low. I had to find my way out. Of you. To life."⁷⁹ Her body taking up more space seems to communicate that once again she is the subject, while her passive behavior suggests that she is simultaneously the object of the experience. The voice-over indicating her emotional state that only finds itself visualized by her passivity. None of these shots show the exact aggression that

⁷⁹ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:27:37min – 01:27:55min.

is innate in their relationship, but they show the lack of compassion and engagement that exists within it. Cook is merely exploring her and that exploration leads to both of their experiences.

Zoey, Faye's Parisian lover, seems to also be caught in the magic of the protagonist's stomach. The third screen grab shows her, the camera now parallel, pressing her face lightly into Faye's belly, kissing it while her hands are holding on to the sides of her hips. Her eyes are hidden behind her hair while Faye's face is cut off completely. Her skin shows as her shirt seems a little too short and her hand, this time engaged, is captured sliding under her pants. Both parties are actively creating the unfolding experience. Both people are actively engaged in it, even though they are both engaged in Faye's body it seems a shared experience. Both are relating to her physique physically. When it comes to common ground only their hands seem to be touching each other in resting on Faye's hip, which could be seen as a beginning current of relating to each other within and through the experience. This time Faye's counterpart looks visually more vulnerable by showing more skin than she does. Even though the two women are framed in between two walls, the background still allows for an escape into nature by offering a glimpse through the house into the garden. It seems more spacious, open and inviting even though Faye's outfit still suggests a sense of formality and distance. Zoey's touch seems gentle and not as possessive as Cook's because her hands barely take up any space and because the focus of the frame lies on her face touching Faye's stomach. The framing in this image suggests that the belly isn't just perceived as a sexualized body part but as center of connection. A relational dynamic is established, even though it does not seem quite equal, it seems as if the experience engages both women and is offering to turn into something more profound. While her lover is driving the experience, Faye is not merely the object of Zoey's desire but a participating subject. Zoey opens up the realm of an I looking for her Thou, for an equal, for a shared experience, while Faye seems to still be mostly focused on the physical, judging from this screenshot in which she mostly engages with herself and visually is still shielded from the other person. The fourth picture is set outside completely. Parking lots and skyscrapers are building the backdrop while the protagonist is leaning against a small white concrete wall, offering up her exposed stomach to Zoey. Her resting arm creating a guiding line toward the center of her body. Her lover's hand creasing her blouse into a fist and resting just above Faye's bellybutton.

The shot is very dynamic and shows the two bodies leaning into one another, without them actually touching. Zoey is pushing against the fence with one arm, while her center is leaning forward. The clenched fist and the convolution of arms give the shot an aggressive feel in which both seem to be an active part in. Zoey's hand on the naked stomach has a very possessive energy to it, while Faye seems to be giving herself over into that passionate experience. This frame takes a turn and steers towards something that feels very equal and mutual as both bodies are so heavily charged but as Faye takes up the center and more space than her lover, it is she who seems to be the experiencing subject. Even though in this case her body again takes on a more passive and therefore objective role, the power of the dynamic between them seems to be finding itself on both ends. Following that scene the Parisian can be heard sharing her thoughts with her lover, "I feel like we are so connected".⁸⁰ Which would suggest that there is a certain level of relation and equality between them, while it could also be argued that if a connection has to be talked about then it doesn't seem to be truly communicated physically. So even though the frame still speaks of a very physical and very passionate relationship, it also communicates two equal sides, even if the viewer is visually not let into the deeper workings of the mind when it comes to the intensions of the two.

The sixth and last belly shot is captured between Faye and BV. She is positioned on the left, he on the right side of the frame. Her cropped shirt has a light color this time, which exposes her belly while the camera is parallel to her body. Not just her but also his face is cut off in this frame, which shows his upper body wrapped in a blue buttoned up shirt. His neck and chin visible. The center of the frame is captured between their hands. His hand appears very big as it is washing the side of her torso. Droplets of water on his thumb. Her hand is resting on his arm a little further away from the lens but still in the middle of the frame. Their bodies are actively connected, both sides are engaging with another. Two subjects. This interaction is happening outside not in an urban environment but in nature. Stone building the floor below, sky, clouds and the setting sun behind and above them. The image seems to breathe all by itself, it has space in which both of them can choose to connect and be in literal touch with the other but

⁸⁰ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:22:07.

they aren't forced to by their environment. They are in union. Equally participating. This to me is the most equal of the shots so far when it comes to participating and physical presence as well as shared space and interaction. With Buber in mind one can see them reaching for a mutual subjectivity, a mutual presence to allow for them to meet in oneness, in a mutual you. Faye's voice-over suggesting the same with a mere but defined "This. Only this."⁸¹ In this last frame her stomach does not feel as physically charged as it did in the other shots, here it seems to be perceived as something more. Her whole body does. Maybe that is due to the religious connotation of washing, cleansing and baptizing the other with water, which also seems to be a part of this shot in one way or another. But then again that would just underline the fact that this interaction between Faye and BV lies outside of a pure physical exchange.

