

# *What Is Heideggerian Cinema? Film, Philosophy, and Cultural Mobility*

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In the late 1960s the American filmmaker Terrence Malick was well on his way to becoming a professional philosopher. He had excelled as an undergraduate at Harvard University, working with Stanley Cavell, perhaps one of the most important American thinkers of recent memory.<sup>1</sup> Under Cavell's guidance, Malick produced an impressive thesis on the work of Martin Heidegger. Although well known in Europe and elsewhere around the globe, Heidegger's work had yet to penetrate American academic philosophy in any significant way, making Malick's undergraduate thesis, which tackled not just Heidegger but also his mentor, Edmund Husserl, all the more remarkable. Malick even managed to obtain an interview with the reclusive Freiburg

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1. Cavell remains a towering figure in American philosophy. His memoir—*Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010)—is a treasure trove of insight and wisdom.

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philosopher—quite a feat for a young student, no matter how bold or brash.<sup>2</sup> Malick clearly had a bright philosophical future.

For a while at least, Malick moved ever closer to that future. On graduating from Harvard, he won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University, where he approached the eminent philosopher Gilbert Ryle with what in hindsight sounds like a compelling dissertation topic: the concept of world in the works of Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>3</sup> It was a subject Malick had broached in his undergraduate thesis. Ryle, however, was unimpressed. An early though critical reader of Heidegger, Ryle, exhibiting Oxford philosophy's typical disdain for almost all things Continental at the time, tried to steer his young American charge in another direction.<sup>4</sup> According to rumor, he wryly suggested that Malick might consider a more "philosophical" topic.<sup>5</sup> This, perhaps, was a turning point. Malick never produced the dissertation. On returning to the States, he taught briefly at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, filling in for one of his former mentors from his Harvard days, the Heideggerian philosopher Hubert Dreyfus, who was off to Paris on a fellowship.<sup>6</sup> But it was too late. There was no going back. As Malick put it years later, he was already "at the end of his rope as a philosopher."<sup>7</sup>

Between about 1967 and 1973, when his first feature film, the highly acclaimed *Badlands*, was released, Malick pursued a wide range of work. Among his many rumored professions, he seems to have worked briefly as a reporter for *Newsweek* and the *New Yorker* during this time, supposedly even covering the trial of French *tier-mondiste* activist Régis Debray in Bolivia. But journalism did not hold his attention. Malick eventually entered the movie business, enrolling in the inaugural class of the avant-garde American

2. Terrence Frederick Malick, "The Concept of Horizon in Husserl and Heidegger" (BA thesis, Harvard University, 1966). Hereafter cited as CH. In the acknowledgments to his thesis, Malick thanks Heidegger for "granting me an interview and answering my questions."

3. See David Davies, ed., *The Thin Red Line* (New York: Routledge, 2009), xi.

4. Gilbert Ryle, "Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*," in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy: Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Murray (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), 64. The review was originally published in *Mind* 38 (1929): 355–70. For more on Ryle's relation to Heidegger, see Murray, "Heidegger and Ryle: Two Versions of Phenomenology," in Murray, *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, 271–90. For more on Ryle in relation to Continental philosophy more generally, see my "Angst across the Channel: Existentialism in Britain," in *Situating Existentialism*, ed. Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

5. Simon Critchley has recounted this story in his essay "Calm—On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," in Davies, *The Thin Red Line*. Hereafter cited as "Calm." See esp. 16–17.

6. In the acknowledgments to his thesis, Malick thanks Dreyfus specifically.

7. "American Film Institute Seminar with Terry Malick," April 11, 1974, 53. Transcript at the Louis B. Mayer Library, American Film Institute, Los Angeles. Hereafter cited as AFI.

Film Institute in Los Angeles, alongside such people as David Lynch and Paul Schrader.

It is as a filmmaker that most people know Malick today, though his Pynchonesque reclusiveness ensures that they do not know much. (In fact, because he refuses to do any publicity whatsoever, many of the most basic details of his life and career remain shrouded in mystery.) But is there a relationship between Malick's early philosophical studies and his later career behind the camera? This question has received some attention already, but it remains unavoidable, for it reopens the perennial debate about how we should view the relationship of film to philosophy.<sup>8</sup> It certainly cannot be that philosophy, as something stable and distinct, can or should be applied to film, also something supposedly well defined and demarcated. Rather, as Malick's example demonstrates, we are forced to posit that film can be in some sense philosophical (and philosophy, of course, can sometimes be cinematic). Philosophy and film are closer than we think. As a character in a Don DeLillo novel once put it, film is "another part of the twentieth-century mind. It's the world seen from inside."<sup>9</sup>

Malick's own teacher, Cavell, intimated as much in the preface to the enlarged edition of his classic work on film and philosophy, *The World Viewed*. Invoking Malick's sophomore film, *Days of Heaven* (1978), which he described as a "metaphysical vision of the world," Cavell sought to keep open a space for reflection that avoided the pitfalls of professionalized thought—a danger for the study of film as much as for philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Cavell's career-long effort to achieve what William Rothman has called "a marriage of philosophy and film" has been predicated on a profound respect for both discourses.<sup>11</sup> The task, for him, is not to reduce film to philosophy or even to translate philosophy into film. Instead of retreating into the cozy confines of scholarly security, we must remain open to the new and sometimes startling insights that emerge from unexpected juxtapositions. As commentators interested in how ideas travel beyond disciplinary confines, we are compelled, I think, to follow in Cavell's

8. On this issue, see, e.g., the massive *Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (New York: Routledge, 2008). See also Stephen Mulhall, "Film as Philosophy: The Priority of the Particular," in *On Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 129–56.

9. Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 200.

10. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enl. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), xiv, xvi. Hereafter cited as *WV*.

11. William Rothman, "Cavell on Film, Television, and Opera," in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 206.

footsteps. We, too, must resist the reductivist temptation.<sup>12</sup> We must remain open to the possibility that our research topics might break the bonds of our narrow and all-too-specialized fields.

One way to avoid the perennial debate between those who merely want to apply philosophy to film—to simply add it to film—and those who see film as in some sense a philosophical challenge, is to excavate instances of actual interaction between philosophers and filmmakers. Malick is the perfect subject for this kind of investigation. His films push philosophy into new contexts. I thus propose to treat Malick's example as a case study for exploring how philosophical ideas travel, not just from thinker to thinker but from discourse to discourse and, furthermore, from culture to culture. This treatment cannot do justice to the rich complexity and nuance of his work as a filmmaker, of course, but it can serve as a helpful reminder of how ideas travel in the contemporary world. Malick's life and work demonstrate that philosophical ideas are dynamic, malleable, and mobile. They transgress the boundaries—be they national, cultural, or disciplinary—that academe commonly uses to categorize ideas and cultural products.

The dissemination and reception of philosophical works are subjects that sit at the crossroads of many disciplines and subfields, from cultural and intellectual history to the sociology of knowledge and also philosophy itself. These subjects consequently require an ecumenical approach: to do justice to the ideas is to refuse disciplinary authority and to embrace instead a more fluid and unorthodox conception of philosophy itself. To disinter Malick's Heideggerian roots, in other words, is to glimpse a complex and ever-evolving network of intellectual transference and acculturation. It is to view intellectual origins and influences less as fixed anchors in a particular soil than as tendrils in search of life-giving nutrients wherever they might be found, in climes both near and far, familiar and exotic, old and new. Examining how Malick's philosophical formation informs his filmmaking sheds light on an important and undeniable aspect of contemporary globalization, namely, cultural mobility.

Malick, who grew up in Texas, is a quintessentially American filmmaker. But what, exactly, does this mean? He is undeniably an artist who has explored the history and meaning of the United States in each of his films. They cover, in the order of their historical themes, the interaction of indigenous peoples and colonists at Jamestown (*The New World*, 2005); the transition from the rural, frontier experience to the industrial age of the early twentieth century

12. On the anxiety of interdisciplinarity, see Louis Menand, "Interdisciplinarity and Anxiety," in *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: Norton, 2010), 93–126.

(*Days of Heaven*, 1978); the forging of American global power during World War II (*The Thin Red Line*, 1998); and the rise of suburban ennui in the post-war decades (*Badlands*, 1973). But as American as these themes are, Malick's vision and his style, which frame these narratives in every possible way, are often seen as the by-products of a distinctly European influence. As the great cinematographer Nestor Almendros, who worked on *Days of Heaven*, put it, "Though Malick is very much an American, his culture is universal, and he is familiar with European philosophy, literature, painting, and music." Almendros even went so far as to suggest that Malick "spans two continents," with one foot in the Old World and the other in the New.<sup>13</sup> We might put it in different but no less evocative terms: he is split between Heidegger and Hollywood.

