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1 The idiosyncratic oeuvre of American filmmaker Terrence Malick has provoked much speculation as to its metaphysical stakes. Several critical studies refer to the hypothesis of an eminent philosopher who happened to become Malick’s undergraduate mentor at Harvard University, Stanley Cavell, that *Days of Heaven* (1978) is a paradigmatic case of the potential for ontological reflection at the movies. Corroborating Cavell’s intuition about the sources of Malick’s aesthetic sensibility, the philosophical inspiration of his work shines forth in one of his recent films, *The Tree of Life*, which garnered the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011. The abiding interest in the problem of genesis and its expression in language, imagery, and narrative that Malick reveals in *The Tree of Life* arguably dates from his own translation of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reasons* while he was a graduate student in the late 1960s. We might regard *The Tree of Life* as a virtuosic translation of the thought of origins in *The Essence of Reasons* into the language of cinema. By constructing a cinematic idiom that radically alters the hermetic terminology of Heideggerian philosophy and the generic tropes of blockbuster movies, Malick’s *Tree of Life* both transmits and transforms the thematization of origin world, and transcendence at issue in Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reasons*. Revealing the presence or manifestation of beings as such, Malick’s films provoke a sense of wonder in the face of the very appearance of the world.

2 Framed by the ritual of commemoration enacted in its protagonist Jack’s lighting of a candle on the anniversary of his younger brother’s death, the mosaic of images in *The Tree of Life* intertwines the story of Jack’s childhood in Midwestern America with the natural history of the Earth. By weaving together these heterogeneous elements as though they were strands in the double helix of a DNA molecule, Malick is able to show the intimate relation between human mourning and cosmic genesis. This connection
between grief and creation is an exemplary instance of the interdependence of Dasein and its world that comes to light in the experience of finite transcendence. Insofar as our access to the spatiotemporal region of such transcendence is at stake in our experience of the death of the other Dasein, Jack is carried towards spiritual freedom by his prayerful address to his brother, his mother, and God. By situating Jack’s work of mourning for his brother with respect to both the genesis of the cosmos that precedes human life and the resurrection of the dead at the end of time, Malick’s film grasps the beginning and the end of the cosmos at once as the limits of human existence and as the very sources of our capacity for transcendence. In the experience of radical and infinite loss, Jack’s confrontation with the mystery of nature and death carries his soul to the miracle of grace and birth.

The Genesis of the Cosmos and the Concept of World

The first words in The Tree of Life are an epigraph from the Book of Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” At a crucial juncture in Heidegger’s The Essence of Reasons, a citation from Saint Augustine’s exegesis of the Gospel of John poses the very same question to men who have become “estranged from God” by defining the “cosmos” or “world” enjoyed by them in opposition to the emergence of holy life in God. “What does it mean to say ‘The world was made by Him,’” Augustine wonders, and how have the heavens, the angels, and even the devils themselves borne witness to their maker whom “those [men] who, because they love the world, are called the world” have blithely consigned to oblivion? While the propositional content of the original passage in the Bible is primarily intended to demonstrate that the postlapsarian standpoint of Job will have forbidden any comprehension of the justice of God, its lyrical inquiry also recalls the prelapsarian bliss that united the created beings of heaven and earth in one voice. Its invocation of the one who lays the foundations of the earth points toward the necessity of elucidating the problem of origins, grounds, or reasons [Gründe] in terms of the historicity [Geschichtlichkeit] and the ontological structure of the cosmos as opposed to the anthropocentric perspective and meaning of an individual’s life circumscribed by his or her existential horizons. The where and when of the first days of creation before and beyond human memory or witness mark out the spatiotemporal site of cosmic genesis understood as a source of judgment in excess of the subjective cognition of the human individual. By demonstrating that one cannot establish the purposive justification or causal logic of any given event by means of human reason alone, the spiritual trial of Job indicates that man must be exposed to the conditions of possibility for life as such in order to reckon with his own destiny in the world. In contrast to Job’s submission to the imperious command of a jealous and vengeful God, the cosmological arc of Jack’s remembrance corresponds to the liminal injunctions -- “find me” and “follow me” -- enunciated by his dead brother. In the name of his sibling who once requested that their mother “tell us a story from before we can remember,” the libidinal drive of Jack’s imagination is interrupted by the formation of space and time out of mind.

