

# THE PASSION OF MODERNITY: ON TERRENCE MALICK'S TREE OF LIFE

The true health of spirit consists in the perfection of reminiscence.

- Arthur Schopenhauer

What is the vocation of cinema? To make visible, in time, that which is invisible outside of cinema. This is why it rains indoors in Tarkovsky films: the interior visibility, as image, of what had been invisible (memory, desire) insofar as it remained outside of cinema. Cinema makes visible, as image, its invisible outside. But what then remains invisible, inside of cinema? The experience of cinema, which we carry back outside. A chiasmus, then, of the visible and the invisible, the inside and the outside. Interior rain: memory made image; image, remembered. And the medium of this chiasmus is time.

But what of that which, outside of time, cannot be remembered? From the beginning, Terrence Malick's films have been posing this question. In *Badlands* (1976): "Where would I be this very moment if Kit had never met me? If my mom had never met my dad?"

And what of that which is neither visible nor invisible, but rather manifest, yet unknown? In *Day's of Heaven* (1978): "This farmer, he didn't know when he first saw her, or what it was about her that caught his eye. Maybe it was the way the wind blew through her hair." In *The Thin Red Line* (1998): "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land with the sea?" In *The New World* (2005): "Mother, where do you live? In the sky, the clouds, the sea?" Or again: "How much they err that think everyone which has been at Virginia understands or knows what Virginia is." Malick's is a cinema of an unknown that is sensed, and the vehicle of this not-knowing is the voice-over, the musing of an unseen speaker, the disembodied question.

But what of that which is not only unseen or unknown, but which could never be manifest? That which, in time, is not only prior to memory, but prior to manifestation? Not only prior to the distinction between the visible and the invisible, but prior to sensation, to any capacity for sensible experience? What is the vocation of cinema, if it takes up this question? To make manifest, in time, that which is prior to manifestation.

As its epigraph from the Book of Job

suggests, this is the task of Malick's new film, *Tree of Life* (2011): "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation...while the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

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*Tree of Life* circulates around a central, singular event: the death of a son, an event that entails mourning of that death by a mother, a father, and two brothers. But this event—the fact of a death and the experience of loss, situated at an existential and psychological level—opens onto a meditation upon another event of properly ontological import: the emergence of life on earth. A son dies; he is mourned by his family. And on the anniversary of his death, decades later, the film's narrative focalization upon the psychological interiority of his older brother gives way to one of the most remarkable "flashbacks" in the history of cinema, even more grandiose than the famous analeptic cut which opens *2001: A Space Odyssey*. From outside the office building where his eldest brother works as an architect we return to what seems to be the origin of the cosmos, and from here we follow the expansion of the universe and the formation of our galaxy through the accretion of the earth, millennia of geological time, the self-organization of RNA and DNA molecules, the emergence of mitochondria and multicellular organisms, the evolution of diverse animal species during the Cambrian explosion, the reign and extinction of the dinosaurs, and the beginning of the latest ice age during the Pliocene. We then return to the bildungsroman of the eldest son, following the progress of his family romance up through the years preceding his younger brother's death.

The film thus situates not only the mourning of loss but also the development of a family's affective world within the broadest possible perspective. The particularity of a life that can be lost takes on the universal singularity of a life (*Une Vie*, in Deleuze's sense). The scope of a particular loss to be mourned expands to include the emergence of life on earth as the condition of possibility for any affective experience of loss whatever. The implication

of this gesture is not so much that "loss" is the essence of life, but rather that the existence of life is the essence of loss. The "meaning" of the affective experience of loss is grounded in the very existence of affectivity or experience, the existence of life, felt or understood as the ontological precondition for the possible negation of affect, sensibility, or experience (the possibility of death).

Malick's film is thus one example of an effort to reframe existential questions concerning the relation of life and death as ontological questions concerning the being or non-being of life per se. If it is an important film it's not only because it is beautifully made, but because of the subtlety with which it exposes the problematic of living being as both physical and metaphysical in scope. The being of "life" is a metaphysical problem because unless life is metaphysical it has no being: it is reducible to the material distribution of organizations and functions that neither warrant nor support a general, encompassing concept. Every vitalist knows this, and that is why, for example, it at least makes sense to recognize the coherence of the Deleuzian concept of A LIFE, even if one does not share his metaphysical commitments. But, on the other hand, if "life" is purely metaphysical it has no being. Life is a physical problem because it characterizes the modality of being of material bodies whose properties and capacities differ from those of non-living bodies: even if, in certain instances, it turns out to be surprisingly difficult to specify just how this is the case.

