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Spirit(uality) in the Films of Terrence Malick

Abstract
This paper will argue that Terrence Malick is a theological filmmaker, even though scholars have preferred to emphasize his indebtedness to Martin Heidegger. It will proceed by way of Malick's use of wind imagery. First, it will show that the wind motif recalls theological notions about God as spirit. Second, it will illustrate how Malick employs wind imagery, revealing a sensitivity to the wind's evocation of God's presence and absence. Third, it will argue that Malick's cinematic restraint identifies the practice of detachment [*Gelassenheit*] as the link between his theological and Heideggerian interests.

Keywords
Terrence Malick, God, Spirit, Martin Heidegger, Gelassenheit

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Introduction

Though Terrence Malick's diverse cinematic career spans a number of decades, his work over the last fifteen years or so has manifested a noticeable interest in religious ideas and themes. For instance, *The Thin Red Line* (1998) utilizes the Guadalcanal Campaign of World War II as a backdrop for ruminations on eternity, sacrifice and theodicy. Similarly, *The New World* (2005) explores the nature of love and the ever-present tension between creation, creator and creature. And yet, it is *The Tree of Life* (2011) that most clearly exhibits a desire to engage theological issues, particularly from within the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Its title is taken from Genesis 3:22—referring to the source of immortality from which Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat after disobeying God—and it opens with a quote that sets the stage for the film's many questions: "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).[1]

From the outset, then, a theological reading of *The Tree of Life* is demanded, and the film as such does nothing to dispel this approach. It juxtaposes a story about the loss of a child—and the conflicting feelings and memories that accompany such an event—with, quite literally, recreations of the origin and evolution of life on earth. Never one to shy away from ambitious themes, Malick here seems to be doing nothing short of probing the meaning of life.

However, if *The Tree of Life* would appear to cement Malick as a theological filmmaker, it is nevertheless the case that Malick's connection to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger—an avowed, if not exactly straightforward, atheist—has received more scholarly attention. After all, Malick studied Heidegger at both Harvard and Oxford, and he even published a translation of Heidegger's *Vom Wesen des Grundes*. And though Malick later abandoned his academic pursuits, critics have argued that his art manifests his philosophical commitments, so much so that *The Thin Red Line* has been dubbed "Heideggerian cinema."[2]

But must these approaches be mutually exclusive? Indeed, that might seem to be the case, if one were to set about Malick's films "dogmatically," in other words, as illustrations of religious teachings on creation, fall, love and so forth. Such an approach might yield some noteworthy points of connection, but would risk reducing Malick's art to a mere vehicle for catechesis.[3] That is not the sort of reading I want to offer here. Rather than expand on what Malick's films *say* about the divine, I want to focus on how they struggle, beautifully, to *manifest* God. I will do so by considering one of the more noticeable aspects of Malick's movies, namely, his interest in nature and, above all, his consistent use of wind imagery. Specifically, I will argue that Malick's copious shots of the wind stirring trees, grass, curtains and so on not only recall certain ideas about God as "spirit," but also hint at the ever mysterious nature of the divine. In this way, Malick's

films represent a kind of spirituality—one that not only allows for exchange with the thought of Heidegger, but perhaps even stands as the *ne plus ultra* of Malick's cinematic vision.

God as Spirit in the Bible and in Theology

The problem of *how* to manifest the divine is an ancient one, and, to be sure, it receives more than a little attention in both Judaism and Christianity. On the one hand, a number of biblical writings describe God in physical terms. For instance, the book of Genesis depicts God as "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8), and Moses was said to have spoken to the LORD "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11). Moreover, this condescension of the divine to the human is taken up and advanced in Christianity, which insists that Jesus of Nazareth is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), the deity *incarnatus*. Here God is not just depicted in physical language but, literally, is said to have united himself with a human being.

At the same time, however, Scripture consistently and resolutely affirms that God is pure *spirit*. Willing and able to enter into relationship with humanity, God is nevertheless qualitatively different than earthly creatures: he has no material composition but, instead, exists eternally as a fully actualized being—or, better yet, as *the* fully actualized being. Consequently, any attempts to encapsulate

God in a created form and to pay homage to such a form are vehemently proscribed. As it is put in the Ten Commandments:

> I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them (Exodus 20:2-5).

