

Article

# Beyond Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* and *Lichtungen*: Christian Thought in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*

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## Abstract

*The Thin Red Line* is a film by Terrence Malick that is usually read in a Heideggerian key, due precisely to the intellectual formation of the author, who was a professor of phenomenology and translator of Heidegger before becoming a filmmaker. However, read in the light of some of his later works, it can be seen as an oblique preamble for the manifest theism that *The Tree of Life* and *A Hidden Life*, two manifestly 21st-century religious films, unfold. In *The Thin Red Line*, Malick gives cinematographic form to some Heideggerian concepts in order to go beyond Heideggerian post-Christian philosophy and make the viewers adopt a mystical gaze that allows them to contemplate creation from a point of view that is neither utilitarian nor technical, but rather characterised by the perspective of *Gelassenheit*. A religious reading of this Heideggerian idea allows access to Heidegger's source, which is Meister Eckhart, who is as present in Malick's film(s) as Heideggerian philosophy itself.

**Keywords:** Malick; Heidegger; Eckhart; *The Thin Red Line*

## 1. Introduction

Before becoming a filmmaker, Terrence Malick was a student of philosophy at Harvard between 1961 and 1965. Studying under Stanley Cavell, Malick set out to relate Heidegger's thoughts on epistemology to Russell, Moore and C.I Lewis' analysis of perception. He undertook his research at Magdalen College, but left Oxford without a degree because he wanted to write his Ph.D. dissertation on the concept of 'world' in Heidegger (and other authors), but the project was rejected by Gilbert Ryle. He went on to teach phenomenology at MIT and worked for a time as a journalist. In 1969 he published his translation of Heidegger's *The Essence of Reasons*. Later he joined the *Center for Advanced Film Studies* at the *American Film Institute* in Los Angeles (Morrison and Schur 2003; Woessner 2011, p. 130; Critchley 2009, pp. 16–17) and in time became the most paradigmatic case of a philosopher-filmmaker. His films can be said to be screening philosophy. They are not just an illustration of theoretical ideas, but express philosophical thought through film (Wartenberg 2007).

*The Thin Red Line*, which was released in 1998 after a 20-year hiatus, is Malick's third film. His first film was *Badlands* (1973), followed by *Days of Heaven* (1978). After *The Thin Red Line*, he went on to film *The New World* (2005), *The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015), *Song to Song* (2017) and *A Hidden Life* (2019). Currently he is editing *The Way of the Wind* (aka *The Last Planet*), which is on the life of Jesus.

*The Thin Red Line* premiered just as the 20th century was coming to an end. It explores religious topics under the guise of a typically philosophical exploration of the phenomenon of war. This religious impulse would never leave Malick and would reappear, more



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clearly but in analogue terms, in two of the most important religious films of the current century: *The Tree of Life* and *A Hidden Life*. The importance of *The Thin Red Line* for Malick's contemporary religious narrative stems from the fact that the style and language he created in his early films find their definitive form in this war epic, which inspired the two latter films and whose underlying religious themes continue in them. What lies at the heart of *The Thin Red Line* is made clear in *The Tree of Life* and *A Hidden Life*. What *latet* in the former, *patet* in the latter.

Malick construes a cinematic language that allows religious themes to shine through, following in the footsteps of the great religious and metaphysical directors of the 20th century. It is to be hoped that this exploration will continue in Malick's highly anticipated *The Way of the Wind* (aka *The Last Planet*), demonstrating the development of the cinematic messages so magnificently seeded in *The Thin Red Line*.

## 2. A Heideggerian Film in a Broad Sense

*The Thin Red Line* is an adaptation of the loosely autobiographical 1963 novel by James Jones, who is also the author of *From Here to Eternity* (Critchley 2009). It evokes the unreasonableness of war, the camaraderie and the emotional intensity of the relationships of the members of the company. There is an earlier version of the film, shot by Andrew Marton (1964). In this one, the plot line is the insanity of war, and the thin red line that exists between the healthy and the sick, the sane and the insane. This is also present in Malick's version, but it is expanded and endowed with much greater philosophical, psychological and theological depth. For Jones, there was a clear relationship between *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line*. This is something that Malick respects, integrating passages and characters from that work in his film. As a result, both films necessarily have scenes in common, but for the most part they are completely distinct.

*The Thin Red Line* is a *sui generis* war film. Its subject matter is war, in the same way as war is the topic of the Homeric *Iliad* or the historical books of the Old Testament: they use war as an allegory to speak of something else (Critchley 2009). The war that, according to the opening dialogue, takes place in the heart of nature speaks to us about heroism, honor, death, destiny, sacrifice, erotic and compassionate love, and also the divine.

Given Malick's intellectual background, this film is usually read in a Heideggerian key (Rhym 2010; Woessner 2011). However, "Heideggerian" can mean many things. This may refer to some of the paths developed by the philosopher in one direction that could have been explored in another, but it might very well refer to the theological inspiration of his thought. It is well known that Heidegger was a thinker who was deeply influenced by theology. He acknowledges in various texts that theological elements were of radical importance in the development of his later thought. For example, in "A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer," he says: "without this theological background I should never have come upon the path of thinking. But origin always comes to meet us from the future" (Heidegger 1971, p. 11). Husserl notes a similar attitude in a letter to Rudolf Otto, wherein he compared Heidegger to his student Heinrich Ochsner:

[n]ot without strong inner resistance did the two of them gradually open themselves up to my suggestions and draw closer to me personally. In that same period, they both underwent radical changes in their basic religious convictions. Truly both of them are religiously oriented personalities. In Heidegger, the theoretical-philosophical interest predominates, whereas in Oxner it is the religious'. (Husserl 2010, p. 366)

Heidegger had received a strict Catholic education in his childhood, which led him to study theology in Freiburg, at a time when the faculty was very much influenced by Thomistic debates. He would later continue his philosophical formation and break with