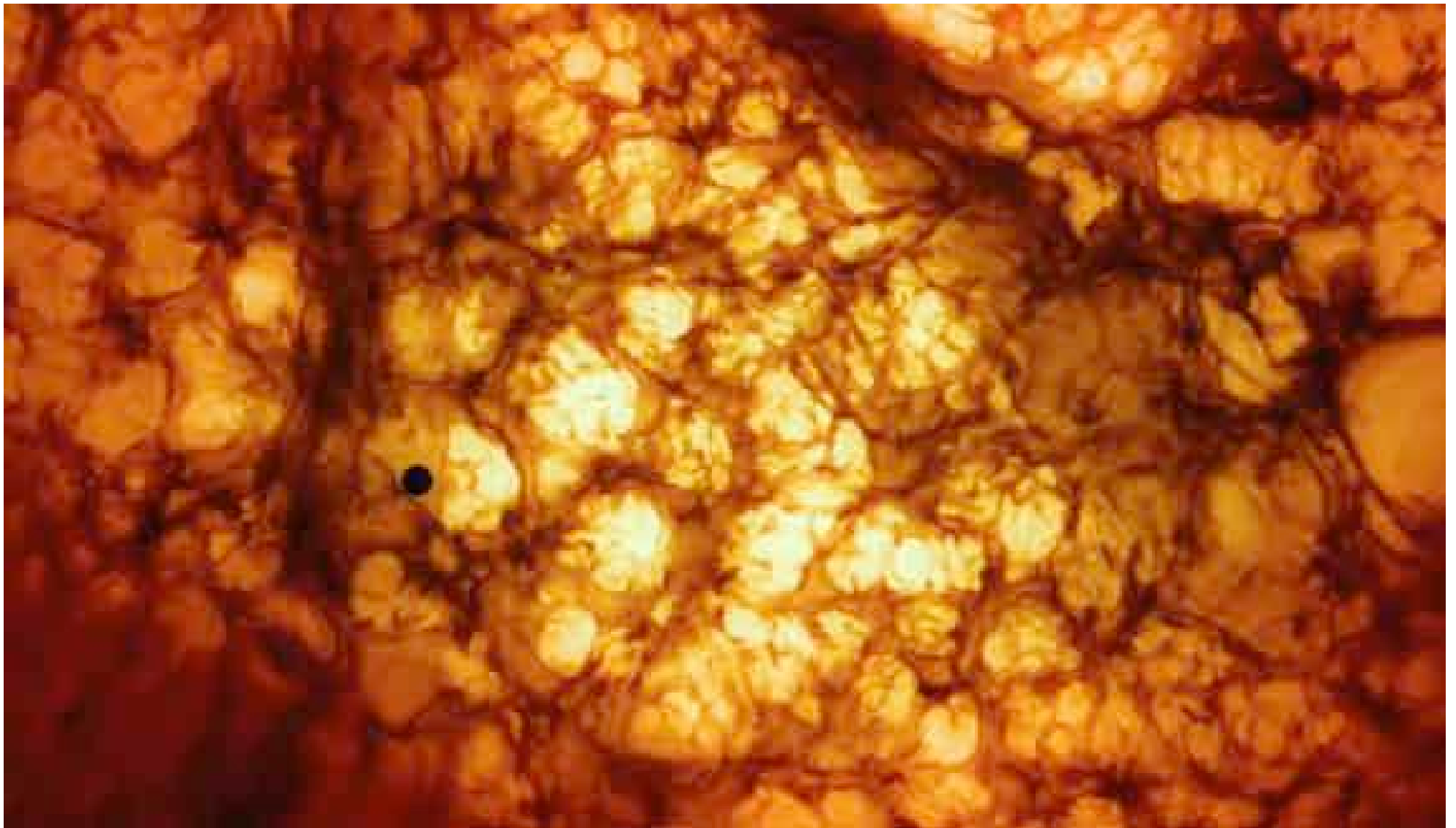
In Malick's film, the ontological and existential problem of "life" is taken up within a Christian framework, which therefore involves him with the problem not only of life but of spirit. We should bear in mind, however, that this framework is not necessarily that of the film itself but rather of the characters whose lives it depicts. If *Tree of Life* remains a profoundly materialist film, it is because the existence of spiritual experience is itself addressed as a problem of material genesis: how does spiritual experience—as an existential fact, as part of a world—come into being within the cosmos? In what sense can we understand the emergence of life as an ontological condition of such experience? And how