According to Cavell, the principal characteristic of Malick’s films is their capacity to extract radiant beauty from nature. He claims that such rhapsodic moments are generated by a metaphysical vision of the world in which the everyday concerns of human beings are simultaneously extinguished to nothingness and elevated to sublimity.
in their juxtaposition with the eternal cycle of sky and earth. Faced with singular and surprising shots of natural phenomena which become manifest in themselves without reference to the human observer, “one feels that one has never quite seen the scene of human existence – call it the arena between earth (or days) and heaven – realized quite this way on film before.” In support of this serendipitous access to the splendidours of nature, Malick’s cinematographers are instructed to be aleatory and improvisational in their methods. In his signature obsession with the “magic hour” in which the source of natural light cannot even be discerned, Malick displays a strong preference for recording rather than manipulating the atmosphere of scenes to which we gain access through the cinematographer’s lens. Malick’s passion for the natural landscapes that situate the human narratives of his films comes to the fore in the cosmogonical montages of The Tree of Life.

The stylistic illuminations of Malick’s cinematographers take up the forceful challenge to the order of representation at issue in Heidegger’s argument that propositional truth must necessarily presuppose and is universally derived from the manifestation of beings as such. Prior to any predicative representation, knowledge, or calculation through human agency, entities must appear in and of themselves. This originary unconcealment of beings is non-discursive in its essence: it stands outside the order of concept, identity, and reason established by the cognitive mediation of the human individual. To the extent that the principle of montage as employed by Malick envisions the cosmos as an unfolding tapestry rather than as a panoramic tableau, it partakes of this movement of disclosure that Heidegger calls aletheia or the originary revelation of truth. Wrestling nature from its primordial concealment in sequences that contract and expand the contours of space and time, the footage in these montages reveals aspects of the world that cannot generally be perceived by the human eye. In portraying the processes of becoming in which beings come to exist rather than the mere presence of enduring substance, Malick shows the world as it “worlds” rather than as it “is”. Therefore, the ceaseless motion of the camera in Malick’s film contests the static composition and the immutable frame that are privileged by the world-picture in Hollywood cinema. Interleaved with scenes of daily life in 1950s America, the images of the universe in The Tree of Life recall the shift in perspective occasioned by shots of the Earth from the Moon.

By filming the successive generation of the galaxy, the planet and the city that serve as prior conditions for Jack’s birth, Malick demonstrates the reciprocal interdependence and mutual illumination of Dasein and its world. Setting the choreography of creation’s dance to sacred hymns, Malick transfigures the whole of the cosmos into a cathedral. As foreshadowed in the conflict between dinosaurs on the same riverbank where the quarrel between Jack and his brother will occur, the contingent nature of the interactions between creatures, mankind, and God is bound up with the chance for faith, hope, and love in the very structure of the cosmos. By eliciting our sense of reverence before the natural world, Malick contests the equivalence between amare mundum and non cognoscere Deum in the scholastic tradition. Against the scholastic argument that all worldly passions remain ignorant of God, Malick asks whether it might be possible to love the world and to believe in God.
The Fall of Man and the Freedom of Dasein

The “protagonist” of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Dasein, has no family, childhood, or sexual drive: its ontological structure is neutral with respect to such determinations of its selfhood. In contrast to Heidegger’s utter neglect of the development of the child in his existential analytic of Dasein, Malick is painstakingly attentive to how Jack shapes and alters his world in the early stages of his life. By dealing with these dimensions of Jack’s formation of his own “project” [Entwurf] or world as well as of his “thrownness” [Geworfenheit] or historical era, Malick is able to explicitly consider the pivotal importance of childhood events, adolescent ennui, and sexual desires to the development of Dasein. Since these aspects of Dasein that are central to Malick’s film had been relegated to the periphery or entirely neglected in Heidegger’s reflections on freedom, the story of Jack’s youth told in *The Tree of Life* expands the horizons of Dasein’s existence. In an implicit dialogue with Heidegger’s exposition of the struggle between authenticity [Eigentlichkeit] and falleness [Verfallen] as Dasein comes into its own truth, the story of Jack’s coming-of-age recapitulates the narrative of original sin in autobiographical miniature.