Hands in Relation

What do hands symbolize? Well, they can reach and hold and touch and let go, they interact with the outside world on a direct physical level, while still being part of the self. Hands are the connection between the self and the other. They can show physical engagement and through that express emotion and convey feelings without needing to show the face of the person feeling them. They express connection and relation to the other, while at the same time show their physical boundaries between self and other very clearly. The beauty in these images is that while they tell you how a character might feel it is still very much about how the viewer interprets the pictures and about what kinds of imagery they might provoke in the minds of the ones ingesting the movie. So in my mind they show the possibility for connection and interaction, which in turn shows how someone relates to the other.

It is what I believe a relational gaze to be, a camera that focuses on conveying a relationality between and within the visual framework instead of creating a subject-object dynamic. Everything is subject, everything is finding each other. Capturing how the world can be perceived in its web of interconnectedness and within that hands as a symbol for reaching into that web. Easy to see and read as they have their physical boundaries and cues, marking where one being gets in touch with the other and showing where one might not be ready to get in

⁸¹ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 02:02:27 - 02:02:39min.

touch. If physicality is the I-It, the drive the lusting for another as we called it nature before, then the thing that happens in the in-between, the thing that is trying to be communicated through the physical could be understood as grace, if we want to go back to Mrs. O'Brien's proposal from *The Tree of Life*. Grace shows the reaching for and into the I-Thou. A space that speaks of mutual subjectivity, a space that is trying to be entered into through and by the physical.



Above are a couple of still images from *Song to Song*, which show that exact play of reaching for connection. One hand is usually active while the other one stays passive. Only rarely can a unity be felt but the center of the frame is always created by that physical connection that happens between two people.

This first image shows BV and Faye, both her hands wrapped around his right one. While her hands are actively exploring his and holding on to him, his hand is open, going along with being explored. Active and passive are again only another duality that can help understand or define something that is happening, so in this case one could say that he is the passive part but at the same time it could be argued that opening up to something or someone is active as well. At least from Faye's point of view, she as an active subject is exploring his hands like objects. There wouldn't really be a need for exploration if they were meeting in the I-Thou, would there? So I would read that scene, that image, as a subject exploring an object, exploring an other that lies outside of the self.

The second still shows BV and his mum. BV's hand on top of his mother's, which is resting on his arm. Both actively engaged with the other. As his hand is visually more present, meaning he

is taking up more space in the frame, we as viewers know to empathize with his feelings over the ones of his mother. His body even shielding hers from the camera's gaze. The relationship does not seem equal on a visual level as he is clearly soothing her, protecting her physically. Therefore I would read it as him, the subject, having to protect her, an object, a somebody, therefore they are not meeting in unity, but are building separation through the physically established power dynamic.

Faye's fingers touching BV's in the next screen grab. She, the active subject, again taking up more physical space than he does, acting out her idea of disconnection by closing his hand. Not putting her hand in his but outside of it, folding it in. Shutting the connection off. Reaching back into an I-It, an experience that is describable. It is hard when laying Buber's ideas and structures on top of scenes as there seems to be a wide scale of grey area if one wants to see and describe in words what something indescribable is supposed to be or look like. Sticking to the essential understanding that everything that is experienced is describable and therefore happening in space-time always lies in the realm of I-It. Meaning that through writing about it, trying to describe it all in this paper, it isn't even really possible to write about anything but the I-It relation. As everything written is describing something and the I-Thou lies outside of any tangible form, wanting to point out an I-Thou is really a delusional attempt. I'll stick with it though by writing about it.

The forth still is very similar to the one before. This time though Faye is reaching for connection, but finds herself denied as BV now closes his hand himself. Away from her, their bodies as foreign to each other as the baroque furniture to the modern window frames. Her hand seems almost like a separate part of her body, so loose in the air, not belonging to BV on the left nor really to her on the right side of the frame. Being held in an in-between. This frame is visualizing her torn nature. There is a visual distance between them, their hands barely engaged. She the subject, as she is guiding the viewer through the experience and taking up space in the frame. She is building the center and actively reaching out for his hand.

