

# Malickian Cinema at the Intersection of Art and Philosophy

## An Introduction

STEVEN DELAY

In a *Le Monde* interview with Yvonne Baby a year after the theatrical release of his second film *Days of Heaven* (1978), the American director Terrence Malick, then living in Paris, turns to the matter of his medium's capacity to transform the one who views it. As Malick explains, "For an hour, for two days, for longer, films can provoke little changes of heart, these changes which come back to the same thing: living better, loving more."<sup>1</sup> In this way, a work of cinema works on the very one who encounters it. In this respect, it does what any other work of art might. And when it does so, when a film exhibits the power to transform us profoundly, accomplishing more than what a mere commercial product or piece of entertainment can, accordingly demonstrating itself to be the work of art it is, could it thus be seen as a work of philosophy as well?

Now, what indeed besides beauty could more credibly account for this transformation? As Dietrich von Hildebrand says in his *Introduction to Aesthetics*, "There can be no doubt that beauty is one of the great sources of joy in human life."<sup>2</sup> A couple pages over, Hildebrand quotes no less an authority on the subject than Plato, who, as Hildebrand notes, recognizing beauty's significance for the development of our moral personality, says in the *Phaedrus*: "At the sight of beauty, the soul grows wings."<sup>3</sup> Art and philosophy, of course, historically have always had a close, if sometimes

ambivalent, relationship. For philosophical thinking in the immediate wake of Kant, it was widely thought that art performs a redemptive vocation. Friedrich Nietzsche, for one, saw art as that which alone has the power to validate our suffering, to render sense of what would otherwise remain senseless and hence unjustified—“For it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*.”<sup>4</sup> Before Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer recognized art’s power to afford the kinds of experiences that make life tolerable. Aesthetic experience, he was to note, delivers us from the ravages of desire, and, finding ourselves temporarily at rest from inner tumult, we experience a moment of tranquility before the beauty we behold: “We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.”<sup>5</sup> For Schopenhauer, the unhappy reality articulated in his philosophical pessimism leads inexorably to the hunt for what can make existence endurable. Art comes to the rescue. His underlying idea is simple: the only relief we stand to find amid all of this world’s suffering is in our experience of beauty, a fleeting refuge without which life itself would not be sufficiently tolerable.

For his own part, G. W. F. Hegel, whose philosophy Schopenhauer despised, also assigned art an exalted role in human existence. In Geist’s historical evolution toward Absolute Knowing, art for Hegel is the sensuous expression of humanity’s self-determination or freedom, the presentation of “ideal beauty.”<sup>6</sup> As this short rollcall of names from the history of philosophy attests, a venerable tradition of thinkers has seen art as more than a means of escapism from the world but as tasked with the aim of revealing truth. Here, probably Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of being is the example most likely to spring to mind. His famous essay on the origin of the work of art states that the artwork is capable of exemplifying the truth of being. For Heidegger, as with the others previously mentioned, art concerns beauty. As he says, beauty “is one way in which truth essentially occurs as unconcealment.”<sup>7</sup> But what for him matters more than beauty per se is truth understood as ἀλήθεια (“unconcealedness”). As a work of unconcealment and thus truth, a work of art ensures “truth happens”<sup>8</sup> by setting up a world. In Heidegger’s estimation, an artwork such as the temple of Delphi embodies a culture’s fundamental understanding of the “Being of beings,”<sup>9</sup> of what a particular people (whether ancient Greek, medieval, modern, or technological) takes it to mean for an entity to *be* at all. Their various disagreements notwithstanding, for those belonging to this philosophical tradition, disputes are internal to a shared perspective for which art is far more than just an item of idle amusement or marginal

experience. For Schopenhauer, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (and others such as Friedrich Schiller), art discloses deep truths about the world and our standing within it.<sup>10</sup>

Against the laudatory role of art accorded by this line of philosophical thinking, naturally one may be tempted to cite Plato as a stark counterpoint. Does not the Platonic philosophy deride art, or at the minimum counsel that we turn a suspicious eye toward it? Rather than functioning as a work of truth, art is illusory or deceptive, so the objection goes, something that leads us into deception and illusion. This is what Book III of the *Republic* maintains of imitative poetry. For if, as Plato thinks, art is *mimêsis*, this is just to say that it is a replica of reality and so in some sense a work of illusion or untruth. It is at best a copy of the Idea (*eidos*). Thus, ontologically speaking, art is not a satisfactory substitute for the reality it aims to depict. In fact, by representing the visible and sensible world, the figurative arts such as painting and sculpture produce works twice removed from the intelligible world of the Idea. Accordingly, art for Plato concerns what amounts to a shadow world less real than the divine, invisible kingdom of the Forms. As the imitation of a sensible reality that is already itself derivative from the intelligible, art cannot be said to be a work of truth. Art traffics in the untrue.<sup>11</sup>

Platonism's dim opinion of artistic *mimêsis* is not merely an abstract concern. It enshrines for Western thought a fundamental distinction between appearance and being that frames a host of recurrent issues, some of which were directly brought to the fore later with the practical invention of photography. What, we may ask, exactly is a photograph? Obviously, a photograph is an image, but importantly, it is an image of something real: a person, a place, a thing, an event. The peculiar intentionality characterizing the photographic image intensifies the ontological concerns already at issue in Plato's account of artistic *mimêsis*. On the one hand, a photograph is itself something tangible and so in that respect just like the other physical objects we encounter in space. And yet, on the other hand, it is altogether different at the same time. Unlike even figurative paintings such as a portrait of Charlamagne or a seascape of Dieppe sailboats, photographs show the thing itself at the actual scene, as it were. In an authentic photo, the image (the physical item we hold in our hand or that hangs on the wall) makes appear what was absent (a dead loved one or an historical event); it makes present something in its absence.<sup>12</sup> The photo, in short, presents an image of reality and thereby inhabits a strange hinterland, straddling the classic Platonic division

between appearance and being. The photographic image is not a mere semblance (for it replicates the physical reality it captures), nor is the reality it shows given in its bodily flesh (in *propria persona*, as Edmund Husserl's phenomenology would say).