The concern here is that the idol will come to be seen as God himself; the worship of the true God will be transferred to one that has been fashioned from human hands and, thus, "cannot save" (Isaiah 45:20). As before, this belief is not limited to the Hebrew scriptures. Christianity also assumes the prohibition against idolatry, so much so that many early Christians preferred death to the sin of worshiping the idols of the Roman Empire.

The challenge of "picturing" God, then, is daunting. A certain sort of allegorical or anthropomorphic imagery is often permissible—one might think of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, particularly his fresco, *The Creation of Adam*—but any direct rendering of the deity risks idolatry. For God is spirit. Even in Christianity, with its emphases on the Incarnation and on bodily resurrection,

the doctrine of the Ascension underlines this point. That Christ has ascended into heaven means that God is especially present in the world as the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

How, then, can the artist manifest the presence of the divine, when the divine is best understood as an immaterial being? This is a complex question, but attention to the biblical words for "spirit" begins to open up an answer. The Hebrew term is *ruach*. It is, of course, often translated as "spirit," though that rendering does not exhaust its richness. For instance, *ruach* can mean "wind," as in Genesis 8:1: "And God made a wind [*ruach*] blow over the earth, and the waters subsided." Likewise, it bears the connotation of "breath": "For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath [*ruach*]…" (Ecclesiastes 3:19). And, finally, "the two images can also be combined to suggest that the wind is the breath of God."[4] As it is put in 2 Samuel 22:16: "[T]he channels of the sea were seen; the foundations of the world were laid bare, at the rebuke of the LORD, at the blast of the breath [*ruach*] of his nostrils."

A similar multidimensionality is found in the Greek term for spirit, *pneuma*.[5] Nowhere is this aspect better demonstrated than in John 3:5-8, where Jesus himself almost toys with the ambiguity of the word:

> Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit [*pneumatos*] he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit [*pneumatos*] is spirit [*pneuma*]. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." The wind [*pneuma*] blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from and where it goes.

Although its dynamics resemble its Hebrew predecessor, *pneuma* here takes on a uniquely Christian quality: more than just a force emanating from God, "spirit" signifies a divine *person*, who comforts, invigorates and renews human beings. In turn, people are to "desire the spiritual [*pneumatika*] gifts" (1 Corinthians 14.1), opening themselves to the hidden presence of God.

This "spiritual" conception of divinity has decisive implications for Christian devotion. Chief among them is the fact that, despite the "data" of revelation, which is given in Scripture and summarized in creeds, God remains ever mysterious to human beings. Indeed, this is precisely what the terms *ruach* and *pneuma* imply, since their lack of determinacy effectively blocks any attempt to penetrate into the divine mystery. As Yves Congar writes:

> Revelation...by being expressed in images, is essentially an expression of what God is *for us*. It also, of course, discloses something of what God is in himself, but it only does this secondarily and imperfectly. What he is is his secret.[6]

For Christianity, this "secrecy" applies to the Godhead per se—the so-called immanent Trinity—and it also holds for the incarnation of God the Son. And yet, there is a sense in which it is especially true of the Holy Spirit. As Congar goes on, "The Spirit does not present…personal characteristics. He is, as it were, buried in the work of the Father and the Son, which he completes."[7] This is the Spirit's kenosis, his self-emptying for the sake of the world. In the metaphor of Didymus the Blind (c. 313-398), the Spirit might be compared to the breath that supports spoken language—essential, ever present, but imperceptible and thus easily overlooked.[8]

The Christian encounter with God, then, never moves beyond a fundamental incomprehensibility. God may vouchsafe his presence in, say, the sacrament of the Eucharist, but such a donation deepens, rather than lessens, the divine mystery. God is disclosed as simultaneously absent and present: he is really there, but not in such a way that he can be restricted or circumscribed. God is everywhere; God is nowhere.

This notion has its basis in the theological principle of non-competition, which maintains that "God and creatures are, so to speak, on different levels of being."[9] This point is best illustrated by its converse—namely, relations between created things. If a person is occupying a given space, then no one else can do so. The presence of the first person excludes that of the other. This situation is true even when creatures cooperate with one another. If one person shares with another, then only the first can be "giver" and the other "receiver." "[T]o the extent I act, you need not; and the more I act, the less you need to."[10] Moreover, if one were to portray this state of affairs, it would be impossible to avoid instantiating these roles. The giver would, in some way, crowd into the scene, his presence unmistakable. He is either there or not. Such is the fate of all finite, time-bound creatures.