Catholicism—although Christian theology will continue to be a structural and conceptual reference for him—as he declares in a letter to his friend Engelbert Krebs (Casper 1980, p. 541; Ott 1995, p. 147). He will go on to develop an existential phenomenology that will deal with the *Dasein* and with faith as an existential experience. But theological categories, and the concern for the divine, will always be present in his thinking (Jung 1990). In fact, the theologian Carl Braig's *Vom Sein. Abriss der Ontologie*, where Heidegger read Aristotle, Aquinas and Suárez, was an influential source for Heidegger's thinking into his later works (Ott 1995, p. 142). Ott argues that 'Martin Heidegger can, I dare say, be understood adequately only from out of his beginnings in which, I want to assert, he always remained and into which he was later to penetrate even further.' (Ott 1995, p. 193). To put it another way:

'the young Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity and the late Heidegger's fundamental ontology address the question of the divine as a decisive philosophical topic. Heidegger's companions on his way to the nearness of the divine were Paul, Augustine, Duns Scotus, Meister Eckhart and the German Mystics, Martin Luther, and later Nietzsche, Schleiermacher and Hölderlin, a poet standing bareheaded in the storms of the divine'. (Wierciński 2010, p. 149)

Among all these authors, 'it has long been known that Heidegger was, and indeed saw himself as, a successor to Meister Eckhart' (Moore 2019, p. 3). Eckhart's presence in Heidegger's questions about being or in his attempt to overcome Western metaphysics is widely recognized by scholars. And it is in this Eckhartian sense that *The Thin Red Line* can be thought of as a Heideggerian film. In it Malick follows the typical Heideggerian path but does not stay on it. He instead paves the way for the straightforward theism that he illustrates in his next films by obliquely alluding to it in *The Thin Red Line*.

Adorno (1974) famously claimed that the most political art is that which is not obviously political. Real political art is indirect and provides an oblique focus. It is in this way that *The Thin Red Line* deals with religion. By way of Heideggerian philosophy, Malick reverses the Heideggerian process, which postulates a post-Christian and post-metaphysical thought, a point of no return at which it no longer makes sense to even think in terms of theistic philosophy in general and Christian philosophy in particular (Heidegger 1969). In order to do this, he recurs to the metaphysical questions that punctuate the action in *The Thin Red Line* as well as to various typically cinematographic resources to make it possible for the audience to be estranged and alienated from the common way of being in the world. That is, he creates a possible Eckhartian scenario. Malick invites the viewer to adopt a distant position, i.e., a mystical gaze that allows one to see the most bitter face of the world we inhabit. We see that it is a world formed by pre-given answers in which everything in existence is instrumental, things strictly countable and measurable. From the mystical distance established by *The Thin Red Line*, it is possible to contemplate creation without ourselves turning it into something objectified, adopting calmness, serenity and detachment. This is the *Gelassenheit* advocated by Heidegger (2003) with respect to things, an idea previously and more radically proffered by Eckhart (2009) in the 13th century, with respect to God.

*Gelassenheit* (releasement, letting-be) is a key term in Martin Heidegger's later philosophy, especially in texts such as *Discourse on Thinking* (Heidegger 2003). In these texts, Heidegger turns away from his existential analysis of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* and develops a more meditative and passive approach to *Being*. Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* takes up elements of the Eckhartian letting-be that should configure human relations with the divine, but Heidegger focuses the concept on a way of inhabiting the world that is opposed to the modern compulsion to dominate it and contrasts with the technological drive to manipulate and enframe (*Gestell*). This "releasement toward things" (Heidegger 2003, p. 54) is a form

of meditative (not calculative) thinking: ‘Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it’ (Heidegger 2003, p. 55).

As has been pointed out, this proposal has its roots in the thought of Meister Eckhart, who offers a theistic perspective of releasement that is absent in Heidegger. Arguably, this theistic perspective of life that is clearly shown in *The Tree of Life* and *A Hidden Life* is already present in *The Thin Red Line* through the advocacy of *Gelassenheit* and the reinterpretation of other key Heideggerian concepts were one to make a different reading of Eckhart than Heidegger’s. That is, a reading that foregrounds the presence of the Christian divine instead. Some of the fundamental themes of the film, usually interpreted in strictly Heideggerian or Gnostic terms, can be better understood from this Eckhartian theistic perspective.

### 3. Unanswered Questions: The Voice of God?

Charles Ives’ famous 1953 melody, *The Unanswered Question*, forms part of the soundtrack of *The Thin Red Line*. In this piece, Ives creates a calm, peaceful harmony through the strings, that invites us to immerse ourselves in the music. But soon this harmony is broken by the inharmonic questioning of the trumpet and the different wind instruments. This is, according to Ives, ‘The perennial question of existence.’ In the film, the unanswered question takes the form of the enquiry into the origin of evil and will be raised by the voice-over rather than the trumpet. When the hill is brutally taken, we hear Ives’ melody and private Train’s voice-over:

This great evil, where’s it come from? How’d it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from? Who’s doing this? Who’s killing us, robbing us of life and light, mocking us with the sight of what we might’ve known? Does our ruin benefit the earth, does it help the grass to grow, the sun to shine? Is this darkness in you, too? Have you passed through this night?