These ontological puzzles to which photographs give rise lead again to the question of art generally: What is art? Or, more narrowly, is photography an art? From its inception, some critics held it was not. A photograph, they were adamant, is only a mechanical replication of reality. Hence, it is not an artwork. Art, so the thought goes, cannot simply imitate reality by replicating it mechanically. To be art it must possess inherent aesthetic qualities; it must be the work of creativity or inspiration. Related to this first so-called *reproduction objection* is another, the *redundancy objection*.<sup>13</sup> Why, someone may wonder, bother to copy reality mechanistically? Does not reality itself already suffice? Were art taken to be strictly mimetic, there evidently is no reason to create it, since at most it will produce what already existed. This threat of redundancy, so it seems, is particularly glaring with the case of photography, which is a breakthrough invention precisely because it enabled the duplication of reality for the first time. Its whole *raison d'être* is reproduction, which unavoidably entails redundancy. Whatever aims photography serves, this objection continues, it is not anything aesthetic. Photography is not art, so its critics conclude.

It is into the middle of this dispute over photography's relation to art that film entered upon its own invention. Understandably, many of the objections leveled against considering photography as an artform resurfaced with film. For if a photograph merely presents an image by way of the mechanical reproduction of reality, then how is film different? For, judged from a technological perspective focused on its material basis, is not the film medium also just a mechanistic sequence of moving pictures? If taking photographs were not an art form, how then could making motion pictures be so?

In response, classical film theory took up the challenge of explaining how (or indeed whether) film is art. If film was in fact an art, as the early silent-film theorists held that it was, what makes it so? As Rudolf Arnheim's 1933 classic *Film as Art* contends, it could be argued that the medium of film produces a divergence from the reality that it seeks to capture.<sup>14</sup> Arnheim, who was born in Alexanderplatz, came under the influence of the gestalt theory during his student years at the University

of Berlin. Fittingly, the influence of the gestalt approach to perception is evident in his account of film's inherent aesthetic promise. "Perception is not a random collection of sensory data, but a structural whole," he said.<sup>15</sup> If the ordinary world of perception is configured in meaningful wholes, film itself accentuates such perceptual configurations. When the ordinary meaningful appearance of things is subverted or exaggerated, their latent expressive properties are brought into salience, he claimed. The symbolism of a film's scene can pronouncedly express the gestalt meanings we encounter in our everyday experience of seeing people, things, and events: serenity, fear, joy, evil. In keeping with the early twentieth-century Soviet theorists like Pudovkin, who held montage to be the artistic foundation of film (the "nerve of cinema," to use Sergei Eisenstein's phrase), Arnheim consequently contends that the stylization and manipulation of reality account for film's expressive, and hence aesthetic, qualities.

Arnheim's view of film as art can also be seen as an attempt to answer the earlier reproduction objection: film is not the straightforward mechanical reproduction of reality that its critics alleged, for in many ways, according to Arnheim, the medium actually distorts what it records. Such distortions, he claims, are not regrettable. To be sure, if judged by the standard of pure reproduction, the film image's inherent divergence from reality would be considered a limitation or a failure. But for Arnheim, these limitations endemic to the medium lay the foundation for the use of stylization, symbolism, and creative interpretation that are necessary for film to be art. Liberated from the constraints of banal reproduction, the film image can thus be an expressive, rather than just mechanistic, medium. For this same reason, film also is no longer strictly mimetic. It not only replicates reality but has the power to interpret it. So much, then, it would seem, for the corresponding redundancy objection.

Arnheim's expressivism does well to highlight film's aesthetic potential owing to its divergence from reality. Nevertheless, such a view shares an underlying assumption with those who denied that film is an art form, an assumption that may be challenged. Would acknowledging that film is a production of reality actually disqualify it as a work of art? Is it the case, as expressivism contends (and its opponents deny), that film must interpretively transform reality to be art? Or, to the contrary, might film's artistic power, along with what accordingly makes it a work of truth, reside in its ability not to alter reality stylistically but to bring unvarnished reality into clear and faithful viewing. Whereas Arnheim presumes that

film must take a stylized or symbolic distance from normal perception in order to constitute art, might not film, by capturing faithfully what we do not usually notice about the everyday, serve as art?

