Being in the World: Malick's Ontology of Existence

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) (programme name). It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the existentialist and ontological philosophy that shapes the cinematic expression in the later films of Terrence Malick, specifically focusing on Martin Heidegger's concept of Dasein and Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of the gaze. The critical analysis will centre on Malick's body of work following his twenty-year hiatus, a period during which his filmmaking style developed a distinct auteurism, unlike much his contemporary cinematic counterparts. The purpose of this thesis is to engage with these existential philosophies in a way that aligns with Malick's ongoing search for the meaning of being—a theme that consistently emerges throughout his post-hiatus films. This will enable us to gain a deeper insight and understanding into the cinematic and philosophical intentions behind making such profound and spiritually awakening pictures. Existential exploration and questioning lead the way as the recurring theme within Malick's work, and serves as the primary strength into the creation of the now famous reflective and contemplative nature that has had such successful circulation. Through this lens, the thesis aims to gain a deeper understanding of Malick's films, intending to demonstrate that philosophy, especially existential thought, provides for and exists as a worthwhile tool for interpreting and appreciating Malick's work. By exploring these philosophical frameworks, this thesis will argue that they not only deepen our understanding of Malick's films but also reveal the profound ways in which his cinematic vision engages with fundamental questions about existence, time, and perception.

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Introduction

For my point of departure, it makes sense to first touch on the context surrounding this enquiry. I want to first touch on the necessary biographical information essential to gaining a strong base of understanding surrounding the man behind the iconic philosophical cinema. Terrence Malick's history within the world of philosophy, that preceded his movements into the realm of shooting for the big screen is of value to know when regarding this study, as it provides an insight that can be used to understand where he as a philosophically minded person, is coming from, regarding his occupancy within the cinematic sphere. It was not Malick's intention to become a filmmaker, he rather fell into it, after years of circulating with solely philosophical circles. It is well known that after his studies at Oxford, Malick briefly taught philosophy at MIT. As a young man, he travelled to Germany in the mid-1960s to meet Martin Heidegger, where he translated his Vom Wesendes Grund, 'the Essence of Reasons' (Heidegger, The Essence of Reasons). It would have initially appeared that Malick was for heading towards the traditional route of a philosophy student, one of residing in contemplation, writing and eventually going on to full time lecturing. He did it for a while, before becoming disillusioned with his teaching abilities, and from there on found work as a screenwriter. Cinema became his primary focus, where he studied in depth its subtleties and potential for furthering his philosophical being. It could be argued that Malick attempted to transform his already developed knowledge of Heidegger's philosophies into cinematic language and experience.

"All of Malick's films after his hiatus beginning with The Thin Red Line contain this location of momentary presence and exploratory nature which is largely distinct from what would be considered acceptable to the mass circulatory sphere. Malick does not insist on any one way of thinking or acting, but rather insights into he multiplicity of worldwide relations. In both 'Knight of Cups' and 'Song toSong' Malick

demonstrates this through making us uncertain of any real protagonist, rather

perpetuating the idea of nature versus machine."

In Malick's films, particularly post-hiatus works like *The Tree of Life*, *Knight of Cups*,

and *A Hidden Life*, the theme of the gaze and its effect on the characters' existential

states is central to the story. The characters in these films are constantly confronted

with the gaze—whether it's the gaze of a parent, another person, or even a spiritual or

cosmic gaze that watches over them. Each encounter with this gaze challenges their

understanding of who they are, forcing them into a reflective and often painful

engagement with their own identity. For example, in *The Tree of Life*, Jack's search for

meaning is not just a journey through time and memory; it is a constant negotiation

between the self and the overwhelming, sometimes oppressive gaze of the universe.

Similarly, in *Knight of Cups*, Rick is caught in a series of encounters that challenge his

perception of himself through the eyes of others, questioning his place in a world that

seems indifferent to his search for meaning. Through Sartre's philosophy of *The Look*,

we can better understand how Malick's characters experience this disruption in their

self-perception. The gaze becomes not just a simple exchange of visual recognition, but

a profound existential encounter—one that brings about both self-awareness and a crisis

of identity. The characters in Malick's films are caught in a tension between their own

subjective experiences and the external perspectives that shape them. The gaze forces

them into a confrontation with their existence, asking them to reckon with the

objectification of their own being in the eyes of the other.