Whereas the ruling maxim of his strong-willed father is that “you make yourself what you are” and “you have control of your own destiny” through the self-assertion of sovereign force in an unjust society, his gentle mother enjoins her sons to “love everyone, every leaf, every ray of light” since “the only way to be happy is to love” in a joyous abandonment of oneself to the essential goodness of Creation. These irreconcilable interpretations of the world struggle for dominance in the soul of the son who has inherited both traits: “Father. Mother. Always you wrestle inside me. Always you will.” This conflict between paternal law and maternal love within his own heart means that Jack’s psychic composition is traversed by opposing drives. In the course of his childhood, he will come to understand that neither the paternal way of nature nor the maternal way of grace can be adequate to his own experience of the world.

A shift in Jack’s relation to and use of language is the initial sign of his estrangement from the domain of family life. As intimations of mortality and sexuality insinuate themselves into Jack’s consciousness, he engages in a secret monologue with himself. In this abyssal chasm of interiority and reflection, Jack becomes subject to another language and another voice: he commits sins of thievery and lust to satisfy a crush on his neighbour’s wife, fantasizes about killing his father and being exclusively loved by his mother, and suffers from a Pauline discovery of the inherent contradiction of the moral will in which “what I want to do I can’t do, I do what I hate.” Jack’s desire for transparent authenticity and independent selfhood culminates in a repetition of the Fall of Man which casts him into exile from the Garden of Eden where his siblings dwell: “What have I started? What have I done? [...] How do I get back where they are?”

Jack has been enviously observing as his brother plays guitar-and-piano duets with their father and paints watercolours for their mother. One day in the woods, Jack deliberately shoots his brother in the hand. Realizing the depth of his transgression, Jack subjects himself to the vengeful retribution that he deserves from his brother, and offers an apology in which he simply acknowledges the importance of the relationship between them: “I’m sorry. You’re my brother.” Even as Jack’s hands are clasped in prayer, his brother miraculously forgives him, and touches his wrist. In spite of all his striving for autonomous individuation, Jack truly becomes himself only in the eyes and under the
touch of his brother. Called to his freedom by the solicitude [Besorgen] of the other Dasein, he exists as a being for and in relation outside the subjective interiority of consciousness. Should we now say that the purpose, validity, and measure of things is established by our common understanding, in accordance with Malick’s definition of Heidegger’s concept of world, such a world can only exist as it is shared between the brothers. In and through their gestural language at this moment, the brothers assume the intimacy of their fraternal bond beyond the imposition of parental counsel or constraint, and open themselves to its persistence and permutations at the limits of their own lives.

The Comportment of Mourning and Prayer’s Address

During a Sunday service that Jack’s family attends, the pastor preaches from the Book of Job that no one is protected against sorrow: the counterpart to salvation by faith alone in American Protestantism is the arbitrary and accidental nature of affliction which cannot be correlated to meritorious works. The family’s subsequent loss of Jack’s younger brother will severely test each member’s capacity for righteous belief in any such theological schema. As the family’s neighbour will repeat in the wake of his brother’s funeral, the fundamental lesson of the Book of Job is to “see God’s hand” not only in what we are given, but in what we have lost. Jack’s mother and father are no longer capable of listening to the ready-made proverbs of their neighbour’s pious certitude and they are not yet capable of giving voice to hope in their own names. Jack’s parents suffer as much from the death of their son as Job suffers from the torments of his own flesh. The trials of Job and the family’s grief over Jack’s brother seem to equally contradict the Christian postulate of a just God. Will their experience of mourning eventually be recuperated into the Biblical theodicy that binds Job’s wounds?