Zoey's and Faye's bodies are similarly framed as they are taking in about the same amount of space in the next shot. The background is open, the apartment is pretty visible and the garden outside seems within reach, doors open, walls only exist in curtains and glass fronts. There is

openness and possibility suggested in that screen grab. Translucent, see through, tangible. Their hands are aligned, the boundaries of their physical forms are in contact. Faye's hands holding a mug, occupied with another object while being touched by her lover's hand. It is not as much of a touch as a try, an alignment, a reaching. The backs of their hands are touching in union, their physical boundaries blurred. The whole image suggests a kind of fusion, an openness, a lightness that goes beyond the limits, which is not as clear in defining where the lines are. And still Faye is in the center, her experience is in the center, the focal point, the experiencing one, the describing one. There is still a subject-object relationship there that can be observed.

The next still of the two woman reverses their placement in the frame. Curtains, light, the piano and the garden are all still there but Zoey is now the one in the center of the frame. "I feel like we are so. Connected."⁸², is what she says to her lover. The sunlight highlighting the touch of their hands. Faye barely building the edge of the frame, her fingers gently held by Zoey, who is about to embrace them with hers. This still puts the Parisian in the subject position and Faye as the object that she wants to experience. Their bodies connected, building a through line from one physical form to the other. Even though a connection is suggested visually by the open space and them touching, as well as through Zoey's voice-over, true connection, union nor equality are communicated in my opinion. It is one side experiencing the other, as one is taking up much more space than the other, therefore clearly communicating a dynamic that is not an equal one.



01:45:39min



01:54:33min



02:02:26min

BV and his father's hands are the subjects of the seventh still. This shot is different from all the previous ones as it closes in and focuses on the interaction of the hands only, making them the only things visible beside the blanket underneath and the handle of the hospital bed in the

⁸² Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:22:07 - 01:22:13min.

background. BV's hand is building the center of the frame, the camera parallel to it showing his fingers wrapped around and holding onto his father's arm. He is the active subject, holding on to his object of desire that within the context of the film has almost entirely lost its sense of subjectivity. Visually the father takes up more space than BV does. The focus lies on his lifeless arm, his inability to connect physically and engage actively with his son in the present moment. His being defines and describes BV's experience. The connection is not mutual, not possible, even if the picture would suggest that there is not much left for them to be equals when looking at the spacing and the nonexistent distance unifying their bodies. Grace and nature both within one frame. The physical reality of impermanence in the form of death and the reaching for connection in an attempt for union, for a shared interconnectedness. Therefore even though there is so much equality suggesting that the two are almost one, the father's passive hand stays bound to the bed, unable to connect, and with that has no choice but to stay outside as an experienced object, a being as describable experience that has lost its subjectivity in space-time.

This next image shows Faye and Pattie Smith, who is taking on somewhat of a mentor role for the young musician in questions of the heart. Profound deep wisdom is shared, perspectives are offered. Faye's hands in hers, on top, sheltered, held. Paddie's hands around Faye's, embracing, supporting, reassuring on the bottom, building the foundation. They are holding each other. Not quite with the same effort and tightness but almost reaching into unity, a melting into one form. Mara's character still in the center, taking in more space than her friend. It's not quite a merging, an equal union, even though it seems like it is offered to her but she can't seem to be able to embrace it just yet. To let herself fall into an I-Thou. Still controlling her physicality in her subjectivity, still experiencing. The hands of both women in embrace are reaching for a deeper not just physical connection. They are outside in an open space and very close to an I-Thou in my opinion, they are both reaching into it, even if they aren't quite equal in the visual framing this is one of the stills and one of the interactions that seems to be very close to a shared you.

BV and Faye are the subjects of the last still. Their separate forms are tangled into one connected one. Their arms and hands are engaging with one another and that connection is

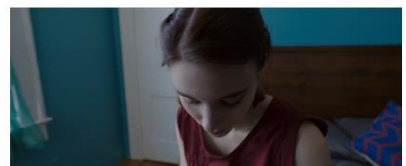
creating the center of this shot. The sun and sky are in the background, the horizon, nature and a stone surface. Openness. The sun hiding behind Faye's stomach, letting the light in around her, illuminating her form. One cloud in the blue wide open sky. Her skin touched, washed, cleansed by his hand. It looks proportionally big compared to her body so close to the wide angle lens. She on the left and BV on the right side are taking up about the same amount of space and framing of the picture. Faye's left hand on his arm, on his shoulder. Both touching each other with the same motion, one hand only. Both active, both engaged. Involved with the other being. Emerged in it, while still keeping each other at a distance. Both of them seemingly in the moment, just occupied with exploring and feeling the other. Their motions aligning. Reaching into the I-Thou. Togetherness, presence. This in my opinion is the end to a buildup suggested through touch and physical interaction which is now finally falling into union, letting the guard of subject-object relation down, opening up into a space that lies in mutual subjectivity. This is not only suggested by their bodies and their unified forms, but also by the surroundings, the light and alignment of them and nature. As if both were opening up to it, embracing it in the now, caught up in the other and the self at the same time. Both actively engaged and aligned. Both heads cut out of the frame, building the focus around their physical bodies that are enough to communicate their connection and union.