But this is not the case with God. As Thomas Aquinas explains, God "is not a body; nor composition of form and matter; nor does His nature differ from His *suppositum*; nor His essence from His existence…".[11] In other words, God is "altogether simple," a pure spirit.[12] For that reason, God can neither be examined nor analyzed: "We cannot know what God is, but rather what he is not,"[13] notes Thomas. And yet, if this is true, then it is also impossible to identify God with the *negation* of being. To declare God "infinite" poses the same risk as declaring him "finite," since, in reality, he is beyond all such creature-bound distinctions.

Thomas' great forerunner, (Pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite, puts it in this way:

> There is no speaking of it [God], nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what it is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.[14]

Dionysius' point here is not as strange as it may seem. He is merely pointing out that God is so different from creation that his difference cannot be grasped. In short, what distinguishes God is that he cannot be distinguished—picked out, isolated—from creaturely things. Indeed, the very attempt to do so is inherently flawed and must lead to idolatry. God is spirit and must be known as such.

It is at this point, then, that the question posed earlier returns: how can the artist manifest God, if God is properly understood as spirit? Following from the preceding analysis, two possible answers emerge. First, one could argue that God cannot be manifested at all, apart from crude metaphorical imagery such as birds

or fire. This approach safeguards divine otherness—since, after all, no one claims that God *is* a dove—but, at the same time, it effectively situates God in a purely symbolic realm. There is, however, another option: one might seek to manifest God as *ruach/pneuma*. God "appears" as spirit, wind or breath. But this also means that the opposite is true: God also "disappears," camouflaged, as it were, in created things. Thus one cannot so much *identify* God as *sense* his presence, though, even in this sensing, ambiguity remains. The wind blows, but one does not know whence it is from or whither it is going.

With its ability to convey moving images, the latter approach is heightened in the cinematic arts, which, even more than painting, have the "capacity to make the invisible visible."[15] Indeed, as will be argued below, it finds particular expression in the work of Terrence Malick, whose films are characterized by a strong emphasis on nature and on wind imagery. As a result, they are rightly seen as "spiritual" movies, which register the presence of something beyond the world *in* the world. And yet, that this spirit remains unidentifiable, even hidden, indicates a proper understanding of the divine. In Malick's films, as in life, God's presence is also a kind of absence.

Nature, Wind and Divinity in the Films of Terrence Malick

While Malick's attention to religious themes is a relatively recent phenomenon, all of his films, dating back to *Badlands* (1973), evince a profound interest in the natural world. Moreover, *The Tree of Life* expands on this vision, interspersing its narrative with spectacular images of the cosmos and of the origins of life in the universe. According to S. Brent Plate, this feature of *The Tree of Life* serves to link its microcosmic setting—Waco, Texas in the 1950s—with the larger macrocosmos.[16] What we see on earth, in other words, has an analogue in the cosmic order. This sense of metaphor also characterizes the intramundane. When Malick focuses on trees surrounding the O'Brien home, he is not so much interested in the trees themselves as in the connection they share (or do not share) with their human neighbors: "[The trees] are filled with life, guarding, watching over, relatively immutable, usually seen from the ground up. The O'Brien family, in 1950s Waco, is part of the great tree."[17]

The salient point here is that, despite Malick's obvious attention to nature, his films are not *about* nature as such. He is not a Jacques Cousteau but, rather, a storyteller who integrates scenes of animal- and plant-life into human narratives. For example, the setting of *Badlands*—with its vast, barren prairie often framed in the fading hues of sundown—serves to mirror the empty brutality of the film's protagonist, Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen). In other films, Malick draws on nature

to provide a *contrast* to the narrative. *The Thin Red Line*'s reenactment of the Battle of Mount Austen on Guadalcanal juxtaposes the lush, soothing beauty of the tropical island with the horror of war and the egoistic callousness of Lt. Col. Gordon Tall (Nick Nolte). Malick's treatment of nature, then, clearly points beyond itself. His natural phenomena are (to borrow from Jean-Luc Marion) "saturated," indicating more than meets the eye.