This, perhaps, is the central thought animating André Bazin's own view of film as art. For the renowned early twentieth-century French film critic and theorist, art's mimetic power reconnects us to reality, attuning us to what is waiting to be encountered yet typically goes overlooked, ignored, or distorted. Rather than art creatively transforming reality, it seeks to transform us by initiating us into a thoroughgoing encounter with the world. In a way that will be recognizable to anyone familiar with the phenomenological tradition of philosophy, Bazin's realism maintains that a cinematic work, insofar as it is a true work of art, enacts a *reduction to the visible*. As is well known, the first Anglophone work of significance exploring the Bazinian theory of realist film was Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. Cavell therein notes how film interrupts our "natural habitation within the world,"<sup>16</sup> in turn initiating something akin to what Husserl means when, in *Ideas I*, he speaks of the *epoché* neutralizing or suspending our "natural attitude."<sup>17</sup> Although it is a considerable oversimplification of the full complexity of Husserl's philosophical methodology, for present purposes it suffices to note that part of what Husserl means to accomplish with the *epoché* is to show that, without the necessary precautions, we are bound to distort the experiential facts when theorizing about the world around us. Prejudices and assumptions obscure what is there to be seen, and, in our contemporary technological world, a world that was already taking shape in Husserl's early twentieth-century Germany, this means a world wherein we habitually succumb to the temptation of interpreting everything from within a broadly naturalistic, or even scientific, perspective. Paradoxically, for Husserl, seeing what is there before us accordingly takes genuine effort and attention, since ordinarily the perceivable is distorted by ideology. Film's reduction to the visible, taken in the realist spirit of Bazin, attunes us to what is always already waiting to be encountered by showing us what the theoretical gaze would otherwise miss.<sup>18</sup> There is the further point, again recognized by Husserl, that anything we perceive in normal visual perception, whether it be a Parisian motorcycle or a Wisconsin barn, always admits of further perspectives beyond the one we have at any given moment or place—located as it is within a "horizon," the perceived thing is inexhaustible, and thus our experience of it remains ever "inadequate." Film, then, explores things from a perspective from which we are

not typically either able or willing to do so, say, an extreme close-up of a murdered woman's eye (*Psycho* [1960]) or an aerial night view of the Los Angeles streets (Michael Mann's *Collateral* [2004]). Finally, by presenting things as purely as possible, or from unanticipated and unusual perspectives, this reduction to the visible transforms us, the ones encountering the same everyday world but now with closer attention and more care.

This Bazinian suggestion that art, especially painting, interrupts our experiential routine and draws our attention to what we had not noticed before is one for which Merleau-Ponty is famous. If the perceived world is the proper subject of art, he says, this is first because, as a matter of fact, we so infrequently see it truly. A Cézanne does not present us with something stylized beyond recognition. It shows us what we do not normally notice about something. This idea that art is art insofar as it highlights what we typically fail to see is also implied by Heidegger's observation that, in our inauthentic everyday mode of "practical *circumspection*,"<sup>19</sup> a mode of perceiving attuned to the task at issue, we accordingly see everything in our surrounding environment's "situation" in terms of its utility. Unsurprisingly, the aesthetic qualities of things largely elude us.

For instance, absorbed in the task of setting the dining table, I may fail to attend to the vase's sapphire blue, the sunlit curtain gently fluttering in the breeze, or the sweet melody of the bird singing its song on the oak branch outside the window. From the Bazinian perspective, a painting studying the vase, the window, or the oak with bird revives us from our perceptual slumber, reawakening us to what we had grown accustomed to ignoring. Capturing perceptual reality, film accordingly shows things as other than how they appear from the pragmatic, circumspective perspective in which we would ordinarily fail to see them.

By now, it is evident why Malick's films such as *Days of Heaven* and *The Tree of Life* employ the signature techniques for which they are so recognizable: long takes, deep focus, and medium-long shots. Utilizing seamless camera movement rather than editing, the resulting images draw our attention to things in the same way the phenomenologists described occurs with the work of art. Justifiably, then, in this respect, one can see Malick's films as exemplars of Bazinian realism. As Noël Carroll says, Malick and others such as Stan Brakhage and Werner Herzog "share an advocacy of the immediacy of experience, that is, an avowal of the possibility of experience—or, at least, of dimensions of experience—independent from routine, social modes of schematization. Indeed, all three regard normal practices of perceiving and of otherwise organizing the world—such as,

most dramatically, language—as filters that exclude the whole, existing dimensions of qualities and feelings from our ken.”<sup>20</sup> For anyone familiar with Malick’s philosophical pedigree steeped in Heidegger, there is a great irony here. How unexpected that a technical invention like film would be the very thing to interrupt the technological “enframing” (*Gestell*) Heidegger takes to be responsible for barring access to the sheer presence of the world and its things. Of all things, it is a technological device that subverts the logic of technology!<sup>21</sup>

What Carroll terms the *immediacy of experience*, we might call *presence*, a term connoting special significance in Heidegger’s thought. What does it mean, not just for phenomenological philosophy but for Malick? Here, an anecdote concerning Malick’s experience with the mindset of the ordinary language philosophy dominating Oxford in the 1960s is illustrative. At the time, there was a zeal to make everyday language the arbiter of philosophical disputes. The results were sometimes maddeningly comical. As Andrea Teuber recounts:

Perhaps the best illustration of the deflationary aims of Oxford philosophy was the final exam questions set for the Schools in Philosophy at the end of Trinity Term around the time Terry and I were there. The question itself was simple enough: “Can there be absolutely nothing between two stars?” The answer that got the highest mark, was not the answer that took “nothing” to mean “absence of everything” or the answer that concluded that if there were absolutely nothing between two stars, the two would be one star, just one, but the answer that began with the question: “what if you were to ask me that if I were to drive up to Birmingham for the day, should I take a box lunch along? I would then say, ‘Yes by all means please do, there’s absolutely nothing between here and Birmingham,’ so there can be absolutely nothing between two stars.” Again: there is a prescribed use for the expression, “absolutely nothing” and in the ordinary language philosophy in vogue at the time, the prescribed use was a way to settle the question. Needless to say Terry and I were not happy with this, especially Terry.<sup>22</sup>

Presence, we thus can say, is a thing’s meaning prior to (or independent of) the sheerly linguistic.<sup>23</sup> It would have been around the time of Teuber’s anecdote that Malick’s supervisor, the ordinary language philosopher