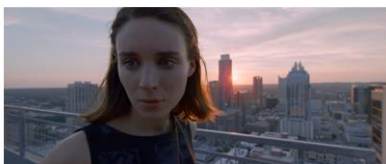
00:28:27min



00:49:51min



00:58:02min



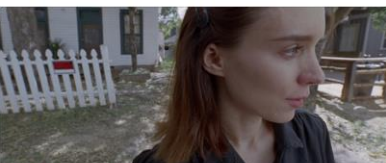
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01:04:30min



01:24:29min



01:28:27min



01:53:33min



01:58:11min

Faye's Non-Experience

These images of the main character feel like breaks in the plot, an interruption occurring in the ever chasing world of experience. The sequences just are, they stay for a while too, without quick edits or jumps to other lives, thoughts or emotions. They force us to be with Faye and force her to be with herself too, in moments that seem packed with realization, doubt and introspection. She is the subject in all of these shots, the only human at least, but I feel like everything around her builds onto her subjectivity. Everything captured in the shot, in the background, in colors and forms, in houses, streets and nature are part of her becoming aware of her subjectivity. "But Malick's camera [...] isn't trying to artfully or moodily frame a subject, not even one as strikingly beautiful as Rooney Mara; it's rather asserting that everything visible is the subject. Her face. The window. The trees. Everything the camera corrals is equally subject to its, and our, attention."⁸³ Faye falls into unity with her surrounding, is caught by it, is steadied through it, enabled to be just as she is. In mutual presence with everything around her. Equal subjects are finding each other as one in the I-Thou. The camera supports that idea by observing her face, by being present with her and her surrounding wherein the unity is felt. No cuts, no quick movement and the minimal use of music enable the viewer to observe without clear direction. In this case, her body is not the focus point contrary to the other two reoccurring visuals, which played on the physicality and the bodily form, desires and the ego drive. This defined physical form becomes blurred in its meaning, while Faye of course still has her body, the framing of her head and face suggest an internal process. The mind is at play here. These shots are balancing the excessive bodily, ego driven realm of experience that she had trapped herself in throughout the movie. The images just focus on her, not needing to engage in a physical experience or with another body. Catching a breath without fame, music, partners or enhanced excitements. All of these frames seem as if she is not part of an experience, because she really is becoming the experience. Experiencing herself. For what seems like the only times, as in every other moment that ties her to another being, she only experiences the other, failing to experience herself. These parts interrupt and in that, guide the

⁸³ Hynes, Eric, „Run Away: The Radical Movements of Song to Song“, in: Film Comment, published by Film at Lincoln Center, 22.03.2017, online <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/run-away-radical-movements-song-song/>, 7.04.2021.

narrative, forcing her to just be and suggest a becoming one, an actuality, a connection to something through finding a connection to the self.

“Der Mensch wird am Du zum Ich. Gegenüber kommt und entschwindet, Beziehungsereignisse verdichten sich und zerstieben, und im Wechsel klärt sich, von Mal zu Mal wachsend, das Bewußtsein des gleichbleibenden Partners, das Ichbewußtsein. Zwar immer noch erscheint es nur im Gewebe der Beziehung, in der Relation zum Du, als Erkennbarwerden dessen, das nach dem Du langt und es nicht ist, aber immer kräftiger hervorbrechend, bis einmal die Bindung gesprengt ist und das Ich sich selbst, dem abgelösten, einen Augenblick lang wie einem Du gegenübersteht, um alsbald von sich Besitz zu ergreifen und fortan in seiner Bewußtheit in die Beziehungen zu treten.”⁸⁴

Dissolving the Subject-Object Construct

This movie offers so much when it comes to any of the dualities that have already been discussed. Whether it would be physicality and non-physicality or experience and non-experience, which both are tied to ego drive and non-ego, every scene opens up so many doors to walk through, so it is very hard to narrow it down and decide which one to engage in further along the lines of the I-Thou and I-It predicament. As I have decided to tighten the grip around Faye, as she is the leading and driving force of the movie, I wanted to take a closer look at little moments that in my mind show a greater impact and evolution of the way she is able to relate, not only to the other, but also to herself and how it changes the way she relates to the other. Illuminating the difference between an I-It and I-Thou relation.