If there is such a thing as Heideggerian cinema, it took shape far from Freiburg, in an in-between space such as America. It is the product not so much of autochthony as of hybridity. This does not necessarily make it unique. Indeed, as the eminent cultural historian Peter Burke has argued, all human cultures are to some extent hybrid cultures. Like the artifacts they leave behind, all cultures are the products of various kinds of cross-pollinations. The multiple metaphors we use to describe their emergence suggest as much. According to Burke, there are at least five: "borrowing, hybridity, the melting pot, the stew, and finally, translation and 'creolization.'"<sup>14</sup> Some of these terms seem to suggest that cultural exchange happens behind or above human agency, as a process of evolutionary or organic change. Others, such as *borrowing* or *translation*, connote a self-aware agency, the action of human beings in the world. Either way, culture can rarely if ever be thought of as pure or unmediated. In fact, if culture is anything, it is mediation itself.

As the late Edward W. Said put it, in a phrase cited approvingly by Burke as an epigraph to his book, "The history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowing."<sup>15</sup> In the realm of intellectual history, this dynamic generally falls under the categories of reception and dissemination. What histories of intellectual and cultural reception recount are the various ways that ideas travel.<sup>16</sup> Today, when cultures from around the globe are brought into

13. Nestor Almendros, "Shooting *Days of Heaven*," in *Days of Heaven* (dir. Terrence Malick, 1978; Criterion Edition Booklet, 2007), 35. This text originally appeared in Almendros's book *A Man with a Camera*, trans. Rachel Phillips Belash (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984).

14. Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 34.

15. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993; New York: Vintage, 1994).

16. As Peter Burke has noted elsewhere, the "frontier" between the fields of intellectual history and cultural history "is increasingly transgressed." Indeed, he believes that a "hybrid cultural history of ideas has recently emerged" (*What Is Cultural History?*, 2nd ed. [Malden, MA: Polity, 2008], 132–33).

ever more frequent and instantaneous contact with each other, ideas are always and everywhere on the move. They move not only between places but also between registers: between the realm of the esoteric and that of the popular, the professional and the amateur, the high and the low. Indeed, culture itself, as these terms indicate, is always and everywhere in a state of flux, which is partly why the literary theorist Stephen Greenblatt has gone so far as to outline a “cultural mobility manifesto.” To understand “the fate of culture in the age of global mobility” is to understand something essential about our world, especially insofar as it represents a chance to connect the contemporary age to those that preceded it.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, for Greenblatt, cultural mobility is an old phenomenon, for “with very few exceptions, in matters of culture the local has always been irradiated, as it were, by the larger world” (*CM*, 4).<sup>18</sup>

Greenblatt’s “mobility studies manifesto” has five main tenets. The first is that “*mobility must be taken in a highly literal sense*” (*CM*, 250). Before cultural mobility can ascend to the level of concepts and metaphors, it must first investigate the concrete networks of exchange and interaction that allow ideas and cultures to circulate. This kind of movement requires the portrayal of human beings as active and self-reflective agents, whether they are students, traders, migrants, or tourists. But some movements, for both obvious and not-so-obvious reasons, are clandestine. Hence Greenblatt’s second suggestion: scholars should “*shed light on hidden as well as conspicuous movements*” (*CM*, 250). Because cultural exchange can take place at many levels, from the sanctioned to the illicit, or from the playful to the serious, the study of cultural mobility must be willing to follow the pathways of reception and dissemination wherever they lead, without regard for the usual disciplinary or topical boundaries that define and shape contemporary research.

The third and fourth tenets of Greenblatt’s manifesto address “*contact zones*” of cultural exchange and the tension between “*individual agency and*

17. Stephen Greenblatt, with Ines Županov et al., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–2. Hereafter cited as *CM*. The classic, anthropological investigation of cultural mobility is James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 17–46.

18. The historian J. H. Elliott dates some of this mobility to around the time that Europeans came in contact with the peoples of the so-called New World. He writes that “the existence of the New World gave Europeans more room for manoeuvre. Above all, it promoted movement—movement of wealth, movement of people, movement of ideas” (*The Old World and the New, 1492–1650* [1970] [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 77). Malick’s film *The New World* dramatizes and reinforces this point. But, taking a different approach, we could also point to Paul Gilroy’s notion of the Black Atlantic, which emphasizes the “circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs” (*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993], 4).

*structural constraint*,” respectively (CM, 251). The former calls attention to the surroundings of cultural transfer, the areas that serve as conditions of possibility, which both allow and hinder understanding. The latter reminds us that individuals are always enabled or ensnared by circumstances beyond their immediate control. Though Greenblatt does not invoke it, this tenet recalls Karl Marx’s famous dictum—articulated in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*—that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>19</sup>

The final component of the “mobility studies manifesto” calls for analysis of “*the sensation of rootedness*” (CM, 252). As Greenblatt puts it, “It is impossible to understand mobility without also understanding the glacial weight of what appears bounded and static.” Even more provocatively, he argues that “a study of cultural mobility that ignores the allure (and, on occasion, the entrapment) of the firmly rooted simply misses the point” (CM, 252–53). In other words, cultural mobility emerges only against the contrast of cultural fixity. But we can go even further. What cultural mobility produces most of all is a certain nostalgia for—if not an active pursuit of—rootedness.

Heidegger portrayed himself as one of the twentieth century’s premier thinkers of rootedness.<sup>20</sup> Hailing from the small town of Messkirch, where he was born a sexton’s son in 1889, Heidegger never ventured far from his rural beginnings. He studied and taught nearby, eventually settling at the University of Freiburg. In 1933 he famously refused the offer of the chair of philosophy in Berlin, citing his inescapable attachment—both personal and intellectual—to the Black Forest. He retreated to his cabin high in the mountains, in Todtnauberg, whenever possible to think and write, and he waxed philosophical about the magic of the place. For him, it was the true source of all his thought. He claimed that his work was “embedded in what happens in the region,” that it was “intimately rooted in and related to the life of the peasants.”<sup>21</sup> Heidegger made it clear that he was no cosmopolitan academic, wandering from metropolis to metropolis, in search of fame or notoriety. He had no interest—or so he claimed—in mingling with the cultural elite in the world’s great metropolises.

19. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International, 1963), 15.

20. On this theme, see the excellent study by Charles Bambach, *Heidegger’s Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism, and the Greeks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

21. Martin Heidegger, “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?” (1934), in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. Thomas Sheehan (Chicago: Precedent, 1981), 27, 28. Heidegger’s hut has recently received attention from architectural critics. See, e.g., Adam Sharr, *Heidegger’s Hut* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). Sharr goes a long way toward puncturing some of the romanticized myths about the hut, some of which Heidegger himself perpetuated.

Though he devoured the novels of Thomas Mann and was a fervent admirer, later in life, of the soccer skills of Franz Beckenbauer, these were as far as his popular tastes went. There is little evidence to suggest that he cared much for movies.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps he considered them part of the pernicious, planetary spread of technology, or maybe it was just a generational thing. Either way, he chose to remain provincial, especially early on in his career. “The inner relationship of my own work to the Black Forest and its people,” he intoned, “comes from a centuries-long and irreplaceable rootedness in the Alemannian-Swabian soil.”<sup>23</sup> “The world of the city,” with its comings and goings, its fads and chatter, was, for Heidegger, inimical to philosophical thought.

Many of these diatribes could be found in the book that made Heidegger’s reputation: *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*, 1927). Its pages contained pejorative discussions of “idle chatter,” “inauthenticity,” and other seemingly modern and cosmopolitan evils, which, taken together, simultaneously defined and denigrated contemporary *Dasein*, Heidegger’s neologism for human existence.<sup>24</sup> Despite its cultivated provinciality, this book carried Heidegger’s name far and wide. From his Black Forest hut, Heidegger’s writings slowly became influential, perhaps paradoxically, in places as far away as France, Japan, Latin America, and eventually the United States, where even a Texan like Malick could have come into contact with them (though in this case Harvard was the primary “contact zone”).<sup>25</sup> If the Black Forest was Heidegger’s all-too-rooted “work-world,” which he dared not abandon for the allures of Berlin, then his writings became all too mobile, traveling to the far ends of the globe via the work of students, translators, and commentators of various cultural, national, and philosophical persuasions.<sup>26</sup>

Malick was one of those students. He also turned out to be a translator and a commentator. In the latter roles he followed in the footsteps of such scholars as Dreyfus, who as a doctoral student himself was among the first to translate Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* into English, helping prepare “an informal English paraphrase of sections 1–53” of Heidegger’s magnum opus.<sup>27</sup>

22. See Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 428.

23. Heidegger, “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?,” 28.

24. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962). Hereafter cited as *BT*.