The voice-over is one of Malick’s favorite cinematographic techniques. He uses it in all his films. It allows him to make room for a ‘transcendent’ reality, something other than what is just seen. The voice, in general, encompasses the strangeness. Though a phenomenon of the physical body, in the voiceover it is disembodied, seemingly coming from nowhere. For others, our voice is one of our defining features, yet when we hear ourselves speak, we are strangely removed from it. It is unrecognizable in a way that the image we see in the mirror is not. We do not readily identify with it in the sense that our voices do not completely form a part of our own personal self-image. All voices, then, have this characteristic of being a sort of disembodied voiceover to some extent, and this character of strangeness. This transcendent quality makes it possible to take voices (and voiceovers) as a sign of the divine (Cook 2019). A phonic intrusion that awakens someone from sleep, or speaks to them in dreams, or reveals something from on high is usually seen as a form of revelation. Malick’s choice of the voiceover is not a mere plot device. This is proven as this narrative voice deploys a battery of unanswered questions in *The Thin Red Line*. Sometimes we can identify the specific voice of one of the characters. The voiceover gives word to their personal thoughts. This is the case when Bell reflects on his marital relationship and his hope that, if he fails, he will meet his wife on the other side of the dark waters. It is also the case when Tall considers his professional frustration for not having been able to go to war and having to stay close to the Caesar, in constant fear, regretting what he has become. It happens as well when Welsh muses on his vision of war and reality.

But there are other more ambiguous occasions, in which these voices, from the diegetic point of view, seem to be floating much more freely in the narrative. For example, the thoughts expressed by private Train, an almost irrelevant character to the filmic narration

who voices the initial monologue about the presence of war in the heart of nature and the final monologue following Witt's death. The non-attentive spectator may think that it is Witt's soul that speaks, but the voice is Train's. Something similar occurs in the dying bird scene. The voiceover compares two ways of seeing reality: either as pain or as glory. It is not Witt's voice this time either (although it seems to agree with his attitude toward life); it is Train's voice again, this time visually accompanied by Welsh's image.

Clearly, the voiceover plays a key role in opening the narrative space, as it paves the way to a much broader consideration of what is real. The voice may belong to a specific character, but it may not. Maybe it is the unique soul of humanity; or maybe, if we follow Heidegger, the speaker is the *Dasein* who is the shepherd of Being, or even the Being itself; or maybe we are just listening to the voice of creation or nature itself. This is also an unanswered question that adds to the many questions posed by the voices themselves. All these questions are like machete blows that clear the forest and create a clearing through which one can better sense and recognize God's presence. In fact, they could be taken as an appeal to an idea that recurs in Eckhart: though one constantly searches for God, He cannot be properly grasped. Said another way, God as reality cannot be properly voiced. As the German Dominican says: "All creatures wish to speak God in all their works; they all speak as well as they can, but they cannot speak Him. Willy-nilly, whether they like it or not, they all want to speak God, and yet He remains unspoken" (Eckhart 2009, pp. 152–53).

None of these questions are answered and may well be unanswerable, but that fact does not turn them into meaningless questions or pseudo-questions. They are not vain utterances or empty expressions. They are questions that might have been rejected by the Oxford philosophers who taught Malick. If so, *The Thin Red Line* could be seen as a sort of response: a human being, understood as an embodied consciousness, cannot but ask these sorts of questions, whether answerable or not.

#### 4. The Primacy of Incarnation

This is one of the major themes in *The Thin Red Line*, i.e., the embodiment of consciousness. It is a topic that Heidegger pointedly avoids in *Being and Time* but that surfaces in some of his later writings. Heidegger consistently resists employing the vocabulary of "body" or "embodiment," as such language presupposes a conception of the human being as *Vorhandenheit* ("presence-at-hand") (Overgaard 2004, p. 126). Malick's peculiar style of filming, which is dominated by jump-cuts, a diversity of points of view (Misek 2008) and a very idiosyncratic way of editing, is a powerful tool for bringing this specific feature to the fore, particularly in the form of the cinematic stream of consciousness. This can never take the form of linear reasoning. Flashing images are, on many occasions, accompanied by one of Hans Zimmer's scores, which sounds like a fast-ticking clock. This works to keep the rhythm of an 'external' time that really does not correspond either to internal time or to the time of events. This dynamic is manifest in the somber melody that plays over that repetitive cadence: 'Hours like months,'—says private Train— 'Days like years.'

As is common in storytelling, Malick's films feature individuals who carry out actions that are intelligible in terms of strategic deliberations; however, specific to Malick's characters is that they are mainly moved by the experiences that result from the fact that they are embodied agents. They are affected by the world not only physically, but also emotionally through what they experience, what they remember and what they hope for. As Saint Augustine pointed out in his *Confessions*,

'it is inaccurate to say, 'There are three tenses or times: past, present and future,' though it might properly be said, 'There are three tenses or times: the present of past things, the present of present things, and the present of future things.' These are three realities in the mind, but nowhere else as far as I can see, for the

present of past things is memory, the present of present things is attention, and the present of future things is expectation'. (Saint Augustine 1997, pp. XI, 20, 26)

This triple present creates our experience of the world. This temporal experience is deeply incarnated in a corporality through which we can access reality, even divine reality. It could be argued that for Malick the thin red line is not so much the line that separates sanity from madness (as it was for Jones) but fundamentally the flesh that signifies our embodiment in the world. This is a typical element of the Christian imagination: incarnation as the key element of anthropology and the history of salvation; that is, the eternal Word became man by assuming human nature (Eckhart 2009, p. 255).

Malick cinematographically shows embodiment throughout the film, by resorting to another cinematic technique he holds particularly dear: the tactile image. It is a technique that has been compared to the pictorial style that Wölfflin associates with baroque art (as opposed to classical linear art) (Davies 2009, p. 57). Malick's camera "simultaneously amplifies the tactile capacity of the filmmaker's vision, his or her eyes through the camera informed by a capacity to touch the world, to intend texture through this machine-mediated vision" (Sobchack 1992, p. 185). The tactile dominates *The Thin Red Line* in both the human and the natural sense. The human sense can be seen in the caresses shared between Bell and his wife and those of Witt in all his human interactions. The natural sense is manifest, for example, in the grass swaying in the wind during the assault on the hill. The camera follows the soldiers, giving us a subjective perspective that seems to belong to no one. This tactile character highlights a certain way of being in the world, which contrasts with the strictly visual with its inherent distance which tends to be dehumanizing, aseptic, objectifying and instrumentalizing. This is the typical perspective assumed by the modern philosophies of subjectivity: the human being is seen mainly as a knowing being, and knowledge means 'scientific' knowledge.