At this point, Malick's frequent use of wind imagery becomes significant. To be sure, that he frequently employs such imagery has been noted by critics—both in appropriation and in opprobrium—to the extent that it has become a platitude. Moreover, it is acknowledged that this attention to the wind is intentional on Malick's part. As Steven Zeitchik, writing about the making of *The Tree of Life*, puts it:

> Malick used no artificial lighting and often pointed the camera away from the actors' performances, toward the wind and the sky. Cinematographer Emmanuel "Chivo" Lubezki said "Tree" was "like no set I've ever worked on."[18]

Some actors, needless to say, have bristled at this approach. In a recent interview, Christopher Plummer—the veteran British performer, who worked with Malick on *The New World*—complained that Malick prefers shots of nature to actual

human subjects.[19] But this grievance misses the point, particularly about Malick's concentration on the wind. It is not that Malick *prefers* wind imagery to subjects; it is that the wind itself *is* a subject, albeit a mysterious one.

The New York Times' A.O. Scott is one of the few film critics who has grasped this point. For him, at the heart of Malick's vision is an "elusive deity," "whose responses [to human characters] are characteristically oblique, conveyed by the rustling of wind in trees or the play of shadows on a bedroom wall."[20] Scott here is referring to *The Tree of Life*, but this statement applies to each of Malick's last three films. In this theological trilogy, Malick regularly manifests (and therefore also hides) God as spirit.

This tendency is particularly noticeable during liminal scenes—those moments in which a character is at a threshold. An obvious example here would be scenes of death. Most filmmakers, as is well-known (and oft-lampooned), tend to focus on the person *dying* in such scenes. But Malick is different: he cuts away from the dying human being and turns his camera to the wind. This approach appears in *The New World*, when Pocahontas' brother is mortally wounded in battle. After focusing on an Algonquin ceremony for the dead, the camera follows the dying warrior's gaze and pauses at the wind rushing through the trees. A similar method is evident in *The Thin Red Line*, albeit in different form. In an early scene—which is highly stylized, even dreamlike—Private Witt (Jim Caviezel) tells a fellow soldier about his mother's death. The setting then shifts to

a bedroom. An old woman lies in bed, alongside a girl in white and a small bird chirping in a cage. The dying woman sits up in bed and makes a gesture; the camera cuts away from her and shows the girl embracing an unidentified figure. The wind begins to tremble the curtains in the background, and the camera rotates upward, panning past a clock on the wall to a blue sky overhead. It is as if the room has no ceiling.

In both of these scenes, Malick's wind imagery *suggests* the presence of the divine spirit, but by no means demarcates it. And yet, as has been discussed, any properly theological representation of God must bear with this ambiguity—an ambiguity that Malick preserves in other liminal moments. For instance, one of the key scenes in *The Tree of Life* concerns the sexual temptation of young Jack O'Brien (Hunter McCracken). Increasingly isolated from his parents, and lashing out at the world around him, Jack undertakes his boldest wrongdoing yet, namely, to break into the house of an attractive female neighbor. He knows she is not home but, at the same time, is conscious that he is violating her sense of security and intimacy. As Jack draws near the front door, the wind noticeably picks up. The camera attends to the wind chimes on the front porch; they stir gently, their pleasant tune standing in contrast to Jack's mindset. He enters the front door and begins tiptoeing through the house. He is alone. Or is he? A breeze enters through the open windows and billows the curtains. At one point, Jack even lets the fluttering fabric run across his hand. He pauses, thinking. Perhaps he is

considering leaving; perhaps he senses the presence of another or, indeed, an Other. But then he looks up the stairs. Here the camera underscores the liminal quality of the moment: the stairs are dark, tunnel-like, and they lead into a room—the bedroom. Jack climbs them. The breeze continues to blow through the house, but now Jack is consumed by the task at hand. He goes through the woman's things and eventually finds her lingerie. He carefully lays out a white, silky nightgown on the bed. The camera pulls so close to him that the viewer cannot tell what he is doing, and, suddenly, there is a change in setting. Jack is running frantically along a river, gown in hand. He looks for a place to bury it, but changes his mind and throws it into the river. The gown is sucked away by the current, but Jack remains visibly upset. When he gets home, he bypasses his mother—who senses he has done something wrong—and begins to swing in the front yard. He is, apparently, trying to reclaim his childhood, but his scowl reveals the truth: his childhood has been lost. The camera closes in on his face, and he says with tears in his eyes, "I can't talk to you. Don't look at me." He is talking to his mother, but his reaction recalls the story of Adam and Eve, who, ashamed and afraid, sought to avoid the divine presence after the Fall (Genesis 3:8).