According to the rather soporific and sententious sermon that the pastor has delivered, the capacity to discern “that which is eternal” and hence “greater than pain, disquietude, deformity, weakness” can be a source of consolation for the vulnerability of our mortal existence. Nonetheless, Jack’s mourning for his brother exacerbates the interrogation of God initiated by the experience of watching his friend drown accidentally at a swimming hole in an earlier scene: “Where were You? You let a boy die. You let anything happen. Why should I be good, if You aren’t?” For Jack’s mother, the loss of her younger son is also an excruciating test of her faith in the essential goodness of the created order. Since her son’s existence has been annihilated without reason, the very fact of his death resists any resolution into the blessedness and beatitude of Being as such. When she calls upon her son as “life of my life,” she indicates both that she once carried him in her womb and that he must now carry her soul. Whereas the psychic economy of the grieving subject is generally supposed to introject or to incorporate the object it has lost in the psychoanalytic account that developed out of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”, the very grammar of the mother who mourns bespeaks an originary and interdependent relation with the absence of the other Dasein. Its mark is the partitive genitive “of my” that simultaneously separates and shares her speaking being with the silent nothingness of her son. It doesn’t matter that she has “still got the other two” sons: in contrast to the restitution and multiplication of Job’s progeny once he has endured his trial, the singular existence of Jack’s brother cannot be sublated or substituted.

Heidegger contends that Leibniz’s investigation of sufficient reason for being rather than nothingness and its consequent theodicy were the first significant exposition of the
essence of reasons in the modern era. However, Leibniz’s magisterial demonstration that every being has its reason in the best of all possible worlds is fiercely resisted by the perception of insufficiency in the order of things by the one who mourns. The emergence of the mourner’s question in the face of loss – “Why is there nothing rather than the other being whom I love?” – is the reverse of Leibniz’s scholastic quandary as to why there are beings rather than nothing before the mind. In response to a rift at the heart of his or her worldly orientation, the mourner calls into question any explanation or justification for the death of the loved one by recourse to the benevolence or rectitude of God. The mourning Dasein suffers from a spatiotemporal disjunction at the heart of its existential stance in which it feels itself to be “with” the very person of whose living presence it has been deprived by death. As he assumes the comportment and mood of a mourner, Jack experiences the nothingness of his brother’s non-existence, or in other words, he experiences Being from the standpoint of his own being-in-the-world. In confronting the facticity of the world as his own interpretation of its fundamental principle shatters, the perspectival narrative that has directed Jack’s approach to his life is displaced, and other possible ways of thinking present themselves to him. Insofar as he will not have learned to live without his brother, this experience of concrete and existential loss will have opened onto spiritual rebirth. Although Heidegger insists that Dasein’s selfhood remains neutral toward “being an I” and “being a Thou,” his own exposition of logos inscribes a structure of address between “I” and “Thou” in the very usage of language that draws out Dasein’s relation to Being as such. As we have seen in our analysis of Jack’s childhood, Malick’s practice of interpretation implicates the selfhood of Dasein in sexuality and desire that are anything but neutral side-effects, since these carnal feelings have been pivotal for his personal formation. Along similar lines as the family mourns for Jack’s brother, Dasein’s exposure to the other’s mortality cuts across any presumed neutral selfhood, which means that the ownmost being of Dasein is only revealed in the “I-Thou” relation. To extend this analysis beyond the scope of Heidegger’s own discourse, the speech of the mourning Dasein is addressed to the vanishing point at the origin of its own life. In its experience of the death of the other, it is forced to confront the generative force of alterity at its own birth.