Gilbert Ryle, told Malick that he could not write a thesis on the concept of world in Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard—such figures were not real philosophy, Ryle is reported to have said. After leaving Oxford as a result, Malick went off to teach philosophy at MIT. However, it proved to be a short stint. As Hubert Dreyfus recalls:

[Malick] was teaching my Heidegger course at MIT at one point and got to the part on anxiety and discovered he wasn't experiencing anxiety, so he couldn't talk about anything. He just stared off into space for about ten minutes, making the class and me as his auditor at that point very nervous. So he gave up teaching that day and became a movie director because he felt that to teach Heidegger you had to actually be experiencing what Heidegger was talking about if you're going to do the phenomenology right.<sup>24</sup>

Thus began Malick's journey from academic philosophy into film.

Although it would be an oversimplification to reduce Malick's films to a "Heideggerian cinema," there are undeniable recurring themes in his films that lend themselves well to Heideggerian analysis. For example, as Division I of *Being and Time* observes, in inauthentic seeing, "one" (*das Man*) sees what "one" says. Malick's signature twist on Bazinian realism accordingly refocuses our attention on the presence of things. This approach achieves the aesthetic goal of dispelling the haze of unclarity that "idle talk" casts over the perceived. It gives new perspectives we had not enjoyed previously. And, above all, one might argue that it both appropriates and exemplifies an interesting philosophical thesis—namely, that there is more available in the world of perception than what we can articulate linguistically. By arguably showing us this dimension of prelinguistic meaning through film, whether deliberately or not, Malick has done a good bit of phenomenological philosophizing.

Hitherto, we have touched on the question of what art is, and with classical film theory we in turn explored how film can be considered an art. What, however, is to be said about the relation between film and philosophy? Following Stephen Mulhall, Robert B. Pippin, and others, Robert Sinnerbrink has identified three ways in which film can do philosophy, or be philosophical. First, there is *philosophy of film*, what film theorists such as Arnheim and Bazin examine, such as the nature of the film medium or image. Second, there is *film as philosophizing*, where films

explore philosophical problems, themes, ideas, or figures. Third, there is *film in the condition of philosophy*, where films reflect upon their own conditions of possibility. It is with this third sense in mind that we note that film, which can interrupt our habits of perception to let the world be seen, exerts demands on our perceptual attention that are not merely aesthetic but ethical too. Even the simple fact that the world is in color should not be overlooked. When in *The New World* (2005) Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher) asks John Rolfe (Christian Bale), "Why is the world colored?" we are struck by the perceptiveness of the question, for her way of putting it acknowledges the difficulty associated with beginning to conceive what might even look like a right answer.<sup>25</sup> Rolfe's reply, or better, non-reply, in the form of an almost bashful laugh, encapsulates the famous Wittgenstein adage ending the *Tractatus*: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."<sup>26</sup> In this scene, two of Malick's characters self-reflexively grapple with a recurring motif throughout Malick's films: that of experiencing oneself as being up against a mystery, the ineffable.

To return to Bazin, montage is condemned on ethical grounds for inviting passive spectatorship. It is wrong, so he argues, for a filmmaker to tell an audience what to think about what they see, and it is wrong to promote lazy viewing when a work of art should instead make demands of its viewers. For Bazin, one technique for challenging viewers is to rely on spatial realism, which induces active spectatorship. By employing shots that keep as much in focus as possible, the filmmaker allows viewers to explore and attend to whatever they so choose. The gaze is free. This freedom of the gaze, Bazin thinks, avoids the further pitfall of expressivism: montage's oversimplistic interpretation of reality. By suggesting just one meaning, expressivist film eliminates the ambiguity of perception and of existence. In contrast, realism respects not only the homogeneity of space but also its ambiguity.

The ambiguity of both the perceived world and the everyday circumstances characteristic of human existence calls for thinking. Malick's films, which are as able to show us the cosmic grandeur of the heavens above as the simple glory of a suburban front yard, enact a *reduction to the invisible*. Not only do they send us on an outward journey into the perceived world, but they send us on a pilgrimage into ourselves as well, into the depths of what Kierkegaard and Michel Henry call life's "inwardness" or "interiority." Now, V. F. Perkins's formalistic theory of film has reminded us that the successful film must uphold the value of organization. In doing so, it must consequently avoid the pitfall of lapsing

into meandering, pretentious “idea-movies.”<sup>27</sup> There is a concern that this happens in Malick, given some of his work’s substantial departures from traditional Hollywood narrative structure (most notably *To the Wonder* [2012], *Knight of Cups* [2015], and *Song to Song* [2017]). Can such works be intellectually stimulating and ethically edifying, without succumbing to the worry Perkins flags? Audiences used to traditional narrative plots may not recognize it so immediately, but there is a story being told in such works. But to appreciate it, the viewer must engage. A case could be made that this is what great film-art should do. For although there is always the threat of a film taking itself too seriously, or of failing to live up to the content with which it attempts to grapple, there is the opposite concern too, that films increasingly have turned cinema into a commercial enterprise for popular storytelling of little substance. Though in its highest expression it is capable of being a great work of art, most commercial film has been reduced to something more resembling a cartoon or video game. If, thus, the Arnheimian-sounding slogan “nearer to nature, farther from art” is untrue, this is so because a great cinematic work, like any great artwork, invites us to search inside ourselves.