By examining Malick's use of cinematography alongside these philosophical

concepts, the thesis seeks to research the existentialist themes present in his work, in

order to gain a deeper understanding of the films themselves. Doing this will help

uncover how the director's visual and narrative style deepens the understanding of human existence, perception, and relational dynamics. Heidegger's *Dasein*, with its emphasis on authenticity, temporality, and being-toward-death, provides a lens through which Malick's characters can be understood as grappling with their place in the world and their quest for meaning. Meanwhile, Sartre's *gaze*, which addresses the objectification of the self in relation to others, offers insight into the interpersonal tensions and self-awareness in Malick's films. The study argues that Malick's unique cinematography—characterized by natural light, fluid camera movements, and expansive landscapes—visually embodies these existential themes, allowing for a richer, more nuanced interpretation of his work. Through detailed analysis of key films such as *The Tree of Life*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Badlands*, and *Days of Heaven*, the thesis demonstrates how Malick's films transcend traditional storytelling to present a cinematic philosophy that invites reflection on existence, time, and the gaze. By synthesizing philosophy and film analysis, this research aims to offer a deeper understanding of both Malick's artistry and the philosophical ideas that resonate through his work.

In chapter 1 of this thesis I will begin by providing a brief overview of Sartre's existential philosophy, particularly focusing on how Being and Nothingness lays the groundwork for understanding the concept of the gaze and its existential implications for one's self. Following this, I will investigate the subjective-objective polarity that Sartre outlines in relation to human perception, demonstrating how this strain influences the perception of one's own identity and existence. I will then introduce an analysis of *Malick's ,'Knight of Cups'* (Malick, Knight of Cups), drawing on the parallels between Sartre's theory of 'shame' and the film's unique exploration of Rick's alienation, that illustrates how the visual medium and language of Malickian

film, can provide for a ontological and sensory extension to Sartre's concepts focused on the layout of being. To both further and strengthen my point, I will then seek to analyse phenomenology as a concept, encouraging the understanding of how the "look" operates as both an individual experience and a societal happening. I intend then to ground the discussion within interdisciplinary areas of study such as psychology and sociology, to add on from the philosophical nature of the inquiry. In addition to the philosophical analysis, I will explore the role of Malick's cinematic techniques in representing Sartre's ontological concepts, particularly drawing from how a Emmanuel Lubezki's cinematography amplifies the subjective fragmentation of Rick's character. By examining Malick's use of cinematography alongside these philosophical concepts, the thesis seeks to research the existentialist themes present in his work, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the films themselves. Doing this will help uncover how Malick's visual and narrative style deepens the understanding of human existence, perception, spatial and relational dynamics between the subjects and objects within the world.

In Chapter two, I will introduce one of Malick's greatest philosophical influences, namely Martin Heidegger, and analyse Malick's integration of Dasein, into his films. My primary intention is to explore how Terrence Malick's films, particularly The Tree of Life (2011) (Malick, The Tree of Life) and Knight of Cups (2015) (Malick, Knight of Cups), engage deeply with the philosophical ideas of Martin Heidegger, especially his concept of Dasein, the fundamental state of "being in the world" that is vital to his existential philosophy. Through a close analysis of Malick's cinematic style and the philosophical traits that make his work what it is, I will demonstrate how Malick's characters are a direct embodiment of Heideggerian thought. More specifically, I will examine how the filmmaker translates Heidegger's philosophical

ideas into visual and narrative language, offering a cinematic exploration of the human condition. In doing so, this chapter aims to highlight how Malick's exploration of Dasein provides a profound reflection on existence, identity, and the tension between the individual and the world they are within.

Additionally, an important component of my analysis will focus on how Malick's films reflect the tension between the human existence and the surrounding world. Dasein, as Heidegger portrayed it, is not simply an individual experience but one that is, by nature, intrinsically connected to the world in which we live. Malick's characters are often portrayed as struggling with this existential relationship searching for meaning, purpose, and connection within a world that frequently appears overwhelming, disconnected, or even indifferent. This occurs as a trait of every Terrence Malick film, so it is of vital importance to the study that it be analysed. I will examine the visual techniques employed by Malick, especially his use of natural landscapes, going into how Malick utilises nature as a contrary to the technological and urbanity of the modern day to reflect distaste for a lack of contemporary groundedness within the natural world. I further intend to illustrate how his characters are at one with their environment, reflecting the Heideggerian idea that the world itself is an essential component of human existence. By focusing on these aspects of the films, I intend to uncover the intricate philosophical dialogues Malick creates between his characters and their surroundings, paying particular attention to the way nature and the urban environment shape their identities and perceptions of reality.

In addition to examining the relationship between individuals and their environments, I will explore how Malick's work portrays the existential struggles inherent in the concept of *Dasein*. For Heidegger, the awareness of one's own being and inevitable

mortality is a defining part of human existence. I will investigate how Malick portrays these struggles, particularly through his characters' internal conflicts and their search for meaning, within often confused worlds. The use of cinematic techniques, employed by Malick such as disjointed narrative structures, radical discontinuous editing, and the emphasis on the subjective human experience will be explored as tools that Malick uses to convey the psychological and philosophical discomfort faced by his characters. By focusing on how these cinematic choices mirror Heidegger's ideas on the finite nature of the human being, I aim to uncover the ways in which Malick's films can be seen as a cinematic manifestation of Heidegger's existential inquiries, namely that of a manifestation of Dasein.