The contrast between these two approaches is clear in the struggle between Colonel Tall and Captain Staros. Tall directs the attack on the hill from a distance, with his binoculars and his radio, instrumentalizing his men as expendable objects to achieve his own goal. The latter is not a strategic target, but satiating his unsatisfied desire to win the battle. In Tall's case it is 'loyalty at a distance' to superiors who are not present but only seen in passing before and after the action. That is to say, a visual sort of loyalty to big egos operating from afar thinking only of their own importance (I do not think it is coincidental that these superiors are all A-listers). Tall has an impersonal attitude toward his men, because he does not care whether they are killed or not. As Captain Staros tells him by way of reproach, he has never had anyone die in his arms. By contrast, Staros is a close, tactile, human character who personifies a different loyalty. In the case of Staros, it is a tactile loyalty, a loyalty of proximity to his neighbor, to the community of men with whom he lives (he is-with them) (*Mitsein*)<sup>1</sup>, to those who he calls 'my sons,' and to those who in fact, are carrying the story forward. Staros (*staurós* is Greek for 'cross') sacrifices his own career for the good of his men. He cares for his men. He would not betray them. All these are Heideggerian categories: care, being-with, being in the world. . . . But they carry religious significance as well. Staros embodies all of them, as well as the attention to ritual and prayer. However, no one is more tactile in the film than Witt, who is close to everyone: his mother (in his memories), the Melanesian children, the dying Sergeant Keck, the terrified Japanese prisoner, his companions. . . . His gaze is always compassionate, even tearful. The characters who really guide the action opt for an 'embodied knowledge,' which Malick's tactile camera shows in all its richness. This embodied experience reaches divine heights as well by way of an analogical imagination (Tracy 1981; Greeley 2000).

By filming in this way, Malick subtly challenges an idea that has persisted at least since the time of Plato, that the higher senses are sight and hearing (Castro 2017): idea

(*idéa*) and what is seen (*eídos*) are etymologically related. The eye thus becomes the main sense organ for knowledge. The inferior senses—taste, smell and touch—somehow pollute the ideal reality. Malick's vindication of this tactile reality places him in the line of Aristotle and Aquinas. Aristotle considers touch the most universal sense, as 'without touch it is impossible for any other [sense] to exist' (Aristotle 2002, p. 435a). Keeping at a distance from Plato's claim that sight is the highest sense because it is the most distant and theoretical and touch the lowest because it is immediate, Aristotle defended that the hand is the tool of tools, the instrument that includes other instruments (Aristotle 2004, p. 687b). In a similar way, Aquinas holds that the soul resembles the physical hand. Both can assimilate all the forms of being and a human being can become everything<sup>2</sup>. This analogy between the hand and the soul, a phenomenological intuition *avant la lettre*, somewhat clarifies Malick's commitment to the tactile reality of the world and to the possibility of becoming all things, of entering into deep communion with everything that exists.

In this respect, Malick clearly follows the phenomenological tradition in which he was trained, one which generally gives preference to sight and hearing yet vindicates the other senses in its conception of the human being. For example, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is, among other things, a reflection on the experience of the body. He says:

'We can "conceive a man without hands, feet, head" and, *a fortiori* a sexless man (. . .). But this is the case only if we take an abstract view of hands, feet, head or sexual apparatus, regarding them, that is, as fragments of matter, and ignoring their living function. Only, indeed, if we form an abstract notion of man in general, into which only the *Cogitatio* is allowed to enter. If, on the other hand, we conceive man in terms of his experience, that is to say, of his distinctive way of patterning the world, and if we reintegrate the "organs" into the functional totality in which they play their part, a handless or sexless man is as inconceivable as one without the power of thought'. (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 197)

Touch is, then, not just a sense from which we can derive a theoretical idea, nor would this be the aim of the experience. Instead, touch is an element of the human way of being in the world, something that makes people present beyond mere representation, something that overcomes the thin red line. Moreover, bridging this distance is a definitive part of the Christian incarnation.

## 5. The War of the Worlds: A True Eckhartian Proposal

Nothing less than "the world" was the subject of Malick's rejected Oxford doctoral dissertation (Woessner 2011, p. 149). It is a typically Heideggerian issue: the world as the self-constitution of human beings in relation to entities wherein the human being dwells. The concept of "world" is a central feature in Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, developed for his early Freiburg lectures. 'World' herein designates the horizon within which human existence takes place. It implies a reference not only to the 'surrounding world' (*Umwelt*), but also to the shared world (*Mitwelt*), something that Heidegger will deal with again in *Being and Time*. In this work, he also notes that to be is to be-with (*Mitsein*), as an essential element of the 'being-in-the-world' (*In-der-Welt-Sein*). The concept of world, in Heidegger's philosophy, is an alternative to the ontic approaches to reality and brings out the fact that world and meaning are coextensive. Being-in-the world, as argued in *Being and Time* (§12–13), means being world-forming or world-disclosing. The world is thus not a set of entities, but a structure of references disclosed as a meaningful whole through *Dasein's* being, making it inseparable from the structures of interpretation, concern (*Besorgen*), and significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) that characterize its mode of being. As Heidegger writes, "The relational totality of this signifying we call 'significance'. This is

what makes up the structure of the world—the structure of that wherein Dasein as such already is” (Heidegger 2001, p. 120).

The theme of “the world” is present in one of the most important relationships in the development of *The Thin Red Line*’s narrative, the relationship between Sergeant Welsh and Private Witt, the latter of whom some has seen a personification of Wittgenstein. The question to be elucidated in this relationship is profoundly metaphysical: is this the only world or is there another world?