25. See my *Heidegger in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

26. Heidegger, “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?,” 27.

27. Robert J. Trayhern et al., “*Sein und Zeit*, by Martin Heidegger: An Informal English Paraphrase of Sections 1–53 with Certain Omissions as Noted.” Manuscript in author’s possession. I thank Bruce Kuklick for generously making his copy of this document available to me.

According to Richard Rorty, mimeographed copies of this unofficial translation were circulated, samizdat-style, among philosophers in the know along the East Coast academic corridor and were the basis for almost all teaching of Heidegger in the United States until the official translation by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson appeared in 1962.<sup>28</sup> Malick's own translation of a shorter though no less difficult text found a proper publisher seven years later, as interest in Heidegger began to pick up. Consequently, he came to play an important part in what Pierre Bourdieu once called the "international circulation of ideas."<sup>29</sup>

As Bourdieu pointed out in his own analysis of Heidegger's reception in France, philosophical ideas do not transcend the cultural and sociological contexts of their creation and dissemination. Such ideas may be immaterial, but the differing fates of their reception or dissemination rest on the work of real individuals, living and working in concrete, material circumstances, under very real constraints (such as those known to all graduate students). Whether it is in the classroom, the newsroom, the museum, or the publishing house—among other possible venues, of course—ideas move from site to site as much as from mind to mind. Along the way, they are repackaged in myriad ways so that they can be transmitted in myriad ways—as something amusing, enlightening, radical, traditional, necessary, or even trivial. The circulation of ideas goes hand in hand with their legitimization or delegitimization as cultural products.<sup>30</sup> As the literary theorist Pascale Casanova has argued, "Translation, like criticism, is a process of establishing value," which means that Malick, wittingly or not, helped establish Heidegger's cultural value in the United States.<sup>31</sup> Malick's translation of Heidegger's *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (*The Essence of Reasons*) in 1969 was an early contribution to what at the time was still a nascent interest in Heidegger's work on the western side of the Atlantic.<sup>32</sup>

28. Richard Rorty, foreword to *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus*, ed. Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), ix–x.

29. Pierre Bourdieu, "On the Social Conditions of the International Circulation of Ideas," in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 220–28.

30. Scholars increasingly broaden the scope of their reception studies so as to address the fate not just of particular texts but of whole cultures as well. See James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, eds., *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2001). One of the best examples of this trend in the history of recent American ideas is George Cotkin's multilayered *Existential America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

31. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 23.

32. Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*, trans. Terrence Malick (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969). Hereafter cited as *ER*.

Malick's translation should not be dismissed as student work, as an academic effort far removed from his later cinematic creations. To the contrary, it foreshadows some of the themes of his films, from *Badlands* forward. In his introduction to *The Essence of Reasons*, Malick explained that Heidegger's text is "largely concerned with the concept of 'world'" (*ER*, xiv).<sup>33</sup> Likening Heidegger's notion of world, which serves as the condition of possibility for all interpretation and understanding, to "Kierkegaard's 'sphere of existence' and Wittgenstein's 'form of life,'" Malick sought to foreground our active role in the construction of meaning. Like Heidegger, he wanted to remove philosophical discussion from the realm of abstract, academic debate, placing it instead at the center of lived experience (*ER*, xv). Philosophy is no anemic intellectual matter; it is a fundamental exploration of the very limits of our existential capabilities. Philosophy, in the end, is about "explaining why we must, and no less how we *can*, share certain notions about the measure and purpose and validity of things" (*ER*, xv).<sup>34</sup> It is about the creation, sustenance, and possible collapse of worlds defined by human temporality and, furthermore, by human freedom. Or as Heidegger puts it (in Malick's translation), "*Freedom is the reason for reasons*" and, a few lines later, "freedom is the 'abyss' of Dasein, its groundless or absent ground" (*ER*, 127, 129). This is the ground of grounds, the essence of reasons.

In an insightful essay on Malick's World War II epic *The Thin Red Line*, Dreyfus and Camilo Salazar Prince have suggested that the concepts of world and ground are indispensable to his art. Malick's works are meditations on the limits of the world. Dreyfus and Prince see *The Thin Red Line*'s representations of American and Japanese soldiers during the battle of Guadalcanal—as well as of the Melanesian peoples caught in the middle of the conflict—as reminders of "our constant vulnerability to the collapse of our way of life."<sup>35</sup> In their interpretation, the film is a concrete and historical example of the freedom of *Dasein* at work, a clear example of the groundless ground of human action. Long before this film, however, Malick was attuned to the existential fragility of human worlds. Indeed, Dreyfus, as one of his mentors, might have even alerted him to the notion.

33. For more on American interest in Heidegger at this time, see my *Heidegger in America*.

34. On the notion of philosophy and measurement in Heidegger, see David Kleinberg-Levin, *Gestures of Ethical Life: Hölderlin's Question of Measure after Heidegger* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

35. Hubert Dreyfus and Camilo Salazar Prince, "The Thin Red Line: Dying without Demise, Demise without Dying," in Davies, *The Thin Red Line*, 29.

Over thirty years before *The Thin Red Line*, Malick, in his undergraduate thesis, “The Concept of Horizon in Husserl and Heidegger,” argued that the concept of world was central to both thinkers’ expansive philosophical projects. One of Husserl’s chief aims, he claimed, was to tell us “something about the conditions of the possibility of experience (saying, doing, understanding) within our horizons and therewith, our world” (CH, 24). What that something was, as Malick demonstrated quite well, changed over the course of Husserl’s career. He eventually came to believe that the world was what we had in common. It was a “universal horizon,” but one rooted in a shared, existential space, what he called the *Lebenswelt* or—as Malick translates it—the “world of life” (CH, 28, 16–17). But who creates or sustains this horizon? This, in short, was Heidegger’s question to his former mentor. As Malick pointed out later, in his introduction to his translation of *The Essence of Reasons* (in fact, he recycled some of his thesis for it), Heidegger tried to distance himself from Husserl’s notion of world. For Heidegger, the nature or the limits of the world were less important than the practical experience of the world itself, an experience peculiar to *Dasein*. Heidegger resisted Husserl’s latent tendency toward abstraction and sought to ground his reflections in an analysis of everyday behavior.

Despite their differences, Malick thought that Husserl and Heidegger had more in common than either of them admitted. “Like Husserl,” Malick suggested, “Heidegger laces up the concept of horizon with the concept of the world” (CH, 31). In other words, both philosophers viewed the limits of knowledge and meaning through the lens of practical experience, that is, through living and being in the world. If Heidegger thought that his teacher was too transcendental and if Husserl thought that his student had become too anthropological, at least both recognized that a practical element was at work in all moments of understanding. But while this insight remained more or less implicit in Husserl’s work (his coinage of the term *Lebenswelt* was about as far as it went), it was the starting point for all of Heidegger’s philosophizing. What Heidegger wanted to do most of all, according to Malick, was “to read our understanding of the world out of the way we behave toward things within it” (CH, 34). From this perspective, Heidegger’s analysis amounts to an investigation of prereflective action, of the activities we engage in without first conceptualizing them. The truth is that we do not have to conceptualize the world around us—its rules and boundaries, conventions and assumptions—unless of course this world breaks down. Only then do the world’s outlines come into question. Otherwise, we carry on as normal in our day-to-day lives.