There are two scenes in *Song to Song* that in my head are complimenting and completing one another and within that show the evolution of exactly that ability of relating and opening up to a form of relationship. They both involve BV, Faye and an insect.

⁸⁴ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p. 28f.



01:03:05min



01:03:18min



01:03:36min



01:03:41min

The first scene occurs shortly after Faye reveals that she had been cheating on BV with their producer. The arising tension between the two finds itself visualizes in these scenes. It is a tension within her, an inner turmoil that is felt and shows her inability to reach into union, into a shared connection, an equal subjectivity. At the same time it shows that she is trying but still unable to connect. It starts at 01:03:05min taking the very heavy classical music from before with it to paint a picture of the established mood and emotions carried by the characters. Framed in a wide shot the scene is opening in a large enclosed space that is fusing two separate rooms together into one. BV and Faye are starting out in different places. Faye on the one end of one room, the furthest away from the camera, loosely building the center of the frame, and BV just entering the frame on the cut, therefore he is in the other room and closer to the camera. Light is coming in through the large windows to the right and front end of the setting. The room they are in seems to be a bar or café type of place, a social location that is empty beside them being in it. There are small, squared, wooden tables and rounded chairs arranged all over the room. A bar framing the left side of the picture. There is a coffee machine on the counter and stacked red and translucent plastic cups alongside a filled water dispenser. The place has a very uncertain feel to it as it is not alive, not used, not filled up, but seems closed and estranged, mirroring the protagonist's relationship. The window frames are white and the walls are painted in a sage green color. A few natural illustrations like grass and trees form a

second layer of paint in a darker green along the connecting wall that acts like an archway between the two combined rooms. Faye is drinking out of a mug looking down and out the windows as the camera follows BV into the room. He looks at her but she looks away until he turns the corner, disappearing into the room to his left. The sign on the window to the right says "OPEN". Faye's gaze following BV after he had passed her, waiting in front of a baroque style sofa and two chairs that are snug into the oriel-like space under three long windows. We can hear spoons clanking against mugs. She is dressed in black, black low cut boots with heels, a black dress that reaches above her knees, a black long sleeved but short and tight cut jacket and a black hat. Her hair worn down, sticking out under the hat. "I'm a beast",⁸⁵ she states in the voice-over as she starts slowly and unsurely walking toward the room BV disappeared into. A cut. Now the camera shows us the both of them again, BV sitting in the center of the baroque sofa and Faye on the chair to the right of it. One half a window behind him and one in the space between the two. Looking into another world, a street, a tree, a car are visible through the glass. The wide angle lens makes the edges of the room seem softer and the spaces and bodies a little unnatural, unreal in a way where boundaries become less visible and things start bleeding into one another. Fluidity. "Still not unhappy about it"⁸⁶, Faye's voice-over continues from the off. The couple doesn't look at each other, each one just fumbles with their mugs, her looking down while he is looking away from her and the camera. As he is taking a sip, the camera moves in closer toward Faye, almost as if moving into or through her and then the next cut. We are further away again, the setting and scene and angles are all still the same, the two sitting but now we can see the table between them. Giving the couple space to breathe, loosen up from the tight grip, the tight framing. "I don't seem to bring people happiness anymore",⁸⁷ her voice hisses from the off into the frame, as she is blowing and swatting away a fly with her right hand. The camera moves closer toward her and adjusts to her motion. Cut. The camera is now focused on BV's arm as the fly had landed on his hand. We move with him as he leans forward to reach toward Faye, as if to show her the insect. His gaze tied to his hand. The motion lands and stops between the two. Both faces are cut out of the frame while their hands

⁸⁵ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:03:16min.

⁸⁶ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:03:23min.

⁸⁷ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:03:33min.

create the center of the shot. As Faye leans forward to touch his, the fly flies away. And just as she reaches for his fingers, wanting to hold on to him, his hand moves out and away from her. Her hand quickly shooting back into her lap, the camera moving with her, showing us her face again, as she looks at BV. "I wasted your love."⁸⁸ The fly swarming around and away, out of the frame.

The level of relation in that scene is held in an I-It realm for most of the time, especially between the lovers. The two rooms separating them physically, the looks that pass each other and never meet, the avoiding of the other, the lack of communication and connection.