This is one of the most memorable (and unsettling) scenes in *The Tree of Life*, and once again Malick charges it with wind imagery. But it is not only in moments of loss and sorrow that Malick focuses on the wind. There are also scenes of comfort, love and happiness. In the climactic scene of *The Tree of Life*,

the adult Jack (Sean Penn) has what seems to be a vision of the eschaton: he passes through a door, scales a rocky prominence and finds himself on a beach, where people of all ages, races and (it is implied) nationalities are walking. They begin to discover people they know, and, likewise, Jack soon reunites with his family. It is an event of consolation and joy. In the background, the water glimmers in the light, but the wind is even more ubiquitous: it blows through people's hair, flaps clothing and ripples a makeshift tent. The scene concludes—in oblique Malickian fashion—with a shot of a sunflower field in the twilight, the flowers' petals blowing softly.

The New World's final scene bears a similar ethos. Though it too might be classified as a death scene—depicting, however briefly, Pocahontas' passing in her early twenties—it lacks the solemnity of other such scenes in Malick's oeuvre. The focus, initially, is on Pocahontas' *joie de vivre*. Whether in flashback or in the afterlife (it is hard to tell), we see Pocahontas running through an autumnal field. Now acclimated to English customs, she is wearing a restrictive, cumbersome dress, and yet she has lost none of the playfulness and immediate familiarity that characterized her former life in Virginia. She does cartwheels and, smiling, splashes water from a pond on her face. Wagner's swirling Prelude to *Das Rheingold* plays in the background,[21] and it builds in volume and in intensity as the setting shifts to a carrack putting out to sea. The camera then cuts to scenes of the North American wilderness, and, suddenly, the music stops. A stream

murmurs as it rolls over rocks, and, at last, there is a view—seen from the ground—of pine trees swaying in the breeze.

In all of the above instances, the wind is an "absent presence" or a "present absence," which serves as a kind of witness to the liminal moments of a person's life. It is there, but not in such a way that it interferes with the characters' lives and development. In other words, it does not compete with persons such as Jack O'Brien and Pocahontas; rather, it is *with* them, enveloping them, as if sharing in their very being. That a number of these scenes come after death only furthers this point. Malick seems to be hinting that wherever *ruach/pneuma* is, so is life.

The converse is also revealing. In the very first scene of *The Thin Red Line*, the camera follows a large crocodile as it slowly descends into dark, stagnant water. This has the appearance of a non-sequitur, particularly when the subsequent scene moves to an indigenous village by the ocean, far from the reptile's swampy abode. And yet, in a film about humanity's descent into war, a subtle point is being made. The crocodile's environment is close, airless. A thick growth of algae on the pond indicates that, in this place, there is no wind, no spirit—no *ruach/pneuma*. The monotone, droning score deepens the encompassing sense of evil. The wind may blow where it chooses, but, Malick suggests, there are places where it cannot be felt. The natural world has come to portend spiritual lack and, with it, spiritual danger.

In the end, then, what Malick offers the viewer is a world that is more than the sum of its parts. A gust of wind through the trees or a breeze passing through an open window is literally charged with something other. Of course, it is unclear as to whether or not Malick is trying to manifest *God* via his use of wind imagery. But, again, this is as it should be. For if God is spirit, then God is not the sort of thing that can be caught on film or, for that matter, anywhere. Thus Malick's wind is an invisible other, which may manifest something—or someone—more to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Put in more direct theological terms, his wind is something natural, which, paradoxically, is capable of communicating the supernatural.

But do these findings mean that Malick is a *religious* filmmaker, as opposed to a Heideggerian one? This paper will conclude by addressing this question. In particular, it will try to establish that Malick's "spirit-uality" is not inconsistent with his interest in Heidegger and, indeed, might owe more than a little to the German thinker.