Perhaps having read Malick's Harvard thesis, Dreyfus was predisposed to view *The Thin Red Line* as a personification of "world collapse." For in the thesis Malick, interpreting *Sein und Zeit*, says that "dread marks the 'collapse of the world'" (CH, 39). Indeed, Heidegger thought that *Angst* was what called into question all of our everyday assumptions about the world around us and, perhaps more important, about our place in the world. The experience of "world collapse" is equivalent to the realization that the center no longer holds, that the shared understanding that defines our space of meaning and understanding no longer exists. But this is an inescapable danger, because our worlds are ever changing. Since Husserl and Heidegger deny that the world is something out there, detached from our attempts to interpret or integrate it into our preexisting contexts of knowing, they both flirt dangerously with those perennial philosophical hobgoblins: subjectivism and relativism. As Malick asks in the conclusion to his thesis: "From what horizons do Husserl and Heidegger themselves address us? How can they claim general truth rather than just local authority for the statements made within those horizons?" (CH, 47). Far from being a bedrock of philosophical stability, the concept of world turns out to be an abyss indeed.

Malick's Harvard thesis is a remarkably prescient and rich work. It displays not just an assured and sophisticated knowledge of Husserl and Heidegger but also a penchant for painstaking archival research (it references unpublished manuscripts in the Husserl Archives in Louvain) and a playful sense of literary style (being livelier than most secondary literature on Heidegger published today). But for those looking for a clear and direct indication of the direction of Malick's later oeuvre as a filmmaker, there is but a fleeting reference to film in his undergraduate thesis. Nevertheless, the reference is a telling one, for it invokes film's inability to adequately frame the world: "On a movie screen the horizon is often so slight that we cannot tell whether the camera is panning or the scene is moving" (CH, 17–18). While this is little more than a throwaway analogy, meant to illustrate a philosophical problem, it reveals something essential about how Malick saw film in relation to philosophy. In both, the world itself is foregrounded, in a way that calls attention to its limits: its horizon in philosophy and its frame in film.

In 1980, after leaving academic philosophy long behind and making both *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, Malick participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute organized by Dreyfus and his former student John Haugeland titled "Phenomenology and Existentialism: Continental and Analytic Perspectives on Intentionality in the Philosophy Curriculum." Geared primarily toward bridging the gap between analytic and

Continental philosophy curricula, the institute explored the role and function of philosophy in the contemporary university. As a guest speaker, Malick addressed the topic “Why do philosophy?” It seems that Malick, as a young man, had been drawn to philosophy because he thought that it might help him explain the world. According to Dreyfus’s report on the Summer Institute, Malick relayed “his disappointment as a philosophy major when none of his philosophy courses helped him understand himself and his place in the order of the cosmos.”<sup>36</sup> Whether an education in philosophy can or should address such concerns was beside the point. As Dreyfus pointed out, professors of philosophy may no longer be in a position to offer such “metaphysical comfort,” but at the very least they should be able to explain why they are not.<sup>37</sup>

If what Malick wanted from philosophy was some kind of statement about his place in the world—if not in the cosmos itself—then we might safely assume that his turn away from philosophy went hand in hand with his realization that, at the end of the day, philosophy could not offer such a thing. But could film? Since the investigation of the concept of world was what drew most of Malick’s attention as a budding philosopher, perhaps he saw in film an opportunity to tackle this issue in a more productive, or at least meaningful, way. If this seems like an overly grand interpretation of a simple change of careers, the reasons for which probably being far more mundane, there is nevertheless a great deal of circumstantial evidence that Malick turned to film in search of answers that philosophy simply could not provide. As Dreyfus has suggested, in his 2007 lecture course on Heidegger, “All of his [Malick’s] movies are about worlds; about what it is to be a world, and things that happen with worlds.” “Each film,” Dreyfus told his Berkeley students, is “about some aspect of the world.”<sup>38</sup>

When it came to the question of worlds—of how they are constituted, experienced, transformed, and even lost—film, for Malick at least, proved a wonderful medium.<sup>39</sup> Even if he believed it impossible to “film philosophy,”

36. Council for Philosophical Studies, *Phenomenology and Existentialism: Continental and Analytic Perspectives on Intentionality in the Philosophy Curriculum* (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, Council for Philosophical Studies, 1981), 4. I thank Eduardo Mendieta for making this pamphlet available to me.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Hubert Dreyfus, “Being-in-the-World I,” lecture, Philosophy 185 (Heidegger), fall 2007, University of California, Berkeley. The lecture is available for free download through iTunesUniversity. I thank Joel Isaac for alerting me to this telling reference.

39. In this, Malick may have been dramatically ahead of the philosophical curve. As Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg point out, “We may respect films as themselves reflective, world-creating, philosophical achievements.” “What makes films suitable objects for critical reflection,”

he recognized that film had great philosophical potential.<sup>40</sup> Its practicality alone meant that it could easily sidestep the abstractions inherent in traditional philosophical reflection. Cavell came to the same conclusion at about the same time. For him, too, there was a connection between film and the world that was well worth exploring, one that went far beyond any simplistic attempt to reduce one to the other. The epigraph, from Henry David Thoreau, that Malick's former adviser chose for *The World Viewed* said it all: "Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?" For Cavell, film was captivating precisely because it offered us the world itself: "The idea of and wish for the world re-created in its own image was satisfied *at last* by cinema" (*WV*, 39).<sup>41</sup> But what is significant about this achievement is that it displaces the burden of making the world. Film offers us the world whole, its horizons ready-made. But it is a world beyond us, outside us, a world we do not fully know. Of the world, film reminds us that "we are displaced from our natural habitation with it, placed at a distance from it." According to Cavell, "The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition" (*WV*, 41).<sup>42</sup> By externalizing the world for us, film relieves us of the burden of making the world, the burden of human freedom that—as Heidegger suggested in *The Essence of Reasons*—was the groundless ground of *Dasein*.

As Cavell put it, movies underscore that we moderns—postmoderns can be included here as well—are in fact already distanced from the world. All we can do is look upon it. "Our way of establishing our connection with the world," Cavell suggested, is "through viewing it, or having views of it." He went even further: "Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look *out at it*, from behind the self." "Viewing a movie makes this condition automatic." It "takes the responsibility for it out of our hands" (*WV*, 102). It is no accident that Cavell came to these conclusions about the same time that he started to

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they argue, "is precisely their ability to create such worlds" (introduction to *Philosophy and Film*, ed. Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg [New York: Routledge, 1995], 3, 4).

40. Quoted in James Morrison and Thomas Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 97. Hereafter cited as *FTM*.

41. This, of course, is a contentious claim, and Cavell devotes a great deal of space in the expanded edition to addressing criticisms of it. See "More of *The World Viewed*," in *WV*, 162–230.

42. The philosopher Noël Carroll has similarly suggested that the "detached display" of moving images is one of cinema's conditions of possibility: "The cinematic display is discontinuous from the space we inhabit" (*The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008], 58). Although Carroll elsewhere distinguishes his account of film from Cavell's (114), in fact the two are closer to each other than he lets on, at least with regard to this topic of distance and detachment.

read Heidegger. In the preface to the original edition of *The World Viewed*, he singled out *Being and Time* and, more specifically, the concept of world that Heidegger explored in its pages, as a decisive influence, and with good reason (*WV*, xxiii). In *Being and Time* Heidegger went out of his way to do justice to what he called the “worldhood of the world” (*BT*, 91–148).<sup>43</sup> It was here that Heidegger interpreted the world not as a collection of things or entities, as Cartesian metaphysics would have it, but as “a phenomenon” imbued with pre-reflective meaning and understanding (*BT*, 91). The objective world, the world of objects, is in fact derivative: it abstracts from a world of practical, absorbed engagement.

Film gives us a meaningful world at the same time that it mirrors our own growing alienation from the world. Moviegoers are simultaneously engaged and disengaged. With regard to the former, we can say that cinema gives us what, in our everyday lives, we take for granted or do not acknowledge, mainly because it is too difficult to do so. It gives us precisely what Malick claimed to have been looking for as a student in his philosophy classes, namely, a sense of the world, if not exactly a complete knowledge of one’s place in it. As he once told an interviewer in 1975 after making *Badlands*, “You hope that the picture will give the person looking at it a sense of things. A feel for the way the world goes” (quoted in *FTM*, 89).