The first dialogue between the two occurs after Witt has been arrested for going AWOL and taking refuge in the Melanesian village. The question of the plurality of worlds is raised in this conversation. Welsh argues that, ‘In this world, a man, himself, is nothing. And there ain’t no world but this one.’ Witt replies: ‘I seen another world. Sometimes I think it was just my imagination.’ Welsh is closed to that possibility: ‘You’ve seen something I never will.’ James (2014) emphasized the element of the will to believe in religious belief. This is an idea anticipated by Aquinas, who follows Augustine to state that, ‘Man can do other things unwillingly, but he can believe only if he wills it.’ (Aquinas 1953, q.14, a.1). Assent is an essential part of the act of believing. ‘Faith implies assent of the intellect to that which is believed’ (Aquinas 1947, II-II, q.1, a.4). No will, no belief, no seeing. Witt can doubt he has seen another world, but he trusts. His will is ready. Welsh’s is not.

*The Thin Red Line* also tells the story of collapsing worlds (Dreyfus and Salazar 2009), the symbolic end of what sustains one’s identity. Private Doll kills a Japanese soldier and recognizes that in doing so he kills not just one man, but the entire normative structure of the world as he knows it. It is the end of a world in which the starry sky and the moral order simply vanish. Sgt. McCron, whom we see praying the ‘Our Father’ with his men at the beginning, loses his entire platoon. In his resultant madness, he pronounces that we are but dust as the same slips through his fingers. Later we see him stand up and face the gunfire without fear. The collapse of his world drives McCron mad and makes him invulnerable to disappearing from it. Private Bell’s world is affected in a similar manner when his wife leaves him. Her love has kept not only his body alive but his sense of self as well. And so when the Ithaca in which his Penelope awaits him disappears along with her, we do not know what will become of him.

Other soldiers avoid this collapse by cynical denial. The world is, simply put, a set of facts perfectly describable by science and a specific type of reason, with no place for the spirit. This idea is inherent in Sergeant Welsh’s advice to Witt to close his eyes, because there are only these rocks, this world, and there is nothing to die for. Thus, he becomes invulnerable to the collapse of the world, because he has no meaningful world to collapse. He rejects the medal that Staros offers him, because it is just a recognition by the people who fuel the war in which he is trapped, and in rejecting the medal, he rejects the lie for which he fights. Bliss is, for him, the same as apathy: feeling nothing, caring about nothing. His relationship with Witt seems to reveal, however, that he does feel longing. One is left to wonder if he longs for the light he sees in Witt, the reflected glory. In their third conversation Welsh says to Witt: ‘You still believing’ in the beautiful light, are ya? How do you do that? You’re a magician to me.’ Witt replies: ‘I still see a spark in you.’ Maybe this spark is what makes him wonder in tears, at Witt’s grave, where his spark is now. In Christian terms, this spark is divine, image of God in man. *Das Seelenfünklein* (soul spark) is the term that Meister Eckhart uses to refer to this divinity in humanity<sup>3</sup>.

In the end, Witt tries to achieve spiritual immortality, to disappear without dying. In the beginning he remembers his mother’s death, her calm, her last breath, the final instant accepted with total serenity, calmness, *Gelassenheit*. In reflecting on his mother’s death, he says he did not see beauty or hope when she met God. He did not see immortality at that moment. But the film shows his mother being received by a girl who hugs her;

the camera moves upwards, as if the soul were leaving the room, and that image merges with that of the beach, a symbol of paradise in the film. This seems to be the secret of immortality: serenity; a peace for which Witt hopes in his last moment. Though secular in expression, this idea is very similar to Eckhart's, who describes *Das Seelenfünklein* as the continuous presence of God in the soul, i.e., the birth of God in the soul in an eternal 'now' that overcomes death.

Witt is open to an indestructible world. Like Welsh, he is invulnerable to the collapse of the world, but for a different reason: the spiritual enlightenment he achieves opens him up to a world that can never collapse. It is a world that determines his calm and his consoling attitude towards dying soldiers. Unlike Welsh, he has seen another world, has touched the glory, has experienced the light.

But their shared sense of invulnerability brings them closer. Witt embodies the pole of metaphysical trust in a goodness that points to an agapeic origin (Desmond 2003); Welsh represents the pole of metaphysical distrust arising from the precariousness of human finitude. Witt has an ontological sense of gratitude for the goodness of being; Welsh is aware of the destructive force of the world and is concerned only with physical survival. Once the first skirmish is over, they converse again and Welsh reminds Witt that one man alone cannot change anything. 'There's not some other world out there where everything's gonna be okay. There's just this one, just this rock.' On this occasion, Witt remains as silent as Jesus before Pilate.

Witt's 'other world' is embodied both in the Melanesian paradise (in which the main characters are the children) and in his mother's last moments of life. The world he refers to appears first as an aesthetic presence: the brightness, the glory, the overwhelming beauty of all things, and especially in that paradise where human beings live in harmony with nature, with death and with each other. The film is dominated by the presence of light that pierces the trees, the fog, the smoke. This effect creates luminous spaces in which light is allowed to shine in same way it does in a Rembrandt painting or through a Gothic cathedral (again the *Gelassenheit*: let be). Those who interpret the film in light of Malick's philosophical background say that the filmmaker is thus representing Heideggerian clearings, regions of Being in which entities are disclosed in a specific way. It might also reflect the very happening of openness, which can be found in Heidegger's later thought. Notwithstanding, the omnipresence and fundamental role of light throughout the film allows us to advance the hypothesis that Malick goes a step further and takes advantage of these Heideggerian clearings to insist not so much on the clearing, but on the light that makes the clearing a clearing, on the light that makes it possible for things to be illuminated, that is to say, for things to be. In the film, 'we look up through the water to the sun; we pan up huge trees to the light; sunlight streaming through leaves pervades many of the scenes, as if to suggest that we are seeing not mere objects but objects in their being illuminated by this basic ontological question, prompted by their being at all' (Pippin 2013, p. 271). Malick makes cinematographically present the traditional equation between light and the divine, which since the assumption of Neoplatonic thought by the Fathers of the Church has been a fundamental element of Christian thought.