Furthermore, I will explore the philosophical implications of Malick's representation of modernity, technology, and alienation. In *The Tree of Life* and *Knight of Cups*, Malick contrasts the authenticity of nature with the artificiality and alienation found within modern, technological environments. Taking from Heidegger's critique of modern technology, I will examine how Malick critiques the ways in which technology and consumerism disconnect individuals from their authentic natural self leading to a sense of existential fragmentation and dread. This section will investigate how the treatment of technology within Malick's films parallels Heidegger's notion of *Gestell* (enframing), where humans fall victim to technological and consumerist control, something Malick staunchly opposes.

Ultimately, this chapter seeks to provide a sophisticated analysis of how Terrence Malick's films translate Heideggerian philosophy into a visual and emotional experience, that works within the artistic realm. Through this exploration, I intend to show that Malick's work provides a rich, cinematic interpretation of existential

themes, offering a place for reflection on the nature of being and the human experience in the world. By examining Malick's approach to philosophy in cinema, I aim to deepen our understanding of both the films themselves and the ways in which they contribute to the broader landscape of contemporary cinema and philosophical thought.

Chapter One: The Gaze and Alienation: Sartre's 'Look' in the Cinematic World of

Malick

In this chapter I intend to articulate the key elements within the ontological discussion presented by Jean-Paul Sartre, from the chapter 'The Look', practically often referred to as 'Gaze Theory', within his 1943 existentialist triumph 'Being and Nothingness' (Sarte). I will first explore Sartre's Gaze Theory, followed by providing a detailed examination of how Malick's *Knight of Cups* visually and thematically explores these existential concepts. The goal is to make valid the link between Sartre's description of human 'shame' through noting its subjective and objective subtleties of individual perception experienced by the human being and draw upon then, the cinematic manifestation of such, which appears consistently within the works of Malick, whereby often articulated is a focus on a singular character's existentialist crisis', discomfort and alienation experienced through their individual, subjective led world experience. This chapter explores the occupation of human perception, eye contact, and the 'gaze' and the resulting 'shame', that exists within our everyday contemporary world, and draws upon phenomenological investigation, sociometry, and psychological science, in effort to add an interdisciplinary level to the inquiry. The result being an in-depth reflection on the ways in which the eye and gaze structure influence the human experience within the films of Malick both practically and philosophically.

Having now established Sartre's foundational theory of the gaze, we can now turn our attention to how this existential framework is visually and philosophically approached in Malick's Knight of Cups. We all see ourselves as the centre of our own existence, and we are led by these subjective notions, which ultimately impact our perception of the world. Most applicable to this enquiry, our interactions with others and how they in turn have the potential to become impacted by our subjective perceptions.

To first understand the gaze, it is necessary to first examine Jean-Paul Sartre's thoughts about the subjective nature versus the objective nature of human perception. Eye contact and the notion of gaze, in its most basic of definitions, is largely accepted and understood as a key and integral component of contemporary human communication. It serves as a vital and intuitive means of introducing interpersonal dynamics and influencing the levels of intimacy within communication between people. This chapter aims to offer an in-depth reflection on the ways in which the eye and gaze structure human experience, while also establishing a foundational framework for understanding their phenomenological significance within the films of Terrence Malick.

Phenomenology, in its broadest sense, involves the study of phenomena as they are experienced within the subjective realm of human consciousness. This approach encourages us to value the lived experience of individuals, particularly their subjective experiences, such as emotions and perceptions. It leads to the discussion of experiences drawn from the eyes, leading then to eye-lines, and crucially, eye contact or lack of, which serve as the critical entry point for this investigation into the study of the philosophies present within the work of Malick. The question at hand concerns the nature of phenomena: Are they experienced natively subjective, or do they contain an objective layer that can be traced and understood across individuals?

The question of objectivity versus subjectivity in sensory phenomena is an area of keen interest in this study. For instance, certain sensory experiences—such as perceiving the colour blue—seem to present themselves as universal and objective. In this sense, the statement "the car is blue" might be accepted as a universal truth based on visual perception. Similarly, biological processes such as reaction times, and a population's collective response to stimuli, can point towards an objective dimension

to sensory phenomena. However, it remains a point of contention whether the full experience of perception exists purely in the objective realm or if it retains an inherent subjectivity tied to individual consciousness.