*"Das Ich des Grundwortes Ich-Es, das Ich also, dem nicht ein Du gegenüber leibt, sondern das von einer Vielheit von >>Inhalten<< umstanden ist, hat nur Vergangenheit, keine Gegenwart. [...] Gegenstand ist nicht die Dauer, sondern der Stillstand, das Innehalten, das Abbrechen, das Sichversteifen, die Abgehobenheit, die Beziehungslosigkeit, die Präsenzlosigkeit."*⁸⁹

This paragraph is fitting for that scene as it is so pregnant with the past. We see two people trying to hold on to something that is gone, but have nothing to offer one another in the present. Nothing to engage with except for the fly. While Faye is busy seeing it as an obstacle to her being, an annoyance, an object to be experienced in her subjectivity, BV chooses to engage. Seen through Buber's word pairs I think it does make a lot of sense and shows us that everything in the frame, even in little scenes like this one, is either relating or not relating. BV engages, connects, and relates by sharing space and attention with this other being, contrary to Faye who is just distracted and annoyed by it. The moment she reaches for it, the moment she tries to connect to the two of them, the fly leaves his hand. Again, *"[...] das Abbrechen, das Sichversteifen, die Abgehobenheit, die Beziehungslosigkeit, die Präsenzlosigkeit."*⁹⁰ BV unable to hold that space, that openness, that connection for her, therefore doesn't engage in her attempt to reach out. Stillness and past between two people, the fly was the only one offering lightness and presence, as the two have moved out of a former I-Thou into an I-It. Merely experiencing the other, not connecting, not stepping into a shared presence.

⁸⁸ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:03:44min.

⁸⁹ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.13.

⁹⁰ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.13.



01:56:07min



01:56:14min



01:56:24min

The complimenting scene occurs toward the end of the movie after the two had met again and sets off at 01:56:07min. The two are framed standing in a medium shot in a field of crops. A sort of warehouse in white in the distance behind them. Blue sky, clouds and a line of trees reaching from the left toward the center of the frame and an array of electric posts and wires overhead are reaching from the right toward the middle of the image in the background. The crops are high and brownish yellow and green. Ryan Gosling on the left side, in a light grey sweater that is pulled up at the sleeves and lets a bright white shirt shine through around the neck. His head slightly cut off on the top of the frame. Rooney Mara stands on the right side with a little more headroom, in a black top and a cyan colored open blouse. Her hair is down but pinned back out of her face with a cyan clip. While they were distant and trapped in a room in the scene before they are now very close in an open space that lets them choose to be close. “Want him on your shoulder?” – “Mhmm”⁹¹, BV asks her in the diegetic world of the movie as he is moving closer, a stick between his hands that holds a caterpillar. He lowers it onto her right shoulder as she agrees. The camera following the action, moving in closer, framing their bodies, framing the motion of the insect as it is moving from the stick onto her shoulder. Crawling in its distinct up and down caterpillar motion. “It was like a new paradise”⁹², states Faye’s voice-over as she is

⁹¹ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:56:07min.

⁹² Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:56:13min.

insecurely smiling at the insect, squeaking as it comes closer to her hair and face. She looks up toward BV grinning. "Forgiveness"⁹³, her voice continues. The camera moves out a little as the caterpillar falls off her shoulder, catching itself on her blouse. Faye's body and face are facing the camera as she looks up toward BV with a big smile, as he steps away and is being captured in his profile. Cut to a higher shot in which the camera looks down on Faye's head, watching the caterpillar make its way from one side to the other. BV observing carefully from behind her, moving around her as the camera is moving too. Letting it happen, letting it unfold. The next cut. The camera shows BV playing with the insect again, putting it from one hand into the other while telling Faye that he needs to go back to be with his family.

The I-It relation that existed between the couple before has moved back into an I-Thou. There is a presence, a togetherness between them. An opening toward a connection. They are physically in touch for a little while, engaging, while the caterpillar is always in touch with either one, it could almost be read as extension between the two and their relationship. There is a curiosity and freedom that guides this relating to the other, a presence. As if this time Faye was willing enough to engage and trusting enough to let it happen, stable enough within herself to open up and step into a relational I-Thou. Compared to the earlier scene where the two were sharing a space, but not their space with one another, here they are constantly engaging with the other and opening up that personal space. If through touch or word or looks, they are always connected in some way. The subjects and objects are interchangeable, as everyone is participating while at the same time all everyone is experiencing is in relation to the other. Therefore I guess there are no objects in that way, only subjects. BV could be our subject, as he is initiating the interaction with the caterpillar and is also the one who speaks and observes. But Faye could be the subject too, as she is also engaging with BV and the insect and contextualizes the scene through her voice-over. But quite frankly, the caterpillar could be seen as a subject too, couldn't it? As without it, the scene as such wouldn't exist. It engages with the two protagonists and is the thing their actions revolve around. So I feel like through scenes like this one, the relational gaze, the relational way of interacting, observing and looking at the world