Here, the call of beauty cannot be overestimated. For when Malick himself states that the intention of *Days of Heaven* was to capture “absolute reality,”<sup>28</sup> this means, among other things, showing the beauty of creation. What could be mistaken for a pretentiousness on the part of the film in fact proves to be the opposite: far from being an instance of self-indulgent intellectualism, it is an at-once aesthetic and ascetic exercise in humility, a concerted exercise in subverting our perceptual habit of failing to submit to the real. With an eye toward returning once again to both Plato and Hildebrand, here the words of the French philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien in *The Ark of Speech* are pertinent: “A rich tradition of thinking, which has developed in many ways, has seen in beauty a call, and has derived the word *kalos*, ‘beautiful,’ from *kalein*, ‘to call.’ But what is it that calls, in beauty, and what does it call to or for? . . . Can it lead to God?”<sup>29</sup> This Platonic insight is translated into a distinctively Christian key when Hildebrand, like Chrétien, says, “The world of the beautiful and of art in particular represent a real voice of God.”<sup>30</sup> For as Chrétien’s meditation on beauty shows, all true human creativity, including art, comes in the form of a response to something that has already called it. In the case of art, first the artist must listen to beauty. Only then does inspiration happen. As Hildebrand comments, “At first it is the artist alone who sees these deeper worlds of beauty that are hidden in nature and in life; he is then

able to realize them in a work of art in such a way that reveals them to people whose eyes do not penetrate as deeply as his. Every real work of art, beyond its own intrinsic worth, also has the function of unveiling nature and life as bearers of these worlds of beauty.”<sup>31</sup> A description as apt for the filmmaker as it is for the painter, poet, musician, or sculptor! When cinema is art, as in Malick, it can accordingly assume a distinctively divine vocation. Occupying this role, Malick’s films attest to this possibility—for in responding to the call of beauty, they make God perceptible, or if not quite that, at least God’s presence felt. These are works at the thresholds of art and philosophy, “aesthetic theodicies” as it were, achievements of the human spirit affirming the goodness of existence even in light of the immensity of the world’s evil and suffering. Here, the truth is profoundly simple—the best film, just as Malick says, is “something that strengthens you.”<sup>32</sup>

Having set out some of the respects in which both the history of philosophy and classical film theory can inform and enrich our understanding and appreciation of Malick’s films and the various metaphysical, spiritual, ethical, political, and aesthetic issues they raise, a concluding word should be said about this volume’s contents. Opening part 1, “Cinematic Experience as Ethical Reflection and Spiritual Exercise,” Jonathan Scott Lee’s sweeping chapter offers an analysis of the familiar idea that Malick’s films are somehow intended to serve as an injunction for self-reflection. Lee suggests that, whereas most commentators have interpreted Malick’s films as works operating in an “indicative mood,” the transformative power of his films is best understood when seen to be issued in what he calls the “subjunctive mood,” a detail that serves to highlight how these films are akin to Pierre Hadot’s notion of philosophy as a way of life. Manuel Cabrera Jr.’s chapter, “Terrence Malick’s Cosmic Cinema,” concurs that Malick’s films are transformative insofar as they are cosmic—that is to say, they aim to present the world in its full scope, in a way that calls us to reflect on our place within it. In doing so, however, such reflection is meant to disabuse us of our human narcissism, our anthropomorphic tendency to construe the world as being concerned with our own concerns. Malick, as Cabrera argues, instead gives us a view of the world that should serve to remind us that our ordinary humanistic perspective obscures the world as it subsists independently of our limited, and often rather myopic, focuses. If Cabrera is correct to note that Malick’s cosmic focus counterbalances what would otherwise be an overly humanistic view of the world, James D. Reid and Candace R. Craig’s “‘Why Should I Be Good If You Aren’t?’

The Problem of the Moral World in *The Tree of Life*” delicately explores the manner in which the role of ethics and morality remain ineliminable, not only in our own everyday lives but in the cinematic moral universe of Malick’s films. Thus, while it would be misleading to place human concerns above all others, it may well be equally mistaken to discount them altogether. Malick’s view of the world, in short, is one that tries to appraise the value and dignity of human life within the larger scope of the world as a whole. As Rico Gutschmidt suggests in “Performativity and Transformative Experience: Terrence Malick’s Mysticism,” in light of the apparent ineffability and immensity of existence implicated by such a view, one might here justly speak of Malick’s mysticism.

Part 2, “Mystery, Evil, Creation: Framing the ‘Big Questions,’” further explicates and deepens the discussion of these issues by turning to the profound metaphysical and experiential themes centrally at stake in Malick’s vision of the world and our place within it. David R. Cerbone, in “Life-Time: Mystery in *The Tree of Life*,” accordingly turns our attention to the nature of time, highlighting how Malick’s portrayal of events—at once both human and cosmic—produces a confrontation with the inherent mysteriousness of existence over which we ought to linger. If the previous chapters by Cabrera, Reid and Craig, and Cerbone all accentuate the paradox of existence, that our being-in-the-world is simultaneously beautiful and ugly, good and evil, joyous and painful, Jussi Backman’s “Not One Power, But Two: Dark Grounds and Twilit Paradises in Malick” investigates this fundamental ambivalence in terms of Schelling’s doctrine of evil, a view that assigns evil (and hence melancholy) a fundamental place as a basic principle of reality. Backman’s suggestion at once deepens and complexifies the way in which Malick’s films can be seen as exercises in “aesthetic theodicy,” as Sinnerbrink has said. Inspired by Dostoevsky’s own Christological view of the cosmos, in the section’s last chapter, Naomi Fisher’s “Tending God’s Garden: Philosophical Themes in *The Tree of Life*,” likens creation to God’s garden. As Fisher observes, Malick’s cinematic works can themselves be seen as seeds meant to occasion modes of transformative reflection and intuition (as epitomized by Kierkegaardian recollection) on our own part, something that might create goodness by inspiring us to emulate the childhood goodness we have recollected.