This concern about the subjective and objective nature of perception brings us to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, specifically his concept of "The Look" as presented in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre's theory provides a profound insight into how human interaction, through the experience of being seen, transforms the subject's relationship to their own being. According to Sartre, the act of being gazed upon by another person fundamentally alters the subject's self-perception and the predisposed notion of how who and what they are within the world. "To begin with, Sartre says, he is "totally "absorbed" by what he sees in the room. He is on the non-reflective level. And he's all alone; he's not especially aware of the presence of other people. (If he's watching other people in the room, he is in any event not really regarding them as other consciousnesses; they are simply objects for him.) But now, all of a sudden, he hears a footstep behind him, and he suddenly realizes he's being watched. He's been caught! Suddenly the whole situation changes radically for him. He's suddenly aware of himself as being seen! The change, of course, is that now he's aware of the presence of someone else—another consciousness, who is watching him. In short, the difference between the two situations, before and after, is exactly the difference between an isolated consciousness, all by itself, and a consciousness in the presence of others —what Sartre calls being-for-others." (Spade) When we look at another person, we typically believe to experience them as an object in our field of vision, organizing them within our subjective experience. However, when we become the object of another's gaze, something significant happens. The gaze of the other places us outside of ourselves, forcing us into the role of the "object," the center of their

perspective, rather than the "subject" of our own experience. This shift leads to a profound existential tension for the egoic mind. Sartre describes this moment as one of "shame," where the subject's sense of self is shaken into doubt. No longer are we merely the perceiver, but we become the perceived, an object within another's world. Sartre's philosophy implies that through this encounter with the gaze of another, the subject experiences a form of objectification: "I feel the world stolen away from me." We through looking externally at 'objects', perceive ourselves within the subjective mind, subjectively, manifesting anything or anyone in the external peripheral as 'the object'. Once the 'object', in this case being a person, emerges into our vision, we become displaced from our original deemed predisposition of 'the subject', as the object from the subjective perspective, appears as the centre of their own experience. It is a case of due to seeing the other person, 'I feel the world stolen away from me'. There now exists a 'sinkhole' of being. As the other person looks to me, I become the object of their gaze. The question now is one of is the now object (the perceiver), experiencing the objective, subjectively. As Malick's camera moves with Rick, we are forced to experience his subjective view of alienation, echoing the detachment and disassociation Sartre describes as a response to the object's look. Just like Sartre's sense of self becomes attacked and alienated through the gaze of the outsider, Rick's disengagement from those around him whether it be at a lavish party, intimacy of a romance or dialogue with family members, reflects a similar existential breakage, offering a potent cinematic display of Sartre's theory of the ongoing objectification and the resulting "shame."

Regarding philosophical strength, not many films could be argued to hold the same moving effect, as that seen within Malick's Knight of Cups (Malick, Knight of Cups). "It continues his trend of exploring past autobiographical experiences of people and

place and relating them to grander themes such as humanity's place in the cosmos. The film begins with Ben Kingsley in voiceover quoting from the Bible passage "The Hymn of the Pearl", a story in which a prince attempts to retrieve a pearl for his father, the king, but loses his memory. The story of Rick (Christian Bale), the Hollywood screenwriter at the centre of *Knight of Cups*, draws many parallels to the tale of the prince. Following the suicide of one brother, Rick moves to Hollywood in order to take care financially of his other sibling, ex-drug addict Barry (Wes Bentley), and his elderly father Joseph (Brian Dennehy). However, the writer becomes seduced by the decadent Hollywood lifestyle, forgetting his family. The film is structured around his relationships with multiple women, as well as his brother who we predominately see in flashback." (Porzio)

Malick from the outset of Knight of Cups and for the remainder of the film, recurringly uses the settings of wealthy, debauchery filled parties, which are almost the contemporary manifestation of Sodom, as a backdrop for Rick's growing internal instability and sense of alienation. These scenes are more than just social events for the deemed successful, but rather become, in the metaphorical sense, a reflection of Rick's existential crisis, where the excess of socialisation within these circles highlight his growing internal instability, forcing him into deep contemplation, separate from the ongoings within the parties. We observe Rick wander throughout the venues, with a clear sense of detachment from what is going on around him. We see him exit the space, where he looks at the attendees from within the inside of the house, out of the window. We see him have moments of regular disassociation form the rest of the people. The Sartrean descriptions of the gaze, and specifically 'shame' is evocatively evident in these sequences. At the forefront of focus is Rick's subjective, which feels under threat within the vast uncaring groupings of people

surrounding him. For Rick, the attendees serve absolutely zero benefit to his life, but yet, with them surrounding him, he is displaced from comfort of his subjective security. The existential tension between Rick and the objects around him, directly correlate with that of Sartre's framework of the self and the other. "At any rate, "the look" is a signification of a direct encounter with another subjective individual. In le regard, Sartre avers, we feel objectified by others and experience ourselves as fixed in the gaze of the other individual. This objectification is experienced as the "negation" of our free consciousness or of our "transcendence" of the other. By seeking to elude this objectification of ourselves via the look, by negating ourselves as mere objective entities for the other, we testify to our "being-as-object" for another. In order to wrench ourselves away from this condition of being fixed as a determinate object in the gaze of the other, we must negate, in Sartre's Hegelian terms, the negation of our free self-consciousness on the part of the other person who objectifies us." (George J. Stack). We are following Rick's search for meaning, fulfilment and success and we a presented this from his subjective perspective. The objective reality is therefore clearly set apart from his internal mind. "Malick creates the subjective experience of a distracted consciousness skimming over its own existence". (Rizov)