⁹³ Song to Song, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017, 01:56:18min.

becomes very noticeable and through that underlines Buber's I-Thou. The relationality between all things that impacts the self as much as the other, "Beziehung ist Gegenseitigkeit. Mein Du wirkt an mir, wie ich an ihm wirke."⁹⁴

Of course there are more obvious and literal visual translations to that Thou connection, but I feel that those aren't as interesting to interpret in a Buber fashion because they already communicate exactly that without having to further engage with them. Without having to be present with them.

Concluding

Looking at the two movies through Buber's lens it becomes quite clear that even though they are both playing with and exploring each of the three kinds of relationship, there is a different focus within the two of them. *The New World* is dealing with the bigger whole, the question of origin, interconnectedness and unity between all things. This I feel is heavily guided by the historic influence and depiction that in essence is wondering about that said unity that is being lost among the people. The film, especially through the character of Pocahontas, very much shows that each I-Thou relationship is connected to and reminds of the eternal-Thou, the bigger source, nature, the mother as Pocahontas calls it. Every scene speaks of either unity or separation and is building on that relational understanding. *Song to Song* scales those big questions down to a personal, to an identity level. Within that framework I feel that the subject-object relation is much more present and with that the ego and physicality aspects are taking up more space. The I-It and I-Thou, as well as their transitioning from one to the other, are more clearly communicated and focused on. There is talk of the soul and of finding it, but it is more about finding one's truth, about finding and connecting to it to create stability in oneself, than it is about how to connect with the world on that macro level, which I feel is very much what *The New World* is about. It is asking to find the I-Thou connection within everyone

⁹⁴ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.16.

and everything to remember the eternal Thou within oneself, whereas in *Song to Song* Faye is asked to find that within herself and toward BV not so much on a grander scale. Both pictures in essence are communicating that relationship and awareness are decisions one makes, either toward relation and connection or away from it. When looking at the relational gaze that the films evoke, I came to realize that it really is not just about how the camera captures, frames and seems to think in relational terms, not focusing on building an object to a subject, having a breathing present subjectivity within every second of the shots, but that it is also about how that relational aspect is translated to the viewer. By stating that, I mean that the fractures, the mosaic-like edit of the movies and voice-overs are creating openings, and through these openings they are constantly provoking and supporting the viewer to engage, to be present and to relate to the pieces that are being given to them. There is a constant interaction, a searching for meaning and understanding, which creates a unique kind of relationship between each viewer and the film. Offering a different impression to every single person who is willing to step into it. Willing to reach beyond a set linear narrative that is easily comprehensible. Through that the film is inviting an I-Thou relationship not just within its world, but also outside of it.

Gegenüber, a Film

Inspired by Malick's approach and by the poetic ways Buber is able to frame the human experience in connection, I created an audiovisual piece to accompany this paper. As I feel like it would take away from its purpose and message if every detail were to be explained and dissected, I will just leave it here with a few essential guideposts. While I am sure that the thesis offers the essential information needed to "understand" or at least experience the film in one way or another, I just want to reiterate that the movie is in its core asking the question of relation. Not always or necessarily within the frames, but maybe between or beyond them.

The short is roughly focusing around four main visual themes, which are all embodying the present moment through observation.

The first reoccurring sequence is tied to a female performer who is driving the provoking and questioning of the inherent visual offer and meaning of the film. Asking to call on the viewer's interpretation and confusion, while escaping a clear definition of a subject-object based reality. Through the white backdrop and the use of a wide angle lens the sense of space-time finds

itself warped, adjusted and taken out of a reality-bound structure. It interrupts the loose rhythm of the narrative whenever it starts leaning too heavily into a clearly suggested statement or interpretation.

The seagulls as well as the ants are taking on a more personified and obvious roll of freedom and presence. They build the backbone of the movie. As they move in and out of being the subject, which depends on if they are observed by someone without being in the frame or if they are actually shown on screen, they guide the viewer through the transitioning from being an object to becoming a subject and asking the question of what that might mean. Again, the lines here are very blurred. What I know is that they personally bring me back into the present moment and therefore create a form of an I-Thou connection within me and between me and the film. The seagulls are always present on an atmospheric level, they can bring the viewer back to themselves and into the present moment, just like the breath can bring them back when sitting in meditation.