Having reflected upon the experience of the mourner, we are now able to examine its mode of expression by the voiceovers in The Tree of Life. The use of voiceover in network television and mainstream cinema tends to serve either an expository or a summary function. This generic technique permits the viewer to identify with the protagonist or to partake of a privileged knowledge of the events onscreen. In a shock to our expectations that defamiliarizes this format, the internal monologues of Malick’s protagonists are often the primary mode of human language in his films, and they do not convey information or correlate directly to the visual track. These internal monologues register the process of self-questioning that is characteristic of human Dasein without any rhetorical interpolation or editorial commentary from other characters or from Malick himself. In one of the rare interviews to which Malick consented at the outset of his career, he remarked that “when people express what is most important to them, it often comes out in clichés. That doesn’t make them laughable; it’s something tender about them.” Rather than purifying language of the particular experiences and historical alterations that have been embedded in everyday speech, the monologues in Malick’s film are a patient and generous redemption of the received phrases and crude thoughts in which his characters struggle to come to grips with their existence.
A striking feature of the monologues in *The Tree of Life* in comparison to Malick's earlier films is their recourse to a structure of address. Whereas the monologues spoken by the protagonists of *Badlands* or *Days of Heaven* more closely resembled private meditations or diary entries, Jack apostrophizes his brother, mother, or God. Rather than being oriented towards his own living presence, Jack invokes an interlocutor who is irrevocably absent. The subjective interiority of the soul's dialogue with itself is ruptured by the structure of address common to prayer and mourning in *The Tree of Life*. Characters in the film are often depicted in the physical stance of prayer, but such external signs are not a prerequisite for prayer to occur: its sole necessary condition is the invocation of alterity in and through anachrony in time. Whether it is Jack's father kneeling at a bench after the funeral of his son or Jack clasping his hands after having injured his brother, the gesture of prayer is presented as a retrospective desire to be forgiven and as a delayed response to the appeal of conscience. A relation to alterity that remains absolutely mute and withdrawn in spite of its interpellation has become constitutive for thought and language on the part of the supplicant or survivor.

One thinks here of the mother's internal monologue as she returns home from her son's funeral. Her anguish interrupts her voice: “I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me – What did You gain? – Be not far from me, for trouble is near.” The authoritative and automatic phrases of the Bible are no longer adequate to her situation: she stands alone without language for her soul. Her desperate prayer is comprised equally of fragments of Scripture learned by heart and savage criticisms of their source: its very desolation negates any consolation that can be offered. As she calls upon God, the mother asks in anguish: “Lord. Why? Where were You? Did You know? Who are we to You? Answer me.”

In the simultaneous montage that intersperses a sequence of cosmological images with a choral performance of *Lacrimosa*, it is as though the whole of creation mourned with her. Indeed, the natural catastrophe of an erupting volcano symbolizes the destruction of her faith: Dasein and its world share the same nature even in absolute destitution. By pairing footage of natural phenomena in the sea, the earth, and the heavens with recordings of hymnal lamentations, Malick is able to evoke a sense of the dynamic and dreadful sublimity of the cosmos that cannot be exclusively characterized as religious or secular. In the extremity of the mother's grief as she cries to her soul, her son, the formation of stars in the heavens resembles the precipitation of tears.

The Experience of Revealability and the End of Time

In response to the French existentialist Jean Beaufret's concern about the status of ethics in fundamental ontology, Heidegger remarks that almost none of his readers have attended to a crucial footnote on the subject of divinity in *The Essence of Reasons*. As the translator of that volume, Malick is ideally positioned to rectify his fellow scholars' neglect of Heidegger's claim that "the ontological interpretation of Dasein as Being-in-the-world tells neither for nor against the possible existence of God. One must first gain an adequate concept of Dasein by illuminating transcendence. Then, by considering Dasein, one can ask how the relationship of Dasein to God is ontologically constituted". One of the most laudable accomplishments of *The Tree of Life* is its respect for the accounts of creation in both Christianity and Darwinism. By remaining faithful to the figure of the “tree of life” common to religious and scientific schools of thought, it suspends the question of their respective veracity, and indicates that it might be overly simplistic to
regard these perspectives as irreconcilable with one another. In terms of Heidegger’s thinking about the ontological possibility of Dasein’s relationship to God, the birth of transcendence in *The Tree of Life* pertains to *Offenbarkeit* or the originary experience of revealedness prior to and in excess of *Offenbarung* or the event of revelation that grounds the act of faith.

Expressing remorse for the forgetting and errancy in which he lost any sense of the presence of God, Jack undergoes a change of heart. In his peregrinations from the steel and glass skyscrapers of San Francisco, through the empty and arid desert, to the light and water at the beach, he gradually assumes a mode of comportment that is receptive to the miracle of manifestation. Rather than coming into a relation with God on his own, Jack is led “to God’s door” by his brother and his mother. These loved ones are both examples of and sources for the gifts of forgiveness, mercy, and grace that carry him towards the experience of redemption at the threshold of faith. In this way, Malick situates the authenticity of the solitary Dasein within a religious and cultural community that protects and cherishes its existence. In communing with his mother and brother, the presence of divinity at each moment of his past becomes retroactively legible to Jack: “I didn’t know how to name You then. But I see it was You. Always You were calling me.”