In addition, something of further significance to this inquiry, is the way in which the camera is used within these sequences. It is of vital importance to the manifestation of Malick's desired philosophical intentions, that the cinematography, namely the framing and camera movement, plays to the emotional beats of these deeply personal sequences. Malick's trusted cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki AMC, ASC, the winner of three academy awards for cinematography, and renowned as one of the best cinematographer of the last 20 years, is the eye behind the images presented. "Significant has been Lubezki's work with American auteur Terrence Malick, a

director known for his poetic, impressionistic approach to storytelling and his almost spiritual reverence for the natural world. Beginning with "The New World" in 2005, Lubezki has shot all of Malick's subsequent films, including "The Tree of Life," "To the Wonder" (2012), "Knight of Cups," and "Song to Song" (2017). These collaborations have produced some of the most beautiful and emotionally profound images in contemporary cinema, with Lubezki's camera capturing the ephemeral beauty of nature and the inner lives of Malick's characters with a sense of grace and transcendence that is truly breathtaking." (Morton) A staple of Lubezki's cinematographic style is the use of wide angles lenses. Lubezki argues they allow him to incorporate further depth to his compositions, through utilising more of the background, pertaining then, a deep focus. "By shooting with a wide lens, Lubezki is able to capture more of the environment around his subjects, creating a sense of context and spatial relationship that draws the viewer deeper into the world of the film. At the same time, the fluidity and mobility of his camera, whether gliding smoothly on steadicam or shaking with the handheld urgency of a documentary, creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy, as if we are right there in the moment with the characters, experiencing their joys, their sorrows, and their struggles alongside them." (Morton). Lubezki frames Rick within a multitude of shot types, alongside using the unconventional approach of using wide angle lenses. With an aspect ratio of 2.39:1, this decision becomes even further amplified, whereby the image is stretched to an almost anamorphic level, with distortion on the edges of frame, which in turn cause a layer of distortion to the 'objects' separate from Rick's internal subjective consciousness. This technique reinforces the Sartrean sense of shame and acts as a visual metaphor to the distinction between both subject and object. Additionally, the wide-angle lens approach creates a significant

unconventionality in the execution of Lubezki's close-ups. Lubezki frames the actors' faces tightly, often warping their key features, which supports the encouragement of the distortion of the presented reality. This frequent technique in Knight of Cups serves as a direct reflection of Rick's subjective experience, his fragmented sense of self and alienation. The distortion does not solely serve as an aesthetic or stylistic choice but also as a visual metaphor for Rick's internal struggle, where the world around him seems increasingly 'warped' as he contests with being seen through the gaze of others. "In short, it is Terrence Malick at his most Malickian. Which also means it is another visual feast, with Emmanuel Lubezki once again joining in to show why he is in a class of his own at the moment. Lubezki has employed an extreme wide-angle lens before to conjure up alienation and isolation, but never as effectively as here". (Klashorst).

Chapter Two – Cinematically Embodying Dasein: Heideggerian Themes in Terrence

Malick's Films

In this chapter, I aim to explore the influence of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, particularly his concept of Dasein, that exists within the films of Terrence Malick. By examining the ontological and existentialist themes seen throughout Malick's work, I will demonstrate how his characters embody the existential struggles and questions raised by Heidegger, namely those regarding the nature being. I will pay close attention to two of his more recent films, The Tree of Life (Malick, The Tree of Life) and Knight of Cups (Malick, Knight of Cups). I will observe the cinematographic techniques, employed by cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki AMC ASC, and discuss how they are used to reflect the Heideggerian philosophy. I will further explore how Malick's cinematic approach encapsulates the tension between the individual's subjective experience and the larger, often overwhelming and intense, world that they exist within. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to illustrate how Malick translates Heideggerian ideas into a visual and emotional language, offering a profound reflection on human existence, through referring to the linkage with that of Heidegger's concept of Dasein. I intend to look at the Heideggerian elements present within Malick's work, as a means to better understand his intentions into the philosophical exploration of the human mind, to then possess a greater understanding of the films themselves, and their place within cinema. Although many disregard Malick's cinematic direction, and label it as 'pretentious' and hard to navigate, one cannot deny their effect on the direction of cinema in a cinema that today is congested with replication in theme and intended achievement.