Lest it be mistakenly assumed that philosophical, ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic reflection on Malick’s films could proceed without carefully considering the unique filmic qualities and techniques that enable such reflection, the chapters in part 3, “Explorations of Image and Voiceover,”

explore the role of image and voiceover in Malick's work. In the section's first chapter, "*Sotto voce*: Inscription as Voiceover in Malick's *Days of Heaven*," Fred Rush shows how Malick's early masterpiece pioneers a means of using written text presented visually as voiceover. As we shall see, a technique such as this opens up possibilities of depicting the human condition that would otherwise remain cinematically impossible. Developing what they term Malick's "poetics of melancholy," Keith Jacobs and Jeff Malpas's chapter "The Melancholic Image in *Days of Heaven*" offers an understanding of the film-image as itself melancholic, showing in turn how Malick depicts the melancholy not of the human experience only but of the very landscape itself, an observation that again underscores the underlying mysteriousness of the world, as emphasized earlier by Cerbone and Backman. If mystery, time, and creation are central to Malick's concerns, it stands to reason that his films would develop unique filmic techniques for imparting what that corresponding vision seeks to convey. In his chapter "Terrence Malick's Ephemeral and Eternal Images: Deleuze, Time-Image, and Montage," James Lorenz insightfully shows how Malick does precisely this, with recourse to image and montage.

If many of the volume's contributors emphasize the error of reducing Malick's oeuvre to a purely Heideggerian cinema, this is partly because Malick's films evince a recurring concern with subjectivity, with interiority, with the intimacy (even privacy) of the human mind and heart. In his chapter "Malick's Cartesianism, or the Ghost by the Machine," Enrico Terrone consequently proposes the provocative thesis that Malick's exploration of human interiority through voiceover can in some sense be said to be Cartesian, insofar as it disembodies the narrator who has taken up a spatial and temporal distance from the events he is recollecting—contrary, then, to what Gilbert Ryle famously said, there is indeed a "ghost in the machine," a fact fundamentally due to the presence of the very interiority (and an accompanying sort of retrospective epistemic privilege with regard to our pasts through memory), which certain strands of anti-Cartesian philosophy have denied but which the "film machine" captures. If, thus, it would be mistaken to overlook the significance of human interiority, it would also be misguided to emphasize the role of human thoughts, emotions, recollections, and memories alone. For as Joel Mayward notes in "Love Is Smiling through All Things: Jean-Luc Marion, Simone Weil, and the Visual Style of Terrence Malick," central to Malick's "spiritual cinematic" style is its depiction of love, a love that resides not only in the visible world but also within us, perhaps most paradigmatically in

our potential relation to God. If so, what emerges is a view of human subjectivity that is not so much simply Cartesian but rather kenotic, as thinkers such as Simone Weil and Jean-Luc Marion have emphasized. At the same time, in good Bazinian fashion, Malick's spiritual cinematography elicits a kind of loving attention on our part that enables us to see aspects of the world that otherwise would be unseen, particularly the presence of the divine in the everyday. As Mayward accordingly notes, attending to what Malick's vision gives to be seen consequently entails a shift from *I* to "witness" (*la témoin*) (to borrow Marion's terminology), as we stand before a "saturated phenomenon" rather than an object subject to a complete concept or sufficient signification.<sup>33</sup>

In his chapter "Let Me Not Pretend: The Promise of Beauty in *To the Wonder*," Steven Rybin intriguingly exploits the richness of the theatrical notion of the image. In addition to its photographic or representational sense, there is also the ever-lurking connotational sense of pretense or illusion—after all, we understand that everyday social existence is characterized by the roles we perform, roles governed by various expectations and norms. For this reason, everyday social life is itself susceptible to becoming a mere performance, whereby we and others only present an image of ourselves, or pretend to be something we are not rather than being who we are. In a move that will consequently be familiar to those familiar with existentialist and phenomenological discussions of human authenticity, Rybin suggests that Malick's films explore the everyday tension between individualism and conformism through the relationship between actor and character exhibited in the films themselves.

Just as any analysis of Malick that overlooked the filmic qualities and techniques of his work would be incomplete, so too would it be unwise to ignore the social and political themes and implications of his work. The overt metaphysical, spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic issues and questions raised in his work bear such implications worth exploring. One way of summarizing Malick's preoccupations would be to say that they fall under the umbrella of transcendence—they are interested in exhibiting what it takes for us to reach self-understanding and self-knowledge in light of the nature of the world and one's place within it. Investigating the importance of memory and recollection (matters examined by Fisher, Terrone, and Rybin), Matthew Strohl's "Platonic Myths of Eros in *Knight of Cups* and *Song to Song*" and Lee Braver's "The Alien God Behind the Camera: A Gnostic Viewing of Terrence Malick's Cinema, especially *Knight of Cups*" each show that Malick's presentations of the pursuit of