In an extended footnote toward the end of the expanded edition of *The World Viewed*, Cavell credited Malick’s first film with achieving precisely this. Even more important, however, he thought that it pressed “questions that we ought to have made ourselves answer” (*WV*, 245). Undoubtedly, they are important questions. Perhaps even—for a reader of Heidegger, at least—the most important, especially since they get to the heart of disengagement and alienation: “To whom, from where, does one address a letter to the world? To what end does one wish to leave one’s mark upon the world?” (*WV*, 246). These are inherently modern questions, unfamiliar to traditional societies and cultures. They are also questions one asks only in a state of anxiety. Indeed, Dreyfus and Cavell, both of them working from Heidegger at Harvard, came to learn that—in the words of the latter—“the world as world” could be known only if one was willing to endure “anxiety,” which accompanied the abyss of human freedom, as both Malick’s undergraduate thesis and Heidegger translation made

43. In his commentary on *Being and Time* Hubert Dreyfus devotes a great deal of space to Heidegger’s discussion of worldhood and his subsequent critique of Cartesian dualism (*Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s “Being and Time,” Division I* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991], 88–127).

clear (WV, 159).<sup>44</sup> Together, these three knew that knowing the world and being open to the terror of anxiety were two sides of the same coin. Heidegger's notion of anxiety is what leads to philosophical questioning. It is only when we are anxious that we inquire into the structure or meaning of the world; otherwise we simply go about living.

Situated somewhere between the terror of anxiety and the banality of everyday life is *Badlands*. Based very loosely, as Malick himself admitted, on the real-life murder spree that a young man named Charles Starkweather and his even younger girlfriend, Caril Ann Fugate, went on in the Midwest of the 1950s, the film might seem to point back to a tried-and-true Hollywood genre, the road movie, with elements of the outlaw movie thrown in (AFI, 28). But from the opening shots, we know that *Badlands* will either subvert or avoid the strictures of any easy genre categorization, just as it will resist the powerful pull of 1950s nostalgia and call into question the reigning cultural norms of the day.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the cultural historian Andreas Killen has described Malick's inaugural effort as nothing less than a "deconstruction of the 1950s."<sup>46</sup>

The film begins in the tranquillity of the suburban home, with Holly, played by Sissy Spacek, sitting on her bed, playing with her dog. Only a few shots later we are introduced to Kit, whom Martin Sheen plays as a wannabe James Dean, without any of his idol's charm. It is obvious that he is trying too hard. Working as a garbage collector, "throwing trash," Kit comes upon a dead dog in an alleyway. Within the film's first two minutes we thus are introduced to the themes of life and death, with images that recur before any of Kit's murders actually take place: as Kit works temporarily in a feedlot, in which cattle die cruelly and unceremoniously, and as Holly's father shoots the family dog in a vicious and unwarranted act of punishment for Holly's disobedience (initially he had disapproved of, then subsequently disallowed, her relationship with Kit). Such imagery is haunting but matter-of-fact in its presentation, foreshadowing what is to come.

What is most striking about *Badlands*, though, is its use of voice-over narration. Throughout almost the entire movie, Holly provides a running com-

44. For more on Dreyfus's own conception of world at this time, see his debate with his own mentor: John Wild, "The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger," and Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Wild on Heidegger: Comments," *Journal of Philosophy* 60 (1963): 664–77, 677–80.

45. On the theory and history of American genre films, see Barry Keith Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

46. Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), 194. Killen's book offers by far the best attempt to situate *Badlands* in its proper historical and cultural context.

mentary of the events unfolding on-screen. What is quickly apparent, both in her narration and in the dialogue, is that neither she nor Kit is very bright. Both speak only in clichés. They state nothing but the obvious about the world around them, even as that world descends into murder, flight from the law, and eventual capture. They remain childlike and naive even as they leave a trail of bloodshed behind them. In one famous sequence, while attempting to avoid the police, they camp out by the river, where they construct a kind of tree-house fortress. Like Robinson Crusoe, Pippi Longstocking, or even the characters in *Kon-Tiki*, out of which Holly reads aloud at one point, the two outlaws seem to live, for a time at least, like imaginary natives or solitary pioneers in the natural world. They are alone. Here, for a fleeting moment, Holly entertains the idea that her life and her world are fragile: “It hit me that I was just this little girl, born in Texas, whose father was a sign painter, who had only just so many years to live. It sent a chill down my spine and I thought, ‘Where would I be at this very moment if Kit had never met me, or killed anybody?’” Instantly, Holly’s world comes into question. While looking at old, sepia-toned images in “Dad’s stereopticon,” she becomes acutely aware of her own fragile temporality—her own “thrownness,” to use a Heideggerian term (*BT*, 174ff.). What if her father and mother had never met? What if her mother had not died so young? Whom would she someday marry? “For days afterward,” Holly’s voice-over explains, “I lived in dread. Sometimes I wished I could fall asleep and be taken off to some magical land, but this never happened.” The horizons of her world had come into full view, shaking her sense of the world to its core.<sup>47</sup>

Aside from this brief moment of reflection in Holly’s narration—this moment of Heideggerian anxiety, in which the world is called radically into question—there is little evidence that she and Kit fully grasp that they are responsible for the world around them. They notice life and death, to be sure, but they cannot seem to find anything meaningful in between. Kit’s only model is James Dean, whose image and fame he hopes to emulate somehow. In fact, as the final scenes reveal, Kit actually achieves as much. Handcuffed and shackled, he at least has the grudging attention, if not the perverse admiration, of the law enforcement officials and national guardsmen who surround him. But what are we to make of this conclusion, if not the entire movie? What

47. Some of the same themes are discussed creatively in Peter Biskind and Michael Silverman, “The Making of ‘Blatherlands’: An Imaginary Conversation between Sissy Spacek and Terrence Malick,” in Biskind, *Gods and Monsters: Thirty Years of Writing on Film and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 250–54.

message can be found in the story of two unreflective sociopaths? Are we not, as moviegoers, equally mesmerized by Kit and Holly? Do we comprehend the world any more poignantly than they do?

Tantalizingly, Malick has a cameo in the film, and one of his very few lines is “I’d like to leave a message, if I may.” Yet he admitted later that he “wasn’t trying to get across any messages with the film” (quoted in *FTM*, 89). We are left to conclude that there is no hidden message in the film, only a world on view, in all of its particularity. Malick’s avowed determination merely to convey a “sense of things” makes him a somewhat conventional filmmaker in this sense. As Lloyd Michaels has pointed out, because his films have by and large avoided special effects, digital technologies, and even nonlinear or disjointed narrative chronologies, “Malick may be described as a remarkably *straightforward* filmmaker, content to create a revelatory ‘cinema in front of our eyes.’”<sup>48</sup> So traditional is Malick’s *modus operandi* as a director that he rarely even uses artificial lighting. As he admitted in 1974, “You just can’t match God’s own light” (AFI, 109).

Nowhere is Malick’s preference for natural methods—as well as for the natural world itself—more on display than in his next film, *Days of Heaven*. Although it carries forward some of the same thematic elements and cinematic techniques on display in *Badlands*—again we have star-crossed lovers, acts of violence preceding flight, and murder juxtaposed with nature, all narrated by a seemingly naive character, in this case a young girl, Linda, played by Linda Manz—Malick’s second film is more fragmentary, elliptical, and poetic than its predecessor. *Badlands* interspersed scenes of natural beauty throughout its road-movie plot. In *Days of Heaven*, however, it is difficult to discern whether the images of the natural world are secondary to the story of Bill (Richard Gere), Abby (Brooke Adams), and the farmer (Sam Shepard), or if they are in fact the primary focus of the film itself. Set mainly on an expansive wheat farm in the Texas panhandle on the eve of World War I, *Days of Heaven*, as its biblically derived title suggests, marks the seasons of traditional, rural life on the cusp of widespread industrialization.<sup>49</sup> Technology is a looming presence just outside the narrative frame. Some of the film’s most haunting images, in fact, depict the disposability of human lives in the machine age. As the film opens in a Chicago steel mill, the deafening roar of the blast furnaces drowns out all of the characters’ dialogue. But the rural farm, to which Bill, Abby, and

48. Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 98.

49. Stanley Cavell calls attention to the biblical overtones of *Days of Heaven* in his essay “An Emerson Mood,” in *The Senses of Walden*, enl. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 156.

Linda escape, is no refuge. Though it is more closely connected to the rhythms of the natural world, with its changing skies and seasons, the farm is no less technological. The train that brings migrant—as well as immigrant—workers such as Bill, Abby, and Linda to its fields belches black smoke that stands in stark contrast to the pillowy white clouds of the expansive midwestern sky. During the harvest itself, the workers are but appendages to the immense agricultural machines, feeding them wheat to be processed and eventually packaged. In fact, none of these workers, with the exception of the farmer and his foreman (Robert J. Wilke), has any claim to the land. It can offer them temporary work and nothing more.