In the Christian tradition, light refers to the agapeic, to the loving origin of reality, to the *claritas* considered a substantial element of the beauty of the real. This, according to Aquinas and the Thomistic tradition, is part of its truth and goodness. God is Light and also Light from Light. God being Light makes it possible for us to see the light (Psalm 36, 10). The only way to really see is letting light be light, that is, renewing the creative act of God: "'Let there be light," God said, and there was light' (Gn 1, 3). The interruption of this creative process belongs to the domain of darkness, depicted in the film by making use of Heidegger's critique of technology, in this case embodied in the image of war, which

puts all the technoscientific enterprise at the service of the destruction of nature. Now the shining hills become something to be 'taken,' destroyed, and thus darkened. The world is subjugated by this destructive and dark power. Witt, however, is not seduced by this instrumental reason, as most representatives of the military high command seem to be. Witt is not mired in this obscurity. Rather, the passage through this darkness allows him, as happens with all mystics, to see the aesthetic as an incarnation of the spiritual: he accepts the darkness of the world, that which followed our expulsion from paradise. In the film, it is manifested as sick children and fighting adults. Facing this corruption, he says: '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 that good that was given us? Let it slip away. Scattered it, careless. What's keepin' us from reaching out, touching the glory?' This deeply Christian idea that there is something, an obstacle for the Kingdom of God to become reality, is accompanied by the hope that things will shine again in a new way, a way pregnant with meaning, i.e., that the light of the Melanesian children, threatened by the darkness of war, will shine forth and reach even the rocks themselves.

It is all about the dialectic between pain and glory. In one of the central voiceovers of the film, Train says: 'One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. But death's got the final word. It's laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory. Feels something smiling through him.' Meanwhile the camera has been focusing in turn on Welsh and Witt. For Witt the light and darkness of the world reside together in all things: being honest, loving truth and goodness and being loved do not lessen suffering. The idea that justice does not deliver from pain will be repeated in *The Tree of Life* and *A Hidden Life*. In these two films, we are reminded that anyone can be a victim, regardless of what they do or think. However, like in the *Book of Job*, we can see the hand of God in the gift and in the seizure of justice. God is seen not only by those who perceive His gaze upon them, but also by those who notice when He turns His back on them.

Notwithstanding, as Eckhart says: 'light and darkness cannot exist together. God is the truth, He is the light in Himself'. (Eckhart 2009, p. 67). 'For in God there is light and being and in creatures there is darkness and nothingness, since what in God is light and being, in creatures is darkness and nothingness' (Eckhart 2009, pp. 413–14). From this vantage point, we can better engage with one of the film's climactic scenes: the one in which Witt dies. Perhaps this death is better described as Witt disappearing without dying, as he enters the light upon which he has been reflecting throughout the film. In an act of altruism, he offers himself up as decoy to lure the Japanese squadron away into a 'Heideggerian' clearing. This is very relevant in that Malick makes a philosophical claim that goes beyond Heidegger's meaning.

Heidegger's well-known term *clearing* (*Lichtung*) is not easy to interpret. In colloquial German, *Lichtung* means the pathway established by foresters to allow their cut trees to be transported out of the forest. In Heidegger's technical language, *clearing* has different meanings. In his 1930s texts (e.g., Heidegger 2012), the concept of the *clearing* undergoes a deep transformation from its earlier treatment in *Being and Time* (Sheehan 2015, p. 224). Now the clearing is no longer the openness *within* which beings appear, but the very *happening* of openness, the event of *dis-closure* 'that remains hidden while disclosing things as meaningful' (Sheehan 2015, p. 226). 'Clearing' becomes thus the originary phenomenon that makes any intelligibility or appearing possible in the first place. That is, the clearing is not a background against which beings show up; it is the very condition for the possibility of any disclosure whatsoever.

Clearings are also intimately related to light. But Heidegger does not posit a 'light' behind the clearing; rather, the clearing *is* what lightens, understood in a non-metaphysical,

phenomenological sense. Even though Heidegger insists that etymologically this term does not refer to *Licht* (light), but to *leicht* (light, not heavy) and *lichten*, which means to lighten, to open something up (he obviously wants to get rid of all theological resonances), he also recognizes the relationship between them: ‘light can stream into the clearing [*Lichtung*], into openness, and allow the brightness play with darkness in it. But light never first creates openness [*Lichtung*]. Rather, light presupposes openness’ (Heidegger 1972, p. 75; Castro 2021). So, for Heidegger it is not the light that dominates, but the clearing that creates the conditions for the light to be reflected and thus play with the darkness of the hidden. Nevertheless, there is no clearing except to let the light in. . .