On *Gelassenheit*—Or Where Heidegger and Spirituality Meet in Malick's Films

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Malick's relationship with the thought of Heidegger has garnered a significant amount of critical attention. Stanley Cavell—with whom Malick studied philosophy at Harvard—launched

this approach in his 1979 book, *The World Viewed*. He noted that Malick's second feature, *Days of Heaven*, is a prime example of the manifestation of Heideggerian themes, employing the cinematic medium as a vehicle for making visible the Being of beings.[22] Since then, Heidegger receives almost obligatory mention in any scholarly engagement with Malick's work. In their essay, "Terrence Malick's Heideggerian Cinema: War and the Question of Being in *The Thin Red Line*," Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy effectively sum up this development, noting a number of ways that "Malick's films...are instances of what may be called a Heideggerian cinema."[23] From his peculiar emphasis on the ambiguity of the cinematic image—the way that it makes present a being that is otherwise absent—to the way he shows how "[t]echnological rationality alienates us from Being or ground, from nature, from one another, and from our very humanity," Malick has responded to Heidegger's call for "a poet in destitute times."[24]

Each of these themes, to one degree or another, might be used to connect Heidegger, Malick and Christian theology, although Furstenau and MacAvoy refrain from doing so. And yet, since this paper is primarily about Malick's cinematic *self-denial*—his submission, as it were, to the ambiguity of the divine—it makes sense to attend to another, perhaps more important link between Heidegger and Christianity: the practice of detachment or "letting go." This practice is commonly referred to by the German term, *Gelassenheit*.

The habit of *Gelassenheit* is, in its most basic form, modeled throughout the Bible. Abraham "detaches" from his homeland and, most famously, from the guarantee of posterity, so that he can remain true to God. Jesus lets go of his human life—and the various pleasures that might have accompanied it, including prosperity, authority and power—in fidelity to his divine calling. What these and other examples suggest is that, according to the biblical tradition, the religious life involves an ongoing surrender of control to God. Moreover, this process does not oppose human flourishing but, rather, supplies its condition. For only the divine will, if submitted to, brings human nature to fulfillment and thus to perfect love. As Howard Gray notes, "The end of detachment…is love but a love attuned to God's priorities."[25]

From the Patristic era and beyond, the Christian mystical tradition made detachment a central component of growth in holiness, albeit in two main ways. First, and most plainly, detachment was seen as an ascetical practice. The disciple was to break away from worldly pleasure—understood in a variety of senses, from dietary excess to sexual license—in order to render himself or herself open to God. Yet, over time, this approach evolved and took on greater complexity. Perhaps the most conspicuous development concerned what might be termed the "intellectualization" of the virtue. No longer a mere renunciation of bodily pleasure, detachment also came to entail an abandonment of the disciple's pretenses to rational and spiritual mastery, especially in religious matters.

A decisive figure in this evolution is Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1328). Although Eckhart did not use the word *Gelassenheit* a great deal—preferring, instead, a "range of [terms] to convey his strategy for ending possessiveness"[26]—he nevertheless made detachment a central motif of his spiritual doctrine. For Eckhart, detachment concerns the "liberation from the images of physical things which serve to restrict the mind and alienate it from its own transcendental possibilities."[27] In other words, detachment issues in a kind of "cognitive freedom,"[28] precisely because its practitioner has let go of himself or herself and, in doing so, prepared the way for unity with the utterly simple God. This notion is succinctly explained by Eckhart's great follower, Johannes Tauler (c. 1300-1361): "If you go out of yourself, you may be certain that God will enter and fill you wholly: the greater the void, the greater the divine influx."[29]

That *Gelassenheit* plays an important role in Heidegger's thought is well-known. John D. Caputo's *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, arguably the *locus classicus* on the subject, traces Heidegger's appropriation of *Gelassenheit*.[30] As Caputo sees it, Heidegger's approach "is structurally very like Eckhart's."[31] That is to say, both of them treat *Gelassenheit* as the abolition of "every trace of willing," "even a will to not-will."[32] Furthermore, like Eckhart, Heidegger marries *Gelassenheit*'s ascetical implications—the need to break from customary ways of thinking—to a positive moment "entirely outside the sphere of willing, where every 'trace' of willing has been eliminated in favor of a simple

openness which 'lets Being be'."[33] At the same time, however, the two thinkers differ when it comes to the purpose of *Gelassenheit*. For Eckhart, detachment is in service to mystical union with God. But Heidegger, as a philosopher and so-called "methodological atheist,"[34] has in mind a response to the dangers of post-Cartesian subjectivist thinking, which subordinates "everything to the dictates and demands of the subject."[35] From Descartes to Leibniz and through to Kant and Hegel, Being has been situated within the confines of metaphysical rationality. Yet, in truth, Being is not subject to humanity but, rather, humanity to it.