If *Days of Heaven* is about the increasing rootlessness of modernity (as the travels of the main protagonists demonstrate, as well as the many images of trains, planes, and automobiles in this seemingly remote and isolated place), then we might say that it is interested less in the stable essence of this historical world than in its transition, its becoming. Far from showing us the essence of things, as James Morrison and Thomas Schur have argued, Malick's films portray the world's fleeting and temporal delicacy (*FTM*, 88–89). To be sure, his films reveal that he is, as Sam Shepard has put it, “haunted by place,” but for Malick, all places are temporal.<sup>50</sup> They are governed not only by the changes of nature but also by our ever-changing engagement with them. They are worlds of meaning that might be held open for a time, but they can and certainly will fall away eventually.

The primary thesis of Heidegger's *Being and Time* was that Being could be explained and understood only against the horizon of temporality. Not for nothing did Dreyfus et al.'s early, informal translation and summary of *Sein und Zeit* consistently render Heidegger's *Dasein* as “transience.”<sup>51</sup> To ask the old metaphysical question—why is there something rather than nothing?—is really to ask about how things appear, how they emerge, and how, over time, they fall away or become concealed. So important was the topic of temporality for Heidegger, in fact, that later in his career he reversed the terms of his early work, speaking of “Time and Being” instead of “Being and Time.”<sup>52</sup>

If Malick's films are viewed from this perspective, then each of his films is about an America in transition: an America in the (un)making, an America being both revealed and concealed at the same time. Even Malick's student

50. Sam Shepard interview, 2002, in the Criterion edition of *Days of Heaven*.

51. Trayhern et al., “*Sein und Zeit*: An Informal English Paraphrase.”

52. Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

film, *Lanton Mills*, a twenty-five-minute short he made at the American Film Institute, evoked this sense of unrelenting temporal change. By far Malick's funniest work (and the humor of his written scripts—at least his early ones—is perhaps their most underrated feature), *Lanton Mills* subverts the age-old genre of the western. It stars Harry Dean Stanton in the title role, with Malick himself as Tilman, his sidekick. The first half of the film follows these two cowboys as they head out on horseback to conduct a heist. Though the witty banter—another character brags about being the “slowest gun in the west” (he is eventually shot in a showdown)—foreshadows it, it is not until Lanton and Tilman emerge from their old-time western locale onto Wilshire Boulevard, amid all the cars, crowds, and high-rises of contemporary Los Angeles, that we realize that these two figures are either holdovers from another time, anachronistic visitors from a long-lost past, or oddball pranksters who like to dress up in period costume. Whether they are from the nineteenth century or the twentieth, it is clear that they are not professional bank robbers. Lanton is eventually shot by the police, who arrive not on horseback but in squad cars with sirens blazing. Before he dies, the cops ask him why he did it. All he can say is “I wanted to be a criminal, I guess, just not this big a one.”<sup>53</sup> Modern Los Angeles and what used to be the Wild West are mutually exclusive worlds. By juxtaposing them, *Lanton Mills* reminds us—in a humorous tone that slips out of Malick's later, better-known work—that the world itself is in constant flux.

A similar theme runs throughout *Deadhead Miles*, Malick's early script for a road movie that was never produced. It tells the story of Cooper, a trucker who pulls a heist and is trying to get his stolen big rig (and all of its precious contents) out west, where he can finally be free. He is a holdover from another time, a freewheeling adventurer made to live on the frontier, a kind of modern-day cowboy. But first he has to make it across the country. After a series of surreal and madcap scenarios that reflect the psychedelic tenor of late 1960s and early 1970s American filmmaking—Morrison and Schur describe the script, quite accurately, as “*Easy Rider* meets *M\*A\*S\*H*”—Cooper eventually arrives at his destination, but the Promised Land is not what he expected (*FTM*, 3). He finds himself stranded in a soulless and overdeveloped residential tract. He was too late. The West was no more. The screen directions describe “suburban streets, towards evening”:

Cooper, walking through a middleclass [*sic*] suburban area toward the highway. There is no sign of life around most of the homes, only the inti-

53. *Lanton Mills*, dir. Terrence Malick, 1969, Louis B. Mayer Library, AFI.

mate hum of air-conditioners and the sense of a place completely at rest itself on this single afternoon. Cooper is visibly stunned by it all, by everything he has missed and hardly guessed was there. We sense that as soon as he leaves, he will begin to doubt whether what he saw was real.<sup>54</sup>

Like *Lanton Mills*, the script for *Deadhead Miles* evokes between its jokes a lost world. The contemporary world, these almost vaudevillian comedies seem to suggest, necessarily entails the loss of other worlds.

Nowhere is the transitory nature of the world more thoroughly explored than in *The Thin Red Line*. Here, however, there is no room for comedy. Set during the battle of Guadalcanal in the South Pacific during World War II, Malick's third major feature is ostensibly based on James Jones's 1962 novel of the same name. But just as *Badlands* veered considerably from the true-crime narrative of the Starkweather murders, *The Thin Red Line* bears only a tangential relationship to Jones's novel. What the film and the book have in common is an overall theme and a shared subject matter. Beyond that, though, it is clear that Malick is more interested in developing his own narrative than in remaining true to Jones's work.

Of Malick's four feature films, *The Thin Red Line* has generated the most critical commentary. Despite universal acknowledgment that the film is in some sense a philosophical film—Marc Furstenu and Leslie MacAvoy have even described it as “Heideggerian cinema”—there is little agreement about what, exactly, its philosophy comprises.<sup>55</sup> Furstenu and MacAvoy, for example, see it as film that addresses directly Heidegger's well-known *Seinsfrage*. But in a well-known essay, the philosopher Simon Critchley has suggested that the film should be viewed most of all as a meditation on the confrontation with death that the experience of battle demands. Though these two interpretations are of course related, they stress rather different aspects of the film (and Heidegger's potential influence on it). For Furstenu and MacAvoy, the question of Being drowns out all other aspects of the film. Critchley's

54. Terry Malick, “Deadhead Miles” (manuscript at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA, April 16, 1970), 112.

55. Marc Furstenu and Leslie MacAvoy, “Terrence Malick's Heideggerian Cinema: War and the Question of Being in *The Thin Red Line*,” in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, ed. Hannah Patterson, 2nd ed. (London: Wallflower, 2007), 185. In the same volume Robert Silberman, in “Terrence Malick, Landscape, and ‘What Is This War in the Heart of Nature?’” also points to Heidegger, though he sees “American Transcendentalism” at work in this film as well (176). For additional commentary, see Kaja Silverman, “All Things Shining,” in *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 107–32; and Robert Sinnerbrink, “A Heideggerian Cinema? On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*,” *Film-Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (2006): 26–37.

interpretation is similarly single-minded. For him, the idea that “there is a total risk of the self in battle, an utter emptying of the self, that does not produce egoism, but rather a powerful bond of compassionate love for one’s comrades and even for one’s enemy” takes precedence (“Calm,” 20–21).

Attempting to derive an existentialist-sounding sermon from Malick’s complex and very untraditional war film (indeed, like its predecessors, it subverts yet another classic Hollywood genre, as can be seen when it is held up against a contemporaneous film like Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*), Critchley reduces *The Thin Red Line* to a stoic sermonizing about the virtues of facing death with calm. This he does over and against his own warnings about reducing Malick’s films to a simplistic Heideggerianism (he speaks famously of three “hermeneutic banana skins” on which critics might slip [“Calm,” 16]). In fact, Critchley ends up offering a reductive reading of Malick’s other works as well. After introducing the theme of death in relation to Witt, played by Jim Caviezel, who sacrifices himself near the end of the film to save his comrades, Critchley then tries to read this sermonizing back into *Days of Heaven* and *Badlands*, in which the male leads also meet their deaths near the conclusion of each movie. “Malick’s male protagonists,” he writes, “seem to foresee their appointment with death and endeavor to make sure that they arrive on time. Defined by a fatalistic presentiment of their demise, they are all somehow in love with death. Yet, such foreknowledge does not provoke fear and trembling; on the contrary, it brings, I will suggest, a kind of calm” (“Calm,” 21).