To start, it would serve of benefit to briefly discuss Heidegger's technical concept of Dasein. In Heidegger's philosophy, Dasein refers to the primary human condition of 'being in the world'. It is the idea that human consciousness is always placed within a world of relations and perceptions. The essential characteristic of *Dasein* being its

awareness of its own existence and eventual death. "Dasein is Heidegger's way of referring both to the human being and to the type of Being that humans have. Its essence lies in its existence. It can respond to its circumstances, thereby choosing its 'Being'. 'Dasein' is about the human being and its place in the world. Dasein is essentially in the world, because it continually interprets and engages with other entities and the contexts in which they lie. Only Dasein makes the world a unitary world at all, rather than a collection of entities. Dasein is the whole human being and makes no distinction between body and mind. Heidegger rejected any purely psychological realm." (Inwood).

There are only a handful of directors, who have successfully developed their own distinctive cinematic language to the extent of which Malick has. His films portray ones immediate experience, which consistently persist within the notions of searching and wandering. The search for something other. They always appear to propose a search for something, that exists just outside of the world we are limited to observing within his narratives. Malick's films are difficult. "His style is often described as "abstract," "elliptical," and "impressionistic." He seems to want his films to operate on an unconscious level. They don't present arguments so much as invite viewers to try on a perspective. Insofar as the perspective they present is consonant with a Christian worldview, Malick's films can be seen as a kind of "cinematic apologetics." (McAteer) One of the most recurring elements in Malick's work is the distinction made between the world of nature, and the world of man, more specifically, the world of technology. The character's introduced by Malick almost always portray them as practical, levelled beings, within a highly practical environment. A binman, farmer, soldier and factory worker, for brief example. This aligns greatly with Heidegger's concept of Dasein, where human life is grounded within the practical, activities of the

everyday, that ultimately shape our experience and perception of the world. Malick's characters, often portrayed as workers or individuals in mundane settings, reflect this existential Heideggerian rootedness. "Usually, our involvement with the world is preconscious and automatic. The mechanics of what we do, whether relating to another person or to things, are out of awareness. When, to take another example, we use "equipment" in the world, we do not think about or rehearse what we do (except perhaps when learning). We *understand* how to use things, and they already matter to us (they have a valence or affective tone; Heidegger called this feature affectedness), even as we are using them, automatically. Heidegger suggests that such knowing-how should not be thought of primarily as internal mental states or events: they are shown or displayed in our acts" (Paul B. Lieberman) . Heidegger argued that our subjective experience of the world, is not based on reason or understanding, but rather on a "Pre-existing sense of practicality. Before we question what is, as previous philosophers proposed, we first instinctively see how to use. Heidegger uses the example of a hammer to point out that before we've intellectually questioned the attributes of such an object, let alone ponder the meaning of existence, we already have an engrained idea of how to use it. It is only when using the hammer fails or surprises us in some way, that we begin to think about its being." (Vanderlinden)

Malick's notable background in philosophy from Oxford's Magdalen College and his keen study of Heidegger in his forming years, present as the initial window into understanding Malick's philosophical and ontological intentions. For Heidegger, the pursuit of understanding metaphysics is inherently limited and cannot be fully realised through what he saw as a limited palette of explanation, something that he later admitted, was a failure of his magnum opus, 'Being and Time' (Heidegger, Being and Time). It can be imagined that Malick then too, through his in depth association

with Heideggerian thought, arrived to the same conclusions. It could be argued Malick attempted to now explore deep ontological metaphysics through a new avenue, the avenue of cinema. An avenue which would not assert language, but offer an interdisciplinary alternative, through the use of sound, visuals and music. For Malick, this shift would allow for the expression of his philosophies, to enter a sphere of art, encompassing varying forms. It would allow for the expression of his existentialist mind, to perform unhindered and would result in them gaining full expression in a way that would in turn reach vast numbers of people.

The Ontology of the Landscape and Nature in Malick's Films

In Both 'The Tree of Life' (Malick, The Tree of Life) and 'Knight of Cups' (Malick, Knight of Cups) Malick employs nature as a character, in a way to effectively portray the purity of the natural. It is in line with the Heideggerian idea of 'Being in the World'. We might capture the sense of Heidegger's thought here by thinking of Dasein not as a subject distinct from a world of objects, but as an experience of openness where my being and that of the world are not distinguished" (Critchley). Malick persists with the idea throughout his filmography, of the relationship between man and his natural environment. Holding characters to their natural environment layers an additional sense of groundedness among the existential tension experienced by the characters. It almost seeks to serve as a contrary to the internal struggle within the characters minds. Nature in this way is not separate from the individual, but only serves as an extension. As the great English Philosopher Alan Watts put it, "We do not "come into" this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean "waves," the universe "peoples." Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe." (Watts) A monologue from Jessica

Chastain's character within 'The Tree of Life' further reiterates the idea, "Nature 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. And love is smiling through all things." (Malick, The Tree of Life).