A key point in Heidegger’s later philosophy is that the clearing remains “hidden,” but not in the mystical sense of concealing itself in way similar to the Christian God. As Sheehan notes, ‘We should avoid the hypostasization and quasi-personalization of the clearing that insinuates itself into Heideggerian discourse via the faux reflexive: “The clearing hides itself.” In this case, verb forms like *sich entziehen* and *sich verbergen* are to be read as “The clearing is withdrawn, is hidden” instead of “The clearing ups and hides itself.”’ (Sheehan 2015, p. 225). In contrast, the Christian God reveals Himself as a personal being, even if He remains partially concealed. In Meister Eckhart’s account, the clearing pertains to the soul’s capacity to open an inner space through *Abgeschiedenheit* (detachment) and *Gelassenheit* (letting-be), thereby making itself receptive to the divine presence. This process constitutes an inward spiritual journey—a clearing within the soul oriented toward union with the Godhead:

‘Let go of yourself and let God act with you and in you as He will. This work is His, this Word is His, this birth is His, in fact every single thing that you are. For you have abandoned self and have gone out of your (soul’s) powers and their activities, and your personal nature. Therefore God must enter into your being and powers, because you have bereft yourself of all possessions, and become as a desert, as it is written, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Matt. 3:3). Let this eternal voice cry out in you as it listeth, and be as a desert in respect of yourself and all things’. (Eckhart 2009, pp. 51–52)

The voice-over throughout the film establishes a dialogical structure that evokes an *I–Thou* relationship, one that is intimately linked to the recurring visual motif of light striving to penetrate obstacles in search of a clearing. At the climactic scene where Witt is shot, we can say he has fought the good fight to the end; he has run the race to the finish; he has kept the faith (2 Tim 4: 7). And so, he enters the clearing ready, like his mother, to calmly experience his last. Once Witt is shot, Malick shows images of nature, trees, water and birds, those entities in which Witt had seen the glow of glory. The clearing opens itself up to eschatological existence that we only can describe in protological terms. Witt appears swimming again with the children, as we listen to Zimmer’s music inspired by the hymn “*Jisas yu holem hand blong mi*” (Jesus, hold my hand). Water and music illustrate that he returns to the bosom of Abraham, his entry to *paradisum*. Of particular moment are the colorful birds in the trees and the sprouting coconut on the beach symbolizing the ongoing cycle of life; life that endures regardless of our intentions. The sprout might also point to the oracular dictum in *Isaiah* that “A shoot will spring from the stock of Jesse, a new shoot will grow from his roots. On him will rest the spirit of Yahweh, the spirit of wisdom and insight, the spirit of counsel and power, the spirit of knowledge and fear of Yahweh.” (Is 11:1–2).

All things glow and all things grow. It is all about not the clearing, but the light; not about what men do, but about God’s presence in nature.

## 6. Nature and Grace: Going Beyond Heidegger

It is difficult not to see a manifest eschatological element in Witt's way of conducting himself. The Melanesian paradise (scored with the melody of Faure's *Requiem 'In paradisum'*) corresponds to the protological state in which the human being has not yet been corrupted by the introduction of sin, in this case in the form of war, disease and internal strife. There, God is all in all.

After the fall/the introduction of war, we have different ways of dealing with the new situation. Welsh represents the individual who hopelessly dwells in this postlapsarian world, closed to any possible tension of history towards its final eschatological realization. He is the one who believes he understands how things 'really' are: everything is a struggle for property, fed by lies, so that facticity can only be endured by making an island for oneself and closing one's eyes to the lie of war. This attitude seems close to the Protestant emphasis on the corruption of creation by sin. But as we can derive from his last line, even in Welsh there exists hope: 'If I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack; a glance from your eyes, and my life will be yours.' Witt being dead, one can only surmise he is addressing God.

In life, Witt recognized that this is how people behave: 'Everyone lookin' for salvation by himself. Each like a coal thrown from the fire.' But that is not the only way. He understands that the protological state—synonymous with paradise—is actually the depiction of the eschatological, of how things should be in the present conception of the present and the present conception of the future, because they are and have been created to be like that. Creation is good; God is present despite appearances. . . or disappearances. Witt is the character that embodies the sort of Christian imagination we will find clearly illustrated in *The Tree of Life*. At the beginning of this latter film, we are given the answers to the unanswered questions posed by *The Thin Red Line* in the form of a choice: that of nature and that of grace or the divine. The latter 'doesn't try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries.' Nature, on the contrary, 'only wants to please itself. Get others to please it, too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it, when love is smiling through all things.'

In both films, nature is an ambiguous reality. It can be seen, from the Christian point of view, as a space for God's presence (Catholicism) or absence (Protestantism). Pascal reminds us: 'Nature has her perfections to show that she is the image of God, and her defects to show that she is no more than His image.' (Pascal 1901, p. 191). This ambiguous character of nature is present throughout *The Thin Red Line*. Here nature visually dominates the narrative: the trees, the birds and their chirpings, the rustling of the wind in the grass, the sound of the water, the waves. . . everything makes manifest a natural world that goes from brightness to darkness to give way to a new brightness. The film opens with a scene of a crocodile entering a pond. Then we see the crocodile captured by the men of Charlie Company, subdued, imprisoned. In a nadir shot that shifts between images of a jungle densely populated with trees, we hear the Private Train deliver the first voiceover of the film: 'What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contends with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?'

In addition to the Heideggerian elements referred to above, it is easy to see a proposal of Emerson's transcendentalism and metaphysical panpsychism in the film's treatment of nature (Davies 2009), perhaps even a pantheist or panentheist view (Castro 2023). After landing on the island, we hear Train's voice-over:

'Who are you who live in these many forms? You're death that captures all. You too are the source of all that's gonna be born. You're glory, mercy, peace, truth. You give calm a spirit, understanding, courage, the contented heart.'

Train explicitly says at one point that there are only two things that are permanent: dying and the Lord. So maybe he refers to God, and not to nature as such. Likewise, Witt claims that ‘Maybe all men got one big soul everybody’s a part of, all faces are the same man. One big self.’ This seems a typical transcendentalist maxim, but it sounds also as one of the Eckhartian reflections about all things being all in all and all in one.<sup>4</sup>

The last detail that tips the scales towards a theistic reading is the music chosen by Malick. He is always extremely careful in the selection of the music for his films. In this case, the driving force of the film are the Melanesian songs. All of them are Christian hymns that decry Witt’s way of being and his ultimate surrender to God: “God Yu Tekem Laef Blong Mi” (God, you take my life), “Jisas yu holem hand blong mi” (Jesus, hold my hand), and even more clearly “Soon my Lord shall call for me.” They are sung within the primal paradise, once the soldiers get some rest after the terrible battle up on the hill, and once Witt is placed into God’s hands. *The Thin Red Line* is *A Hidden Life* and *The Tree of Life* narrated from a different angle.