Though Critchley is entitled to interpret Malick’s films in this way, as meditations on how to die, such a focus replaces an explicit investigation of both Malick’s philosophical and cinematic work (which, I have been arguing, center on the concept of world) with what is merely a comparison of two separate cultural objects—a philosophical treatise, on the one hand, and a film, on the other. Critchley’s interpretation remains rooted in disciplinary authority and the tidy categorizations that accompany it. His account also seems to narrow the scope of Malick’s expansive movie down to a single character’s actions.<sup>56</sup> *The Thin Red Line*, though, tells the stories of many characters, as the overlapping voice-over narration makes clear. For the first time, Malick’s audio track is not limited to the perspective of just one narrator but in fact includes the perspectives of several characters. As many commentators have pointed out, this palimpsest of narration reinforces the fact that in war, subjec-

56. Clearly, Critchley is viewing the film through the lens of his own preoccupations. See, e.g., his work *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

tivities become almost interchangeable, if not eminently anonymous and replaceable, as soldiers usually are.<sup>57</sup>

*The Thin Red Line* shows us not just this world but, to paraphrase Witt, “another world.” Its central aim is not merely to dramatize the meaning of death, as Crichtley would have it, but to investigate the meaning of the world itself, something connected to mortality, but not defined entirely and solely by it. At least four different worlds come into contact during the course of the film: that of the American soldiers, who arrive with the objective of taking control of the island and its airstrip; that of the Japanese soldiers, who have settled on the island as imperial occupiers, transforming its landscape into a series of bunkers and defensive fortifications; that of the Melanesian natives, who find their island home transformed into a foreign battleground; and, fudging a little (since for Heidegger worlds were entirely human phenomena), what we might call the world of nature, which amid the chaotic interaction of these three other worlds stands out as resplendent and abundant but also somewhat menacing, as the opening shot—of a crocodile sliding slowly into murky water—suggests.

“What is this war in the heart of nature?” asks the opening voice-over narration of *The Thin Red Line*.<sup>58</sup> It is an allusion, of course, to the famous fragment from Heraclitus—“War is the father of all things”—which we now know captivated Heidegger.<sup>59</sup> Yet moments later Malick inserts magnificent shots of nature, alongside images of Melanesian children playing in the water, innocent and pure. These are scenes of organic community, religious cohesion, a happy symbiosis with the natural world, one seemingly free of violence. Two American soldiers, one of them Witt, are obviously absent without leave among the natives, for the fragile boundaries of this prelapsarian paradise are shattered when an American frigate violently enters the frame. In a subsequent shot that recalls the smoke-belching train of *Days of Heaven*, Malick follows an American warship as it traverses the seas of the South Pacific, its coal-black smoke blotting out the beautiful blues and pinks of a twilight sky. The world of industrial warfare can only stain this natural beauty.<sup>60</sup> Witt, having deserted,

57. See, e.g., Michael Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, trans. Trista Selous (London: BFI, 2004), 20.

58. This line as spoken is usually attributed to the character of Witt, though Amy Coplan has shown that it is actually the voice of somebody who never appears in the film (“Form and Feeling in Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*,” in Davies, *The Thin Red Line*, 84–85n5).

59. See Gregory Fried, *Heidegger’s “Polemos”: From Being to Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

60. Secondhand confirmation of this line of interpretation can be found in Peter Biskind, “The Runaway Genius,” in *Gods and Monsters*, 255–77. According to one of *The Thin Red Line*’s producers, “Guadalcanal would be a Paradise Lost, an Eden, raped by the green poison, as Terry used to call it, of war” (263).

has glimpsed a world apart from all this, though it, too, would soon be lost. When next we see Melanesians, they appear as soldiers, enlisted in the American war effort to rid their island of the Japanese. Furthermore, when Witt later returns to the Melanesian village, after the Americans have overthrown the Japanese defenses and have finally taken Hill 210 (in the film's middle section, which stands closest to the traditional war film genre), we see a village riddled with violence and fear—children fight, men argue, mothers turn away timidly. The accompanying voice-over offers a plaintive meditation: “We were a family. How'd it break up and come apart? So that now we're turned against each other, each standing in the other's light. How'd we lose the good that was given us, let it slip away, scattered and careless? What's keeping us from reaching out, touching the glory?” While it would be easy to read into these lines a Christian or humanist moral about the “family of man,” the style and tenor of the film seem to suggest something broader than a simplistic moral sermonizing. Even if it is true that he is—as Peter Biskind has reported—“preoccupied with faith and religion” and “knows the Bible well,” Malick is not a religious filmmaker in any conventional, dogmatic sense.<sup>61</sup> *The Thin Red Line* explores territory behind the bulwarks of orthodox religious belief, just as it points beyond a blatantly anthropocentric frame of reference. Malick does not merely lament the damage done by war to human relations, though this is undeniably part of the film; rather, as the countless images of natural splendor throughout his third feature film make clear, he is interested in a loss of purpose, a loss of a meaningful world that includes all of the bounty of the natural world—its plants, its animals, its sky, and its soil.

Whereas commentators like Critchley read *The Thin Red Line* through the lens of Heidegger's existentialist romanticization of the World War I *Fronterlebnis*, with all its heroic “being-towards-death” and “authentic resolve,” it seems that we must turn instead to Heidegger's later works to appreciate fully Malick's intent, works such as *On Time and Being*, in which the world—like Being—is viewed as a kind of gift from elsewhere, not merely a product of existential resolve.<sup>62</sup> Malick's war film is less about death than about our increasing inability to recognize that the world itself is a delicate and fragile balance predicated on, but ultimately pointing beyond, human agency. It depicts

61. Biskind, “Runaway Genius,” 257. David Sterritt has also suggested that Malick is a kind of “theologian,” even a “cinematic alchemist, hoping to unveil occluded connections between physical and metaphysical realms” (“Film, Philosophy, and Terrence Malick,” July 2006, [www.fipresci.org/undercurrent/issue\\_0206/sterritt\\_malick.htm](http://www.fipresci.org/undercurrent/issue_0206/sterritt_malick.htm)).

62. See, e.g., Domenico Losurdo, *Heidegger and the Ideology of War: Community, Death, and the West*, trans. Marella Morris and Jon Morris (Amherst, NY: Humanity, 2001). See also Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, 12.

what Heidegger later in his career came to refer to as the “fourfold.” The fourfold is Heidegger’s somewhat mystical-sounding neologism for describing the interaction between the earth, the sky, divinities, and mortals. Mortals play a key role in keeping this delicate phenomenon in balance. As Heidegger put it, “Mortals *are* in the fourfold by *dwelling*. But the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve. Mortals dwell in the way they preserve the fourfold in its essential being, its presencing.”<sup>63</sup> Malick’s numerous shots from the ground, looking up through the tropical trees, teeming with wildlife, to the majestic skies above, seem like photographic representations of the fourfold itself—they are, in Cavell’s sense, “the world viewed.”<sup>64</sup>

The theme of dwelling gets even fuller treatment in *The New World*, Malick’s retelling of the story of Captain Smith (Colin Farrell) and Pocahontas (Q’orianka Kilcher). The fact that he began working on the script for this film soon after making *Days of Heaven* suggests that, like its predecessor, it is a story of how America has come into being, about how this nation stands in relation to dwelling.<sup>65</sup> But if *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, and *The Thin Red Line* (not to mention *Lanton Mills* and *Deadhead Miles*) all explore contemporary America—the America of the twentieth century, with its vast industrial and technological might, so fearfully on display at the battle of Guadalcanal—then *The New World* takes us back to a time before all this, to the almost mythical roots of the United States. Or does it? In fact, what *The New World* reveals most of all is the continuity of what we might call the American world, for it focuses most noticeably on the colonists’ destructive reshaping of the natural world, which leads, of course, to the eventual erasure of the worlds of the native inhabitants or, as Captain Smith and his cohort refer to them in the film, “the naturals.” Here, in fact, lay the roots of the contemporary American world. Indeed, it was no accident that some of the classic works of mid-century American studies were works that examined precisely this interaction of technology and environment, civilization and nature.<sup>66</sup> As Ron Mottram has

63. Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 150.

64. In fact, I have to admit that it was not until I started watching Malick’s films that I understood what Heidegger’s fourfold really was. Dreyfus, who in his fall 2007 lectures on Heidegger says that he was able to visit the set of *The New World*, also sees the film through thoroughly Heideggerian lenses.

65. Interestingly, Cavell turned to Heidegger’s later philosophy, especially his notion of dwelling, about the time that he was engaged with Malick’s *Days of Heaven*. On this point, see his “Thinking of Emerson,” in *Senses of Walden*, 123–38.