does the work of mourning pose the question of the relation between spirit, life, and matter, insofar as it involves an affective relation to the material disappearance of a life experienced as a spiritual loss? Malick's characters respond to the loss of a life by posing spiritual questions and seeking their spiritual resolution. The film's representation of the "tree of life," however, the physical genesis of living being, implicitly responds to these questions in explicitly materialist terms. It is a

lem that returns us to the question of how feeling and sensation first come into being, of how the opacity of being opens onto manifestation for the first time. If affect and sensation first come into being through the existence of life, how can this becoming-sensible itself be made sensible? Which also means: how can it be felt, how can it be made to affect us? And what becomes of cinema in its effort to make manifest that which is prior to manifestation?

The most obvious fact about

also the context in which a film like this is engineered. It is not, directly, life or thought or spirit that enables the manifest reconstruction of the material coming-into-being of manifestation; it is technics. In this sense, the true frame of *Tree of Life* is not so much a Christian theogony as a technological anabasis, a return to the source of all that modernity allows through its scientific, technological, and economic resources. The problem, then, is not only that of the relation between mat-



resolutely Darwinian film, but one that includes the facticity of spiritual experience within the process of material genesis that it seeks to make manifest through cinematic representation.

Materialism is that philosophical orientation which formulates ontological questions according to the following criterion: given that being is prior to thinking, how can thinking become adequate to being? In Malick's film, as its title suggests, this problem is crucially conditioned by the mediation of the relation between being and thinking by life, and therefore by affectivity and sensation as conditions of material experience. Moreover, insofar as these conditions (feeling, sensing) give rise to forms of spiritual experience, affectivity not only constitutes the distinction between matter and life or grounds the relation between life and thought, it also gives rise to a relation between life and spirit. It is thus a spiritual problem which returns us to the "tree of life" in Malick's film, to the genesis of affectivity. It is a spiritual prob-

lem that returns us to the question of how feeling and sensation first come into being, of how the opacity of being opens onto manifestation for the first time. If affect and sensation first come into being through the existence of life, how can this becoming-sensible itself be made sensible? Which also means: how can it be felt, how can it be made to affect us? And what becomes of cinema in its effort to make manifest that which is prior to manifestation? The most obvious fact about Malick's film, but also perhaps the easiest to overlook in parsing its commitments, is that the capacity of cinema to address these problems is first and foremost a technical capacity. If the spiritual, existential, and ontological questions posed by the voice-over of Malick's characters might seem to be answered by the "god's eye view" of the camera—its capacity to frame and render visible the material genesis of the cosmos—we should remember that this is in fact a technical frame. It is a frame enabled by a production team faced with immediately material problems of visual representation solved through the resources of current biological and physical theory, 3D scanners, and CGI special effects. Which also means that these are solved through considerable financial resources: by capital. What has to be thought, in thinking through Malick's film, is the fact that the gleaming corporate skyscraper of the architectural firm for which Sean Penn's character works, his late capitalist life-world, is

ter, life, and spirit, but how this relation is mediated by technics and by capital.

This is not, of course, to undermine the integrity of Malick's project, but rather to think its situation, the manner in which its own conditions of possibility are inscribed in those of cinematic representation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If the perfection of reminiscence is, for Schopenhauer, the true health of spirit, for cinema the effort to remember everything returns us, at its limit, to the restlessness of spirit afflicting each of Malick's films: that of a garbage man, a factory worker, a soldier, a colonist, a corporate architect. This is the restlessness not only of what we do not know but also of what we know too well, not only of the beginning but the end, not only of the origin of life but of life under capital.

The cinematic perfection of reminiscence is thus the passion of modernity, made manifest.

-Nathan Brown