The title of this latter film refers to the Darwinian metaphor, but it is also the tree encircled by the serpent in the Garden of Eden and the tree upon which Christ was crucified (Paretsky 2017). It resonates also with Psalm 1, 3: The righteous man ‘is like a tree planted near streams; it bears fruit in season and its leaves never wither, and every project succeeds.’ In *The Tree of Life*, nature ceases to be the realm of struggle and question, even of indifference, and becomes the cosmic answer to the unanswered question. The mother who has lost her child asks the divine: “Where were You?” And Malick presents his fantastic unfolding of creation—images of the universe, of its evolutionary history—against the musical background of K. Preisner’s *Lacrimosa*. This is the answer to Job, as stated in the opening quotation of the film: ‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?’ (Job 38:4,7). And while the answer is being ‘shown,’ the mother keeps saying, ‘Answer me.’ But there are no words, only galaxies, nebulae, suns and, amidst all this, the Earth upon which is unfolding the sublime evolution of life, life, that reflects the infinite creativity of the Creator. Malick recovers the tradition of the great American landscape painters of the 19th century, who see in the sublimity of nature the face of God. The meaningful totality shown is one in which the recrimination by Job is echoed by the mother, heard and not resolved as a metaphysical or ethical problem, but as the embodiment of a continuous act of loving creation.

Nature is, therefore, a creature and as such can be corrupted. In *The Tree of Life* we see it face to face, in its very process of becoming. In *The Thin Red Line* we may still doubt whether it is something that might be taken as a divine reality itself or perhaps as something that refers us to its source, which is not itself natural. This is what *The Tree of Life* makes clear: although nature has been corrupted, it is in God’s hands, because it always has been. The last voice-over we listen to in *The Thin Red Line* sounds again like Eckhart:

‘Darkness, light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh, my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.’

## 7. Conclusions

The superb cinematographic effort we witness in *The Thin Red Line* shows a Christian image of the real as *The Tree of Life* and *A Hidden Life* will later do. Malick’s cinematographic resources are placed at the service of a philosophical reflection on what it means to be an incarnated being, what it means to be in the world, how nature can be understood. . . and finally what is the relationship of divinity with the human being. From what we can therefore take to be Malick’s own perspective, what is expressed in *The Thin Red Line*

is something that goes beyond the kinds of philosophical claims that Heidegger makes concerning being, *Lichtung* and *Gelassenheit*, going back to the root of the Heideggerian thought in Meister Eckhart, and using all the Heideggerian *accoutrement* to make room for the divine.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Mitsein* is an existiale that plays a critical role in Heidegger's ontology, particularly in challenging the modern conception of the human being as an isolated "I," "subject," or "consciousness"—understood as a self-contained and unchanging entity. In contrast, Heidegger's account of *Mitsein* reveals that the self is never detached from others; rather, being-with is a fundamental structure of existence. These "others" are not objects of concerned engagement, as tools are, but are instead encountered through solicitude (*Fürsorge*), a mode of relating specific to intersubjective existence.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Thus the soul resembles the hand. The hand is the most perfect of organs, for it takes the place in man of all the organs given to other animals for purposes of defence or attack or covering. Man can provide all these needs for himself with his hands. And in the same way the soul in man takes the place of all the forms of being, so that through his soul a man is, in a way, all being or everything; his soul being able to assimilate all the forms of being—the intellect intelligible forms and the senses sensible forms.' (Aquinas 1951, B.3, lect.3, n. 790).
- <sup>3</sup> 'The soul has something in her, a spark of intellect, that never dies; and in this spark, as at the apex of the mind we place the "image" of the soul. But there is also in our souls a knowing directed toward externals, the sensible and rational perception which operates in images and words to obscure this from us'. (Eckhart 2009, p. 73); 'The spark of intellect, which is the head of the soul, is called the husband of the soul, and is none other than a tiny spark of the divine nature, a divine light, a ray and an imprint of the divine nature'. (Eckhart 2009, p. 187); 'And there is one power in the soul that splits off the coarser part and becomes united with God: that is the spark in the soul. The soul becomes more one with God than the food with my body' (Eckhart 2009, p. 193); 'It seems to me, this servant means the spark in the soul which is created by God and is a light, imprinted from above, and an image of the divine nature, which is always striving against whatever is ungodly, and it is not a power of the soul, as some masters would have it, and it is always inclined to the good—even in hell it is inclined to the good. The masters say this light is so natural that it is always striving, it is called synteresis, which means to say a binding and a turning away from. It has two functions. One is to bite against that which is impure. Its other task is that it ever attracts to the good, and that is directly impressed in the soul, even those who are in hell.' (Eckhart 2009, p. 193).
- <sup>4</sup> In Eckhart's Sermon Seven, we read: 'The soul has something in her, a spark of intellect, that never dies; and in this spark, as at the apex of the mind we place the 'image' of the soul. But there is also in our souls a knowing directed toward externals, the sensible and rational perception which operates in images and words to obscure this from us. How then are we God's sons? By sharing one nature with Him. But to have any realization of thus being God's Son, we need to distinguish between the outward and the inward understanding. The inward understanding is that which is based intellectually in the nature of our soul. Yet it is not the soul's essence but is, rather, rooted there and is something of the life of the soul. In saying the understanding is the life of the soul we mean her intellectual life, and that is the life in which man is born as God's son and to eternal life. This understanding is timeless, without place without Here and Now. In this life all things are one and all things are common: all things are all in all and all in one' (Eckhart 2009, p. 73).

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