

The New World's terrible paradox

By David Walsh
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The New World, written and directed by Terrence Malick

The most recent film by American director Terrence Malick, *The New World*, treats in an elliptical and lyrical manner the famous events surrounding the landing of British colonists in Virginia in 1607. Every American schoolchild knows or once knew the legend of Captain John Smith, one of the English company, rescued from execution by the Indian maiden, Pocahontas. Whether the incident ever took place is a matter of some controversy (Smith, a renowned self-promoter, did not write about it until 17 years later), or if it did, whether Smith was, in fact, a participant in a ritual that never threatened his life.

In any event, the girl known as Pocahontas (a nickname, apparently meaning “the naughty one” or “spoiled child”) did exist. She would have been around 10 or 11 at the time of Smith’s adventure. She was later kidnapped by the English settlers (betrayed by Indians of another tribe) and used as a political pawn in negotiations with her father, Powhatan, a significant chief. Pocahontas became the first Native American in Virginia to convert to Christianity. She was baptized and given the name Rebecca. In 1614 she married John Rolfe, a tobacco grower, and they had a child together. A few years later they traveled to England, where her visit was well publicized; she was presented to King James I, the royal family and London society. While preparing to leave for America, she became ill with tuberculosis or pneumonia, and died in Gravesend at the age of 21 or so, where she was buried.

The story is an extraordinary one, moving merely in the brief retelling. What did the girl make of all the deeply contradictory events she went through? And what, in the end, did they make of her?

Malick’s film begins, to Wagner’s *Das Rheingold*, with the arrival of the English ships. The girl (Q’orianka Kilcher), the daughter of a chief, a princess (she is never referred to as Pocahontas in the film), is on the shore with the rest of her anxious, curious people. Smith (Colin Farrell) is in chains in the ship’s hold, for certain ‘mutinous remarks,’ we later learn. Along with the rest, Smith is given a chance to redeem himself in this new world. As he later muses to himself, it will be “a new start,” “a fresh beginning,” in a land where none need be poor, “a true commonwealth” without landlords and such.

The English, who decide to build on the spot, and ‘the naturals,’ as the former call the native people, encounter each other. The colonists, initially overjoyed by the natural bounty they discover, run into difficulties: above all, a food shortage aggravated by provisions going bad and theft. Punishments, the first in this new world ‘paradise,’ are carried out. The ships leave for England, to return in spring, leaving a group of settlers behind. Smith, a professional soldier, is charged with leading an expedition up a major river to an Indian settlement to see about trade.

Losing contact with his companions, who are presumably killed, Smith is captured and brought before the chief, Powhatan (August Schellenberg). One question concerns the Indians: do the colonists intend to leave? “Not till spring,” Smith answers, evasively. He is seized, threateningly. The famous incident occurs. The chief’s daughter (his favorite) throws herself on Smith and begs for his life. The decision is taken, disagreed with by some, to spare him. A guest or a prisoner, Smith is permitted to take part in the life of the village. He is treated well.

Smith’s voice explains that the ‘naturals’ are gentle and faithful, lacking in all guile, and that the words for deceit, greed and envy do not exist in their language. He and the chief’s daughter are drawn to one another. More of his musings: “There is only this. All else is unreal.”

Eventually Smith is returned to the English fort and the remaining colonists. Disease, death have visited them. After a struggle, Smith emerges as the new leader of the settlement. The cold arrives, and things go from bad to worse. When all hope seems lost, the chief’s daughter and a band of native people arrive, bearing deer, turkeys, pumpkins and other provisions. The fort is saved. Smith tells the girl to go. “Don’t put yourself in danger. Don’t trust me.”

In springtime Smith is tempted to pursue her. He exhorts himself to “exchange a false life for a true one. Give up the name of Smith.” But he remains in the fort. The Indians see that the colonists are not leaving; they’ve even planted crops. The girl warns Smith an attack is forthcoming. A battle ensues, but the Jamestown settlers forewarned, withstand the assault. Powhatan banishes his favorite for her treachery. She ends up being bought by the English for a copper kettle.