Importantly, Jack is not fully and finally reconciled with the members of his family in an eternal Now. The paradisiac or apocalyptic scenes on the shoreline in which the adult Jack is reunited with his family members should not be regarded as situated in regions beyond everyday life. Rather than standing outside the realm of Jack’s story as its eschatological or teleological culminations, the Resurrection of Souls and the Day of Judgment presented figuratively in these scenes are structures of possibility that subsist in the interstices between the moments of Jack’s existence. Even in the comical and earnest prayers of Jack’s childhood – “Help me not to sass my Dad. Help me not to get dogs in fights. Help me be thankful for everything I got. – Where do You live? – Help me not to tell lies. – Are You watching me? I want to know what you are. I want to see what You see” – the domains of the everyday and the metaphysical are contiguous with and complementary to one another.

Against a whole lineage of theology that rigidly demarcates the fallenness and immanence of earthly life from the purity and transcendence of the heavens, the finite transcendence of Dasein in *The Essence of Reasons* and *The Tree of Life* happens in and towards the world. Therefore, the “cosmos” no longer denotes the Being of man in a way of life that is estranged from God: it is the pragmatic differentiation in which Dasein draws out its singular mode of existence in the light of ontological truth. Turning towards the world that comes to presence in its mourning and its memories, Dasein can both dwell in the world and be with God in its heart. We see the possibility of this grace as the mother’s hands gather and release the spirit of Jack’s brother: “I give him to You, I give You my son,” she says, in a disposition of the heart that reveals her attunement [ *Befindlichkeit*] with the harmonious order of the cosmos.

As Heidegger contends in *The Essence of Reasons*, “ontological founding opens marginal realms of the possible” wherein polyvalent forms of presenting are “rooted in Dasein’s freedom.” This open region for poetic saying and ontological disclosure is not the immemorial origin or the idealized goal of any given narrative: it can only subsist in its repetition and renewal by the prayerful attention and solicitous care that is the very ground of community and coexistence [ *Mitdasein*]. Jack’s memories open onto the inner possibility of finite transcendence and ontological truth because of the transcendental...
imagination’s relation to time. The ontic determination and the ontological disclosure of the possibilities at stake in Jack’s existence coexist in the medium of his remembrance. He conceives of a pantheistic logos speaking through persons, landscapes, and sensory impressions without necessarily being significant or comprehensible for him. Such a divine voice would have been present at every moment of his life as a potential word addressed to him by the fact of creation as such. Entering into the Open [Lichtung] at the shoreline between heaven and earth, Jack not only comes to see “the glory around us,” but also consecrates his own existence to his brother, who will “keep” and “guide” the souls of their family until the end of time.

Conclusion

According to Malick, the concept of world in Heidegger’s corpus not only demonstrates that the anthropocentric standpoint of existentialism is not adequate for ontological inquiry into human finitude, but it also shows that there are limits to the jurisdiction of philosophy as such. As Heidegger confronts the limits of philosophical interpretation, he proposes that the languages of poetry and art have a distinctive capacity to disclose the world. By means of his remarkable appropriation of technological advances in contemporary film, Malick challenges Heidegger’s suspicion of the mastery and instrumentality that characterize the vast majority of modern uses of techne. As he transposes the basic concepts of Heidegger’s discourse into the visual medium of cinema, Malick engages critically with and expands insightfully upon the philosopher’s concerns. By means of formal and stylistic interventions such as the priority of internal monologue over spoken conversation, the recurrence of montages which conjoin images and music, and the reduction or even absence of conventional narrative structure, Malick generates a cinematic language that partakes in the originary disclosure of non-discursive truth.