transcendence and individuation can be appreciated in terms of their deeply Platonic and Gnostic influences.<sup>34</sup> Central, too, to this pursuit of self-understanding is love, a theme readily apparent in Malick's most recent film, *A Hidden Life* (2019). In part, it certainly is possible to see the film as Malick's own attempt to reckon with his debt to Heidegger and his philosophy, given the latter's notorious involvement in Nazism. As Katerina Koci and Martin Koci show in their chapter "A Hidden Life of Love: Sacrifice in Malick's Cinematographic Philosophy," if there is in some sense a shift from a Heideggerian cinema to a Kierkegaardian cinema in Malick,<sup>35</sup> this is because love (as embodied between Franz and Fani Jägerstätter) takes center stage. Further exploring this theme of self-sacrifice rooted in love, Donald Wallenfang turns directly in "Bleeding Hearts: Edith Stein, Franz Jägerstätter, and Martyrdom" to the nature of martyrdom by showing how Malick's cinematic portrayal of Franz can be appreciated from a perspective considering not just Kierkegaard's philosophical influence but also that of Edith Stein, who herself was martyred. In light of the human condition as fraught with political violence and social upheaval, David B. Johnson's chapter "Authoritarianism and the Authoritarian Personality: Malick's Tragedy of Disobedience" accordingly explores the inherent tension in life between authenticity and conformism, this time with reference to our vexed relationship to authority as understood by the Frankfurt School. Finally, in the volume's final chapter, "'But I Am Free!' Malick on Freedom and Transcendence," Daniel Layman continues the section's reflections on the meaning of the quest for transcendence and freedom by returning to themes explored at the volume's outset, suggesting that Malick's is a view according to which the resolution of such predicaments is spiritual. Although it is not a view of human political and social freedom Layman himself holds, for Malick, to be free is to find one's right orientation in the world by first finding oneself in God.

Of course, it almost certainly goes without saying that there is no substitute for experiencing the beauty of a Malick film in *propria persona*. It would be misguided for any written work, such as this one, to claim otherwise. Here, the written word's own work begins by acknowledging its comparatively humble task of responding to what the films themselves have given to be seen. As all true works of art do, these films invariably give much to think, and thus call forth speech. In reply, each chapter in this volume answers that call.

## Notes

1. Terrence Malick, “Un entretien avec Terrence Malick, réalisateur de ‘Days of Heaven’ . . . Le paradis, entre les doigts.” As Robert Sinnerbrink notes in his preface, after releasing *Badlands*, Malick said, “I don’t feel one can film philosophy.” It is entirely possible that Malick changed his mind as his filmmaking career progressed over the decades.

2. Hildebrand, *Beauty in the Light*, 81.

3. Hildebrand, 83.

4. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, §§ 5 and 24.

5. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 196.

6. For one notable discussion of such beauty, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vols. I and II*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). For Hegel, of course, nature’s beauty was of little significance in both his ethical and aesthetic theories. One might think that Hegel’s startling lack of interest in natural beauty, which distinguishes him markedly from Kant and Schiller, is precisely what in part explains his aesthetic theory’s unique capacity to account for the rise of abstractionism in modern art. For an essay addressing Hegel’s foreseeing a shift from the sensuousness and the beautiful to the conceptual and the reflective, see Robert B. Pippin, “What Was Abstract Art (From the Point of Hegel)?” in *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 279–306. In the essay, Pippin mentions Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrain as three twentieth-century modern artists whose abstractionism takes painting itself to be at issue. Modern art, in this way, is somehow a self-conscious or self-reflexive exercise. For an opposing account that sees abstractionism as ultimately self-expressive rather than self-reflective, see Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2009). Henry’s phenomenological conception of painting differs from not only the Hegelian understanding of art but also the Heideggerian. See Steven DeLay, “Disclosing Worldhood or Expressing Life? Heidegger and Henry on the Origin of the Work of Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 4, no. 2 (2017): 155–71.

7. Heidegger, “On the Origin of the Work of Art,” 181.

8. Heidegger, 181.

9. Heidegger, 165.

10. For a work subtly highlighting the similarities between Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s aesthetic responses to the problem of justifying suffering, see Julian Young, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Hegel’s philosophy of art, with its characteristic emphases on self-recognition, self-determination, and intersubjective intelligibility, crucially informs Robert B. Pippin’s *Filmed Thought: Cinema as Reflective Form* (Chicago: Chicago University

Press, 2020). Pippin's exploration of what it means for a film itself to philosophize, to be a reflective form of thinking as such, is a question to which we shall turn shortly in this introduction when noting Malick's creative appropriation of André Bazin's work. Presently, it suffices to note that although Alfred Hitchcock receives more attention, Pippin's analysis examines Malick directly in chapter 9 of *Filmed Thought*, "Vernacular Metaphysics: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," an essay that readers will naturally find interesting. The Heideggerian view of art receives comprehensive treatment in Iain D. Thomson's *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), with particular reference to ontotheology and technology, the latter of which we shall examine when discussing film's materiality as a mechanistic medium.

11. For an insightful account (with particular reference to Hegel and Nietzsche) of art's relation to philosophy in the postmodern condition resulting from Kant's critique of metaphysics, see Paul Miklowitz, *Metaphysics to Metafiction: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the End of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). For an argument that art can in fact disclose truth, meeting the "Platonic Challenge" on its own terms, see Anthony Rudd, *Painting and Presence: Why Paintings Matter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

12. Robert Sokolowski provides an exceptional Husserlian investigation of the general problem of intentionality in *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), including an informative analysis of image consciousness and picture perception.

13. These turns of phrase are borrowed from Noël Carroll's *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), a marvelous analysis of classical film theory that includes, among other things, a fascinating study of the relation between photography and film.

14. Among other things, Arnheim mentions the following key items as central to the divergence between the film-image and reality: projection of solids upon a plane surface, reduction of depth, lighting and the absence of color (Arnheim is focused on early black-and-white silent film), delimitation of the image and distance from the object, and absence of the space-time continuum. See the section "Film and Reality," in Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 8–33.