The woman on the Moroccan rooftop essentially serves as a human canvas that offers a space for self-projection as she is the only person that reappears throughout the film in a calm and human manner that isn't as abstract as the dancer and therefore allows the viewer to identify with her. She practices balancing the object status she holds as a woman in the land she finds herself in, which makes moving into an I-Thou seemingly impossible and very undesirable, while keeping her subjective ego-driven self at an arm's length. Finding that Thou connection doesn't have to be found within people nor anything man made. Gazing at the birds above her, she is able to remember. Her shadow questioning the set rules by breaking out of a finite reality. The last reoccurring element finds itself within the question of denied connection, visualized by various caged animals. It underlines the I-It relation that is celebrated amongst people by keeping it alive and asks what it takes to be aware of one's opposite. What it takes to recognize a Thou in the other.

The sound of the film mostly incorporates various atmospheric sounds that I have collected throughout the years, all of them observing the awareness and presence of another being. The "Rama Rama" chant that is incorporated has been held by Ram Dass in 1969 and sings to the union of dualities by addressing Rama, the god of the sun kingdom who stands for that unity

and supposedly resides in the heart of everything. The parallels to Buber's eternal Thou become very visible.

The film is called *gegenüber*.

“Der ichhaft gewordene Mensch, der Ich-Es sagt, stellt sich vor den Dingen auf, nicht ihnen gegenüber [...].”⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Buber, Martin, *Ich und Du*. 11 Aufl., Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983, p.29, 30.

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All images used in this paper are stills from the movies

The New World (The Extended Cut), R.: Terrence Malick, USA/UK: 2005 and *Song to Song*, R.: Terrence Malick USA: 2017 and are marked with their exact timecode. They are not my property.

Appendix

German Abstract

Martin Bubers Buch *Ich und Du* wurde 1923 veröffentlicht und erläutert seine Annahme gegenüber einer dem Menschen zwiefältig erscheinenden Welt. Einer Welt in der jedes Ich in Beziehung zu einem Es oder einem Du steht, wodurch die Wortpaare Ich-Du und Ich-Es etabliert werden. Da Buber und sein Beziehungsverständnis Teil der jüdischen Renaissance des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts sind, in denen auch die visuellen Kulturen des filmischen Erzählens etabliert und ausprobiert wurden, kann angenommen werden, dass seine relationale Weltauffassung Einfluss in das bewegte Bild und die visuelle Kommunikation von Beziehung gefunden hat. Diese Annahme bringt mich zu Terrence Malicks Filmschaffen, das Bubers Konzept des Ich-Du und Ich-Es aufgreift und die Grundlage seines relationalen Blickes schafft. Diese Hypothese wird durch die Methode der klassischen Filmanalyse untersucht um zu erläutern wie Bubers relationale Dualität auf einer textlichen wie auch audiovisuellen Ebene in Malicks Filmschaffen wahrgenommen werden kann. Den Fokus der Analyse bilden dabei jeweils die Hauptcharaktere seiner Filme *The New World* und *Song to Song*, wobei das Ziel darin liegt, Bubers Philosophie mit Malicks audiovisuellen Werken zu verbinden. Diese schriftliche Masterarbeit wird von einer filmischen Arbeit begleitet, die ebenfalls einen Teil der Conclusio darstellt und in Zusammenhang mit dem Institut für Visuelle Zeit- und Kulturgeschichte steht.

Abstract

Martin Buber's book *Ich und Du* (trans.: I and Thou) has been published in 1923 and discusses his idea of a world that appears twofold to mankind. A world in which an I is always in relationship to an It or with a Thou, building the I-It and I-Thou word pairs. As Buber and his understanding of relationship are a part of the Jewish Renaissance of the 20th century, in which the visual culture of cinema was established, I believe that his word pairs and his relational understanding of the world would have influenced the moving image and made an impact on how relationships are visually communicated. This is what brings me to Terrence Malick's filmmaking, which in my eyes is embracing the I-It and I-Thou concept and uses it as a

foundation to create his relational gaze.

This hypothesis is explored throughout this thesis by using classical film analysis as a method to look at how Buber's relational duality is apparent and suggested on a textual and audiovisual level in Malick's films. The focus of the analysis lies on each of the two main characters of his films *The New World* and *Song to Song* and aims to demonstrate how Buber's written theory can find itself animated in Terrence Malick's pictures.

This written thesis is accompanied by an audiovisual piece which is a part of the conclusion of the paper and is linked to the institute of Visual Contemporary and Cultural History of the University of Vienna.