In Knight of Cups, Malick portrays nature and the natural world as a safe haven for Rick. Away from the vast cityscapes, we often see Rick venture alone within mountain ranges, beaches and in vast grassy plains. Rick engages in deep ontological contemplation and internalises his struggle, maintaining it within his subjective consciousness. With Rick venturing into these isolated landscapes, offered by Malick is a philosophical juxtaposition sperate of that from the superficiality of his urban existence. The natural world, exists as a tool utilised by Malick to help make evident the reflection of existential uncertainty employed by Heidegger within Dasein. "Malick envisions the modern city as a colossal, fragmented collage of various cultures, artworks, and consumer objects which promises the individual immediate gratification at the expense of breeding narcissism and a fundamental alienation from the real" (James Slaymaker).

Malick's Philosophical Exploration of Technology and Modernity

As discussed earlier, the idea of the urban and natural environment, recurringly manifest within Malick's films. Additional to that sense, however, is the theme of technology and modernity, against that of the natural order of things. Malick expresses a distaste for the technological advances of recent, maintaining even to shoot celluloid within the predominantly digital age of cinematography, wherever he can help it. But within his films, the modern world is cinematically expressed by one consisting of great alienation, where the technological advancements of recent serve

only as a hinderance to the growth of the spiritual potential of his characters. "Heidegger draws attention to technology's place in bringing about our decline…we now view nature, and increasingly human beings too, only technologically … we see nature and people only as raw material for technical operations." Malick favours the natural world in Knight of Cups, criticising the alienating force of the urban world. We understand his intentions with his radical discontinuous editing style, drifting from the beautiful, scenic natural landscapes (the cosmos within The Tree of Life), and cutting to the rush filled city experience. In Knight of Cups Malick uses the highly affluent sections of society as a metaphor for the technical advancements of our age. How the rich hold to technological progression, with a disregard for the natural world, for mere personal economic advancement. This sense correlates with Heidegger's concept of 'enframing' or 'gestell', whereby as Heidegger himself puts it, "The rule of enframing threatens humanity with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth." (Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays). The urban landscapes presented by Malick, are made suggest as the primal problem, our lives become lost to the consumerist notion, with a loss of connection to the pure self. The self therefore loses its essential authenticity.

Emmanuel Lubezki's Cinematography: Visualizing Dasein and the Human Condition

Emmanuel Lubezki's stellar cinematography must not go untouched upon when referring to the manifestation of Malick's philosophical tendencies. Lubezki approaches cinematography with a strong emphasis on character, framing character's

as subjects within the grander environment of the world. He and Malick both developed a distinct and visceral visual language that only serves to heighten the Heideggerian philosophies of which Malick draws upon. Malick and Lubezki even co-created what they labelled a 'dogma' for shooting, for 'The Tree of Life', which consisted of namely using only natural light, shooting for depth, always backlighting and never underexposing the negative, to ensure the absence of milky images. On from that, the use of hand-held camerawork, serves to obtain an almost documentarian style to the work. It creates a sense akin to that of Heidegger's Dasein, a sense of being in the world, naturally experiencing the periphery. The hand-held camera work encourages the manifestation of flow to the world and heightens the philosophical underpinnings of Heideggerian thought of which Malick wishes to cinematically pursue.

Additionally, the use of wide lenses has a Heideggerian background also. They encourage the visuals to highlight life in the context of surroundings. Take for example, the close ups on Rick's face within Knight of Cups. Through utilising both a deep lens stop and wide-angle lens, the character becomes inseparable from their surroundings. They are one with the world. Heidegger's influence over these integral moments is evident. Dasein is portrayed through these visual choices, with the characters are joined with their surroundings, in a sort of spiritual unity.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study indicated that Terrence Malick is not only a filmmaker, but a philosopher. His ability to merge deep philosophical concepts, like from that of Heidegger, and merge them into the artistic world of cinema, highlights the complexity of him as a person. It is refreshing to see his films, one feels 'allowed' into another realm, where contemplation and self-inquiry are not judged. Malick employs a sense of reflection and inquiry within his films, and that then passes onto his audiences. The audience want to know what is really going on, just as does Malick. Malick's cinema is renowned for making the audience feel something unique to that of most other streams of film. His honest search for answers intrigues viewers and also intrigues his crew, actors and ultimately himself. He evidently enjoys what he does, and it shows through the personality bursting though in the work.

This thesis set out to explore the philosophical traits that are integral to what we know as being the cinema of Terrence Malick. In this thesis I leaned into a particular focus on his integration of Martin Heidegger's concept of Dasein and its relevance to the understanding of human existence, identity, and experience within the modern world. Through an in-depth analysis of two of Malick's most significant films, The Tree of Life (2011) (Malick, The Tree of Life) and Knight of Cup*s* (2015) (Malick, Knight of Cups), this study has demonstrated that Malick's work provides for a cinematic avenue for the successful integration of Heideggerian existentialist and ontological philosophy. Through closely examining Malick's distinctive cinematic techniques and the manner in which he translates complex philosophical ideas into visual and emotional experiences, I have shown how Malick's films explore the tension between the individual's sense of self, other and their surrounding environment.