When the ships return, Smith is offered a plum assignment, to explore farther north for a passage to the east. Accepting the responsibility means leaving the girl behind. Smith tells a companion, “Wait two months, tell her I’m dead.” He goes without a second thought. Distraught, the girl wanders around in a daze. The English have started torching native villages.

The chief’s daughter is taken in hand, put in a dress and shoes. She meets John Rolfe (Christian Bale). They spend time together. He asks her to marry him and she accepts, or yields. Years pass, a child is born, the couple seems happy. They travel to England where ‘Rebecca,’ as she is now known, meets her fate. She has one more encounter with Smith. Of their time spent together in the past, he says, “I thought it was a dream; it’s the only truth.” She asks him, “Did you find your Indies, John?” Gazing at her, he replies regretfully, “I may have sailed past them.”

Many things can be said about Malick’s film, a good number of them not flattering. The European arrival in the Americas is a complex historical issue and, in these times given to superficiality and confusion, not especially promising as artistic material. (One feared for the worst, frankly, about the prospect of a Malick film on the subject, and not without reason.) On the one hand, Columbus and the other great navigators continue officially to be treated as icons, their exploits mythologized; on the other, ‘left’ critics decry their voyages as merely the onset of centuries of rapine, exploitation and murder.

If Malick had to be situated in one of the two camps, it would presumably be the second one. His native people are guileless, propertyless, egalitarian, while his English are quarrelsome, aggressive and egoistic. The latter introduce hanging, ear-cutting, flogging, guns, clothing, sin, guilt, and so forth. Smith, offered the possibility of a new Eden with a second Eve, chooses career, wealth and the king’s favor. The picture Malick draws of the colonists is somewhat clichéd: ruthless and scheming in the upper echelons, desperate (with spittle flying from their mouths) and easily manipulated at the bottom.

In fact, the act of sailing thousands of miles across the Atlantic in small

ships and establishing a colony, leaving aside the ultimately tragic consequences, was an astonishing achievement, made possible only by significant intellectual and cultural advances. The exploration and settlement of the North American coast were not mere accidents, they were conscious undertakings based on a new and confidently scientific conception of the world.

Suffice it to say that one of the earliest would-be colonizers in North America was Walter Raleigh, poet, scientist, explorer and one of the great figures of the English Renaissance. The London that Pocahontas visited was the same metropolis that had turned out large audiences for plays by Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson and a host of others writing about the most complicated human problems.

Leftists of a certain disposition stumble badly over the nature of culture. The latter has a *dual character*, as first, an expression of humanity's enhanced power, and, second, an instrument of class oppression. The European arrival in the Americas was a world-historical event, a product in its own way of the Renaissance.

This achievement, however, was bound up with changes at the base of society that were giving birth to capitalism. So, far from establishing a new Garden of Eden in harmony with what already existed, the arrival of this nascent capitalism meant the ruthless smashing of all earlier forms of production. Primitive communism common among the native peoples was entirely incompatible with a system based on private property, class exploitation and production for profit.

Marx commented, searingly: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the uprooting, enslavement and entombment in the mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercialized hunting of black skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production." Capital, he wrote, "comes into the world dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."

In this regard, Malick's approach is ahistorical and it colors the drama, shifts it often into the wrong orbit. Smith's choice of a new expedition and the king's service over his charming 'natural' love, although personally distressing, was both historically inevitable and even progressive. What was he to do? The conditions did not exist to establish an egalitarian 'commonwealth' in Virginia in 1607, the level of the productive forces would not have permitted it. (To his credit, when the Indian girl urges Smith to "come away" with her, Malick has him reply, "Where would we live? In the tree-tops, in a hole in the ground?")

Malick's Smith is a brooding, introspective creature—does the following sound like such an individual?: "Born in 1580 in Willoughby, England, John Smith left home at age 16 after his father died. He began his travels by joining volunteers in France who were fighting for Dutch independence from Spain. Two years later, he set off for the Mediterranean Sea, working on a merchant ship. In 1600, he joined Austrian Forces to fight the Turks in the 'Long War.' A valiant soldier, he was promoted to Captain while fighting in Hungary. He was fighting in Transylvania two years later in 1602. There he was wounded in battle, captured, and sold as a slave to a Turk. This Turk then sent Smith to Istanbul as a gift to his sweetheart. According to Smith, this girl fell in love with him and sent him to her brother to get training for the Turkish imperial service. Smith reportedly escaped by murdering the brother, and he returned to Transylvania by fleeing through Russia and Poland. After being released from service and receiving a large reward, he travelled throughout Europe and Northern Africa. He returned to England in the winter of 1604-05" (Jamestown Historic Briefs, National Park Service).