Hence, for Heidegger, detachment is the means by which human thinking is chastened, "cut down to size." It brings the thinker to a recognition of his fundamental poverty—a recognition that is crucial in a technologically-driven society, where the manipulation of beings has overshadowed their mystery. As Heidegger writes, "Releasement toward things [*Gelassenheit*] and openness to the mystery belong together. … 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."[36]

Now, with regard to Malick's films, what is interesting is that "the thin red line" between Eckhart and Heidegger is unclear. In other words, it is impossible to say whether his cinematic method is in service to Eckhartian (mystical) or to Heideggerian (philosophical) aims. This is especially true of his wind imagery. Is Malick trying to hint at the indeterminacy of God as spirit? Is he displaying the

mysterious "presencing"[37] of Being, which, like the wind, is subject to no mortal? Or is he suggesting some combination of both, perhaps with an eye to the very relationship between Christian theology and Heidegger's conception of reason after ontotheology?

That these questions cannot be definitively answered is a testimony to Malick's *Gelassenheit* as a filmmaker. His portrayals of *ruach/pneuma* are characterized, above all, by their restraint. He allows the wind to be manifest itself, to be what(ever) it is, and in doing so he models the humility and poverty that ought to attend an encounter with Being and/or the divine.

This point brings this essay back to where it began, namely, to the question of how to manifest the divine, particularly in the arts. It should now be clear that, for Malick, this question is inappropriate, since it is only through *Gelassenheit* that the divine can emerge. In other words, the filmmaker does not manifest the divine but, instead, detaches from such an endeavor. In doing so, however, an appropriate theological reserve is maintained and, with it, the condition for the possibility of a genuine encounter with God. Seen from this perspective, it could even be argued that *The Tree of Life*, which directly invokes the God of Job, is a form of contemplation—a cinematic prayer to the one who "laid the foundation of the earth" (Job 38:4). On this reading, it is a film *best* understood within the Christian mystical tradition, rather than a mere point of overlap between Malick's spiritual and Heideggerian interests.

In a recent essay, Simon Critchley argues that "calm" is the distinguishing feature of Malick's filmmaking. As he puts it, "There is a calm at the heart of Malick's art, a calmness to his cinematic eye, a calmness that is also communicated by his films, that becomes the mood of his audience: after watching…we feel calm."[38] For Critchley, this sense of tranquility results from Malick's directorial attention: "[O]ne has the sense of things simply being looked at, just being what they are—trees, water, birds, dogs, crocodiles or whatever. Things simply are, and are not molded to a human purpose."[39] Of course, what is missing from this list is the wind. In refusing to mold *ruach/pneuma* to a human purpose, Malick refuses to foreclose on its divine significance. In this case, to let the wind be what it is is also to let it be *more* than it is—an approach that accords with the Bible's understanding of the incomprehensible, ever-mysterious spirit of God.

Critchley's thesis, then, is apt but incomplete. Indeed, it is more than a little significant that, in contemporary German, *Gelassenheit* has come to mean "calm." The calm at the heart of Malick's cinematic vision is nothing but the manifestation of a kind of spirituality, of detachment. In his oeuvre the viewer experiences film as *Gelassenheit*, and, as Eckhart (and perhaps Heidegger) would note, that is precisely why they are capable of communicating the divine.

[1] This quotation is Malick's; he provides it without indicating a particular translation. All other biblical quotations come from the English Standard Version (ESV).

[2] Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy, "Terrence Malick's Heideggerian Cinema: War and the Question of Being in *The Thin Red Line*", in Hannah Patterson (ed), *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 179-191. Also see Robert Sinnerbrink, "A Heideggerian Cinema?: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*", *Film-Philosophy*, 10 (2006), 26-37.

[3] This point is not meant to imply that Malick's films could be easily enlisted in such a catechetical project. In his new book, *Bad Religion*, Ross Douthat cites Malick as an example of a modern artist haunted by "the ghost of a Christian worldview," rather than a Christian artist *sensu stricto* (Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* [New York: Free Press, 2012], 292). Nevertheless, as will be argued below, Malick's overtures to Christianity impart key spiritual and theological insights, regardless of whether or not they are explicitly doctrinal.