The task of The Tree of Life is to construct a singular idiom that would be adequate to this originary revelation such that man can both recall transcendence and love the world. The crucial insight that is elucidated by the imagery, narrative, and lexicon of this film pertains to a specific configuration of being and time: it portrays the essential conjunction of cosmic genesis and human mourning in the very structure of remembrance. To show that human freedom cannot be generated through authority, autonomy, or authenticity in and of themselves, its kaleidoscopic lens presents the origin and the end of the universe in their polyvalent status as the sites of our transcendence and the limits of our finitude. By developing the prayerful comportment of the mourning Dasein in terms of a structure of address, the internal monologues of Jack and his mother further emphasize that the language and life of each Dasein comes to be in correspondence with the alterity and absence of the other Dasein. As Jack returns from his spectral encounter with his family to the urban environment of his daily life, the penultimate shot of the film is a bridge over a body of water. The bridge is also a key symbol in Heidegger’s “Building Dwelling Thinking” that poetically gathers and binds sky, earth, mortals, and divinities. By alluding to the figure of the bridge in Heidegger’s thought, the elegiac image at the ending of The Tree of Life evokes a fragile redemption that can only be enacted within the relational structure of Jack’s remembrance: the poetic configuration of images that generates the birth of transcendence.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass., 1979, xv-xvi. In the concluding section of Cavell’s foreword to the expanded edition of The World Viewed, his remarks about Days of Heaven serve as an example of his own hermeneutic method of “reading” films, whose reciprocal constitution of interpretive significance and filmic elements he charmingly calls “the cinematic circle” (Cavell, op. cit., xiv). He claims that the beauty of Malick’s images is not only comparable to but “a realization” of certain passages from Heidegger’s What is Called Thinking? about how the “Being of beings” or “Being as such” appears to Dasein (Cavell, op. cit., xv). Cavell contends that it is Malick’s discovery of “a fundamental fact of film’s photographic basis : that objects participate in the photographs of themselves” (Cavell, op. cit., xvi) that allows the
relationship between the presencing of Being as such and the presence of specific beings to be rendered by his films.


10. Situating the montage technique in *The Tree of Life* with respect to the history of cinema and the extensive literature on montage theory lies beyond the scope of this paper. For an excellent treatment of the history and theory of montage, see Jacques Aumont’s *Montage (Kino-Agora 3)*, Caboose, Montréal, 2013.


12. This equivalence is expounded and implicitly criticized in Heidegger, *op. cit.*, 53-57.


15. Malick, *op. cit.*, 2:00:40.


25. For an intriguing and influential treatment of the incorporation/introjection alternative, see also Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s *The Wolfman’s Magic Word*, Minnesota UP, Minneapolis, 1986, with an introduction by Jacques Derrida.


30. Malick, *op. cit.*, 20:00-21:45.


35. Malick, *op. cit.*, 58:00-59:00.


40. See “The Question Concerning Technology” in *Basic Writings*, *op. cit.*, 336-39 for Heidegger’s own views on modern technology and the potential for its free use. Cavell’s foreword to *The World Viewed* maintains a cogent awareness of both the revelatory and the dangerous powers of cinema in this context. According to Cavell, the most important characteristic of objects under a camera
lens is their “self-referential” or “inherently reflexive” nature, which means that “they participate in the re-creation of themselves on film; they are essential in the making of their appearance” (Cavell, op. cit., xvi). By contrast, the spectator or filmmaker who responds to these objects with an urge to dominate or to aestheticize their “self-manifestation” forecloses or simply refuses his or her own potential capacity to “participate” in these scenes (Cavell, op. cit., xvi).

ABSTRACTS

This paper interprets Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* through the lens of his early studies of philosophy and specifically of Martin Heidegger’s work. Drawing on Malick’s own translation of Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reasons*, I examine the interdependent themes of human mourning and cosmic genesis in Malick’s film. I argue that the experience of mourning presented in *The Tree of Life* challenges and complicates some of Heidegger’s presumptions about the existential project of Dasein and the origin of the world inhabited by Dasein. At the limits of his own life, the mourner develops non-discursive modes of language in which he remains close to the person whom he has lost. Through this stance of prayer, imagination, and remembrance that holds open his relation to the death of the other, the pain of mourning becomes an experience of spiritual transcendence.


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