For Malick, born 1943, who directed *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* in the 1970s and then made no films for two decades, humanity seems to dwell in beautiful and indifferent nature simply as one element among others. Nature simply 'is,' un moulded to human purpose, as a commentator notes. His male characters in particular strive for a paradise

or refuge in the face of a brutal social order, without success. They always flee, when they should ... what? Find transcendence in Being, in Nature itself? This seems to happen to 'Rebecca' in this film. She accepts things calmly, including death. She addresses God or Nature toward the end of the film, "Now I know where you live." Rolfe tells us, on her death bed, "She gently reminded me, all must die." No fuss is made about her passing. Nature and Being carry on. In the final shots we see a wide river, water flowing over stones, light in the trees, a stream, sunlight through the leaves of a tree.

This is rather murky (Malick specialized in Heidegger as a student of philosophy), perhaps banal, and one would rather not probe too deeply the director's conscious outlook. Unlike lesser mortals, such as Spielberg, Clooney and others, Malick has kept his distance from history and contemporary events. He pays a price for his 'timelessness.' There is little developed sense of the contemporary world and its specific problems in his film.

If *The New World* were nothing more than a congealed expression of its director's confused and ahistorical viewpoint, it would have little value. But this is fortunately not the case. In the first place, an extraordinary lyricism is at work in the film, which should not be dismissed. Yes, Malick's film can be irritating, with characters who wander about muttering important things under their breath. But the director is also capable of generating remarkable emotional power, which arises organically from the extraordinary settings and imagery, and sound. The opening scene alone is quite affecting. *The Thin Red Line*, Malick's antiwar film, was also afflicted in part by self-conscious and annoying sequences, more so than the most recent work, as a matter of fact.

The New World is not simply picturesque. Visual beauty of this magnitude must be associated with some depth of thought and feeling. And honesty. As an artist of integrity Malick is too honest to be satisfied with the simple-minded equation, Native Peoples=good, Western Civilization=bad. He may be horrified by the manner in which humanity brutally intrudes on nature, but the meticulousness of his effort leads him in a more nuanced direction. Are we to disapprove of 'Rebecca' wearing a dress or, more significantly, learning to read and write? Are we to react with distaste to Jacobean London's impressive architecture in contrast to the huts and primitive forts of Virginia; or to the formal, sculpted gardens organized around English country homes compared to the untamed fields and forests of the New World? One hopes not. Nor, to his credit, does Malick make a mockery of the court of James I. Even if Malick has no genuine interest in the historical-social process, his strong and precise images reveal it to be extremely contradictory and not reducible to abstract moralizing.

The plight of the girl herself, extraordinarily represented by Q'Orianka Kilcher (her father is a Quechua Indian from Peru, and her mother is a Swiss native who grew up in Alaska), humanizes the film more than any other element. The human face conveys a great deal, some faces more than others.

The story of Pocahontas is a historically tragic one of the first order. The 'new world,' of course, can just as easily refer to her encounter with English society. Let's assume that her choices of Christianity, of Rolfe, of the voyage to England were purely voluntary. That makes her circumstance all the more tragic. Did she find anything eye-opening and valuable in books, in fine clothes, in palaces, even in the Anglican faith? One imagines she must have. However, given the historical circumstances, her embrace of Western Civilization could only have been rewarded, so to speak, by that same civilization's destruction—almost simultaneously—of her own people. What a ghastly paradox!

Features of that paradox make their presence felt in Malick's film and Kilcher's performance. The closer 'Rebecca' comes to the heart of English life, to London, to the court, the sadder and more deliberate her general demeanor. All this more advanced social organization comes, one

feels strongly, at a terrible price for her. She travels toward a world whose representatives are rushing past her in the opposite direction with dire consequences. This, it seems to me, is what's most moving and enduring in Malick's film.

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