[4] Scott Hahn (ed), *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 871.

[5] It should be noted, however, that *pneuma* does not always carry the rich, "earthy" overtones of *ruach*—a point that helps explain why *pneuma* found favor in dualistic Gnostic circles. That, however, is a topic that outstrips the concerns of this article, not least because *pneuma* can be (and is) translated as both "wind" and "spirit."

[6] Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 3 (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), 5.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See, for example, Didymus the Blind, *On the Holy Spirit*, in Mark DelCogliano, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, and Lewis Ayres (trans), *Works on the Spirit* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011).

[9] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

[10] Ibid., 4.

[11] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1 (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, Inc., 1948), 19.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 14.

[14] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in Paul Rorem (ed), *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 141.

[15] Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: BFI Publishing, 2004), 1.

[16] S. Brent Plate, "Visualizing the Cosmos: Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* and Other Visions of Life in the Universe," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80 (2012), 527-536.

[17] Ibid., 533.

[18] Steven Zeitchik, "Cannes 2011: Finally, the end of secrets on Terrence Malick's 'The Tree of Life'," May 13, 2011, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/movies/2011/05/cannes-film-festival-2011-terrence-malick-tree-of-life-brad-pitt-sean-penn.html

[19] *Plummer: I'll Never Work with Him Again* [Video]. Retrieved July 19, 2012, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw08GQw0hBI.

[20] A.O. Scott, "Heaven, Texas, and the Cosmic Whodunit," May 26, 2011, http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/05/27/movies/the-tree-of-life-from-terrence-malick-review.html?pagewanted=all.

[21] Starting with his use of Carl Orff's *Gassenhauer* in *Badlands*, Malick has long been regarded as an innovative and skillful handler of music in his films. Though a topic that ranges beyond present considerations, it is worth noting that music is a non-visual mode of representation, which, in Malick's oeuvre, is often used to suggest (or to accentuate) spiritual reality. Perhaps this point is best demonstrated by Malick's stunning application of Zbigniew Preisner's *Lacrimosa* in *The Tree of Life*, which accompanies images of interstellar nebulae and roiling solar flares. Traditionally, the *Lacrimosa* belongs to the Requiem Mass, and its Latin text invokes the Last Judgment, as well as hope in the mercy of God. By pairing it with astral imagery, which in and of itself might be viewed in a purely materialistic manner, Malick intimates the mysterious coincidence of the natural and the supernatural—a feature that overlaps with the theme of this paper.

[22] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), xiv-xv.

[23] Furstenau and MacAvoy, 180.

[24] Ibid., 185-86.

[25] Howard Gray, "Detachment", in Philip Sheldrake (ed), *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 234.

[26] Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 166.

[27] Oliver Davies, "Introduction", in Oliver Davies (trans), *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1994), xxix.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Johannes Tauler, *Sermons* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 38.

[30] Heidegger's most pointed discussions of *Gelassenheit* come in a pair of discourses: (i) a talk commemorating the 175th anniversary of the birthday of the composer, Conradin Kreutzer, entitled "Gelassenheit", but known in English simply as "Memorial Address;" (ii) an essay called "Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit: Aus einem Feldweggespräch über das Denken," typically referred to in English as "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking." These pieces were later published together: Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske Verlag, 1959). This book, in turn, was rendered into English: Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

[31] John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 177.

[32] Ibid. Also see Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 79-80.

[33] Caputo, 178-79 and Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", trans. E. Lohner, in W. Barrett and H. Aiken (ed), *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Anthology*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 220. Also see Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 73.

[34] On this term, see, for example, George Kovacs, *The Question of God in Heidegger's Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 202. Also see Laurence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger's Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

[35] Caputo, 175 and Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 58-59.

[36] Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 55.

[37] The term "presencing" [*anwesen*] is, for Heidegger, replete with meaning. As he sees it, the presence of this or that entity entails the retreat of Being as such. In other words, "Being reveals itself in the presence of entities and at the same time withdraws into the being of entities" (Alfred Denker, *Historical Dictionary of Heidegger's Philosophy* [Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000], 220). This is the truth of Being, which, ultimately, is not governed by human agency.

[38] Simon Critchley, "Calm—On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*", in David Davies (ed), *The Thin Red Line* (London: Routledge, 2009), 26.

[39] Ibid.

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