66. See, e.g., Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); and Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).

argued, Malick's films "mark a progressive violation of the natural world and the natural within the human being, as well as a growing difficulty of maintaining a moral code and a belief in meaning."<sup>67</sup> The two trajectories are undeniably parallel and have defined the evolution of America since the seventeenth century.

If *The Thin Red Line* explores the dwindling possibilities for dwelling in the natural world, then *The New World* offers two competing visions of dwelling, one vanquishing the other. As the English ships arrive on the shores of this new, uncharted land, the voice-over narration offers us utopian dreams of a new world, of equality, rebirth, and eternal prosperity. But all of this is contradicted by the interaction of the Europeans with both "the naturals" and the natural environment itself. What *The New World* recounts is the transformation of the natural world into an artificial world. Scenes of indigenous dwelling are juxtaposed with scenes of colonial misery, the former depicting balance and harmony with the environment, the latter only struggle and strife—an existence against, not with, nature. Malick's film does not so much recount the discovery of a world as document the demise of another. Although the love triangle of Smith, Pocahontas, and John Rolfe (Christian Bale) recalls the tragic plotline of *Days of Heaven*, *The New World* is no romantic love story. Far from rehashing the Pocahontas myth, as James Morrison has pointed out, Malick uses it to explore the origins of the modern world, in which mortals begin to exaggerate their role in the delicate and fragile interaction of the fourfold, throwing it off balance.<sup>68</sup>

Nowhere is this aim more apparent than in the film's closing sections, in which Rolfe takes Pocahontas to London. Presented to the king in English

67. Ron Mottram, "All Things Shining: The Struggle for Wholeness, Redemption, and Transcendence in the Films of Terrence Malick," in Patterson, *Cinema of Terrence Malick*, 24.

68. James Morrison, "Making Worlds, Making Pictures: Terrence Malick's *The New World*," in Patterson, *Cinema of Terrence Malick*, 201. Morrison, who also believes that "Malick's work has always been Heideggerean [*sic*]," offers a compelling and by my lights entirely persuasive account of the phenomenon of world-making in the film (202). Nevertheless, he and I differ on what the concept of world means in this instance, as well as in Malick's other work. For one, Morrison points to possible affinities in Malick's work with the writings of Nelson Goodman, especially *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1978). I have found no evidence, though, that Malick's understanding of the philosophical concept of world was influenced in any way by Goodman's thought. It seems to me that there is only the Husserlian-Heideggerian lineage at work (with perhaps some Wittgenstein thrown in), which carries a rather different valence. Similarly, while Morrison and I agree that *The New World* explores the connection between world-making and modernity, we disagree, I think, about the prospects for redemption—or what he calls "transcendence" (199)—that are presented in the film. Furthermore, we view differently, if only slightly, the complicity of filmmaking itself in what Heidegger called the "conquest of the world" (201).

attire, Pocahontas is uprooted from her world, rather like the other caged and domesticated animals from across the Atlantic on display. In a series of haunting shots, she and her uncle (Wes Studi) later wander through rationalized English gardens, perplexed by how the Europeans have tamed and reshaped the trees of nature: all planted in tidy rows, trimmed into geometric shapes of various sizes, like the artificial world of concrete and cobblestone around them. In this context, these two natives, far from their world in both a geographic and a spiritual sense, are also domesticated. Their emotions are guarded, corrupted. They can no longer be spontaneous. The words of their conversation come slowly and painfully, as if somehow foreign to them. If the colonists brought industry and civilization to the land that came to be called America, they also brought the modern subject: René Descartes's *Discourse on Method* (1637) appeared only three decades after the founding of Jamestown in 1607. Hence it is not idle speculation to suggest that the colonists also brought the metaphysics that created the objective and rational world, a world in which nature is seen—according to Heidegger's later writings—as little more than “standing reserve.”<sup>69</sup> America emerges out of the interaction of these two worlds—that of the “naturals” and that of the colonists—but it bequeaths to us a view of the environment drawn primarily from the latter, which sees it as little more than a region full of exploitable resources, of passive objects awaiting manipulation and domination.

Here we reach the paradox at the heart of Malick's filmmaking—indeed, of all filmmaking. If Malick's movies offer us “the world viewed,” the world as it is, they are nevertheless—like all films—feats of monumental artifice and, furthermore, technological manipulation. Despite his traditional methods, and his naturalistic style, which never overlooks an opportunity to stitch visions of natural harmony and beauty into the human drama on-screen, Malick nevertheless works in a medium made possible by technology itself. In fact, as many of his collaborators have testified, Malick is somewhat of a technological whiz, the rare director who knows as much about film stock, lenses, and editing as any of the professional cinematographers and editors he hires. But each film's presentation hides such technical virtuosity. The projected image covers over the materiality of its creation, even as it consumes huge amounts of matériel,

69. See Martin Heidegger, “The Question concerning Technology,” in *The Question concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 3–35. For a recent investigation of the place of technology in Heidegger's thought and how it influenced another student of Heidegger with ties to America—namely, Herbert Marcuse—see Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

whether in the form of capital, machines, or people. It offers up a world while simultaneously concealing its own world, its own origin. We can see the brushstrokes in the painting, feel the cuts in the marble statue, inhabit the spaces and places made possible by architecture—but film appears before us magically, as if independent of the massive process that actually manufactured it.<sup>70</sup> Film gives us the world, another world even, but at what cost? In his essay “The Age of the World Picture,” Heidegger sought to explain the unrelenting grasp that the technological mind-set has on us by arguing that when we humans came at last to see ourselves as living *on* a world, we had finally replaced any notion of dwelling with a rationalist, external, and objectified vision of existence. “The fundamental event of the modern age,” he proclaimed, “is the conquest of the world as picture.”<sup>71</sup> We had effectively enframed the world, turning it into “standing reserve.”<sup>72</sup> Is Malick part of this?

The cinema of Terrence Malick is undoubtedly an instance of enframing, but of a very different sort. Rather than give us a world to be manipulated, Malick’s films provoke us to question the world. They do not, in fact, offer us a “standing reserve” or even, conversely, a poetic home in which to dwell. Rather, they point always and everywhere beyond the frame, back to those very groundless grounds of human freedom Malick had reconnoitered as a philosophy student. His films, like the philosophy he studied, help us see being-in-the-world as a gift, albeit one for which we alone are ultimately responsible. At the same time, they also point beyond our anthropocentric blinders. Malick’s films may not offer us the metaphysical comfort of a safe and secure place in the cosmos, but they do make us aware of the importance of this desire. They are neither more nor less important than academic philosophy, yet in addressing how the world is made—how we, in dwelling, make and remake the world—they may have achieved some of the very things that Malick sought to accomplish so many years ago as an undergraduate. I cannot agree with commentators who have interpreted Malick’s films as holding out “the possibility of reconciliation with the world” (*FTM*, 68), if only because the world is not something external, something out there, to which we can be reconciled. But insofar as these artistic productions continue to give us, more humbly, “a sense of things,” they might continue to inspire further reflection. They might con-

70. This, of course, is but one of the many observations made by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217–52.

71. Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in *Question concerning Technology*, 134.

72. On the notion of enframing, see Heidegger, “Question concerning Technology.”

tinue to spur us to thought, to reconsider just how it was that this world—my world, our world—has come about and what has been gained or lost in the process. In this day and age, when the technology of American-led globalization has finally conquered distance, when it has displaced, eliminated, or simply surmounted the boundaries and limitations of nature, such reflections are sorely, even desperately needed.

We end where we began, with mobility. As we have seen, questions of reception, translation, and influence have led some to ask whether Malick is more American or more Heideggerian, more European. Such questions miss the mark, if only because, I hope, we have long since abandoned the idea that—as G. W. F. Hegel famously proclaimed—“what happens in America has its origins in Europe.”<sup>73</sup> The game of origins is a game nobody can win. The more important thing to consider today is that in this age of modern mobility, worlds are more frequently reshaped and transformed than ever before. This should make us recognize that we are indeed standing on groundless grounds, for our worlds, we now realize, are not only mobile and malleable but temporary, because in fact they are entirely temporal. This, in the end, is what Malick’s Heideggerian cinema—as both a product and an investigation of cultural mobility—puts on display. But it is for us to achieve a “sense of things” in viewing it—to give it some kind of meaning, at least for the time being.

73. G. W. F. Hegel, “The Geographical Basis of History,” in *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1988), 90.