15. Kleinman and Van Duzer, eds., *Rudolf Arnheim: Revealing Vision*, 2.

16. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 180. That the film medium alters our ordinary and habitual stance to the world in the way Cavell states also explains why films interest us so much, why we feel drawn to viewing them, and why we enjoy going to the theater. To return to the earlier question, this observation is pertinent to the issue of whether film is art. Far from just mechanically duplicating reality (as many early film critics alleged), as the engrossing medium it is, film has the power to shape culture over time by creating stories and archetypes with whom the audience (and so the public)

comes to identify. The experience of going to the movies, thus, has led some to note that doing so is itself a kind of ritual, even a religious one. That film has this power to shape mass consciousness and culture is why someone like Plato was so concerned about the dangers of art—for Plato, the issue is not merely that the image concerns the visible and hence is “untrue” ontologically but that it is susceptible to being used for propaganda. It is, after all, possible to analogize entering the theater to the allegory of the cave: one sits inside the theater (“the cave”) watching the projected images on the screen (the “shadows on the wall”). For a very interesting analysis of the symbolic power of film to influence culture by transforming audiences, see Jay Dyer, *Esoteric Hollywood: Sex, Cults and Symbols in Film* (Walterville, OR: TrineDay, 2016).

17. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy—First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), §§ 27–32.

18 As Walter Hopp says, phenomenology’s quest for intelligibility leads to disclosing truths that are obvious (rather than surprising), yet this does not mean the insights are uninteresting. For example, when presented with any two external objects, we can ask which is farther from us, while such a question makes no sense for our own body parts, for my foot is as near to *me* as my hand. Hopp explains, “As a description of how we experience our own bodies in the vast majority of non-pathological cases, it’s still obvious. Its obviousness, however, is of a distinctive kind. It’s not obvious in the way that someone saying ‘The phone’s ringing’ while the phone is ringing is obvious. Rather, its obviousness is more like the way a punch line of a joke or the answer to a riddle is obvious. It’s obvious and insightful.” Hopp, *Phenomenology*, xx. Malick’s films are insightful in just this way, showing us the obvious but with insight. What Charles Taylor says in regard to realist painting in modernism can equally be said of realist cinema: “Realist painting can do what it does because of the crucial fact that painting can make us see things differently. Painting can bring to the fore patterns, lines of force, whole aspects of things, which are certainly there in our visual field but overshadowed, made recessive, by our normal way of attending to and apprehending things.” Taylor, “Epiphanies of Modernism,” in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 466–72.

19. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 163.

20. Carroll, *Interpreting the Moving Image*, 284.

21. For an especially judicious exploration of this paradox in its full Heideggerian context, see George Pattison, “In the Theater of Light: Toward a Heideggerian Poetics of Film,” in *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*, eds. Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston (New York: Routledge, 2017), 29–45.

22. Andrea Teuber, interview in *All Things Shining*, 131.

23. In the wake of Husserl, many phenomenological figures have challenged the “linguistic turn,” most recently and notably Claude Romano in *At the Heart*

of *Reason*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015). Jean-Yves Lacoste's *Thèses sur la vrai* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2018) is another case in point. Those working in the Anglophone context have contributed to the effort also. Among the most notable examples is Frederick A. Olafson, *Heidegger and the Philosophy of Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), which explores this domain of primal meaning through the lens of Heidegger's question of being, what Olafson terms "being *qua* presence." At the same time, there are of course those who have taken Heidegger in the opposite direction, casting him as a forerunner of the linguistic turn. See Ernst Tugendhat, *Traditional and Analytical Philosophy: Lectures on the Philosophy of Language*, trans. P. A. Gorner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Considerable light can be shed on this presence with Jean-Luc Marion's conception of the "saturated phenomenon," as Joel Mayward's chapter in this volume shows.

24. Hubert Dreyfus, interview in *All Things Shining*, 112. If the influence of Heidegger's philosophy on Malick's filmmaking is well known, so too is the fact that Malick met Heidegger, although the extent of their personal relationship is unknown. It is a well-known fact, for instance, that Malick visited Heidegger at his hut in the Black Forest. While there, Malick is said to have received an autograph from Heidegger that Malick gave to his philosophy friend Paul Lee, which Lee subsequently lost. There is evidence suggesting that Malick may even have served for a time as Heidegger's personal driver. See, for example, Von Thilo Komma Pöllath, "Wer was Heidegger's Chauffeur? Der stille Amerikaner," *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/war-terrence-malick-1970-heideggers-chauffeur-17207934.html>. Thanks to Rico Gutschmidt for drawing my attention to this intriguing article.

25. One's mind turns to Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment concerning Mary, the brain scientist, who lives in a black-and-white room, with no experiential acquaintance with colors. The question arises: in possessing all the physical facts about color, might Mary be said to have the relevant information necessary to answer the question mystifying Pocahontas and Rolfe? The scene itself suggests not, Pocahontas and Rolfe are registering a primal wonder about the world of perception, something thus akin to David Chalmers's "hard problem," or even better, a kind of metaphysical awe evoked when facing the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Having what a neuroscience textbook says to hand would be neither here nor there. My thanks to Enrico Terrone for mentioning this connection to me.

26. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, proposition 7.

27. Perkins, *Film as Film*, 189.

28. Terrence Malick, interview in *All Things Shining*, 80.

29. Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, 79.

30. Hildebrand, *Beauty in the Light*, 55.

31. Hildebrand, 59.