The exploration of Dasein, of which I maintained a deep focus within, is wholly evident in many ways, within Malick's films. It helps to reveal the natural and intrinsic connection between the individual and the world. In The Tree of Life, the depiction of the natural world is not simply a backdrop to the human experience but acts as an active participant in shaping the characters' sense of being. Malick employs his cinematographer, Emmanuel Lubezki AMC ASC to execute his incredibly considered visual techniques, particularly his want to generate a consistent pattern of showcasing natural landscapes with the use of wide-angle cinematography to evoke the concept of Dasein as described by Heidegger. This sense of interconnectedness between the individual and the world is embodied in the characters, who, throughout the narrative, struggle with their awareness of their existence in the vastness of the universe and their eventual mortality.

In Knight of Cups, the juxtaposition of the modern, consumer-driven urban environment with the purity and authenticity of nature, serves as a critique of the alienating forces of contemporary life, namely the technological. Malick's use of nature, in contrast to the overwhelming presence of urbanity, serves as a contrast to the existential struggles of his characters, offering them a space to confront the meaning of their lives and their place within the world.

I have also shown how Malick's treatment of modernity and technology reflects Heidegger's concept of *Gestell*, or "enframing," which describes the way technology shapes our perception of the world, reducing everything—including human beings— to mere resources to be exploited. The disconnection from authentic existence that Heidegger critiques in his philosophical works is evident in *Knight of Cups*, where the characters' interactions with technology and materialism alienate them from a deeper understanding of their true selves. I mainly touched upon this with the character,

Rick, played by Christian Bale. Malick's portrayal of the modern world, with its rapid pace and consumerist focus, stands in stark contrast to the reflective and contemplative spaces he creates through his use of natural landscapes, which offer a more authentic space for his characters to confront the ultimate questions of existence. In addition to the Heideggerian themes explored throughout this thesis, my analysis also touched upon the notion of the gaze, particularly through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of existentialism. Sartre's exploration of the gaze, especially in his work Being and Nothingness (Sarte), is critical to understanding the dynamics of self-awareness and the objectification of the self. For Sartre, the gaze is not simply about the act of looking; rather, it represents the way in which individuals are seen by others, a crucial aspect of the human experience that shapes one's understanding of identity and existence. This existential phenomenon is evident in many of Malick's characters, who often find themselves caught in the tension between how they see the world and how they are seen within it by others.

In Malick's films, characters frequently struggle with their sense of self, particularly in moments when they are confronted with the gaze of another. The gaze also is sometimes not just limited to a person, but a lack of something the character desires, from which they feel a sense of shame in knowing they do not possess. This appears in Knight of Cups, where Rick's journey is marked by his attempts to reconcile his inner desires with how others perceive him, a key theme that aligns with Sartre's notion of *the l*ook the awareness that one is an object in the world of others. This gaze is not just a passive observation but an active force that shapes the subjectivity of the person being looked at. Rick's detachment and search for meaning can be understood through the Sartrean lens of alienation and objectification, where the self is reduced to

an object in the gaze of the other, thus delaying true self-knowledge and authentic existence.

In *The Tree of Life*, this concept of the gaze is also subtly woven throughout the narrative, particularly in the relationship between the characters and their surroundings. The gaze, whether it's that of the parent, the child, or the divine, becomes a means through which individuals struggle to define themselves. The cosmic and familial elements of the story create a narrative in which the gaze shifts from the personal to the universal.

By incorporating Sartre's ideas on the gaze into this analysis, it becomes clear that Malick's films offer a rich route for examining existential alienation, identity formation, and the search for authenticity of the self. The struggle to find meaning and self-understanding in a world dominated by external perceptions resonates deeply with Sartre's philosophies, highlighting the complex relationship between individual freedom and the societal gaze. Through this lens, Malick's exploration of identity and existence is not only a personal quest but also a broader philosophical inquiry into how humans navigate the world of others and the constant tension between being seen and seeing oneself.

In terms of cinematic technique, this thesis has underscored the significant role that Emmanuel Lubezki's cinematography plays in reinforcing the Heideggerian themes at the heart of Malick's work. Lubezki's collaboration with Malick in *The Tree of Life* and *Knight of Cups* helped shape the visual language that aligns with the ontological themes explored in the films. The use of natural lighting, hand-held cameras, and wide-angle lenses creates a sense of immersion that reflects the characters' lived experience of the world. The fluidity of the cinematography captures the subjective nature of Dasein, offering a perspective that is both personal and universal, grounded

in the individual's relationship with the world around them. This approach to cinematography serves not only to highlight the aesthetic beauty of the landscapes but also to evoke a deeper sense of the interconnectedness of all things—an essential aspect of Heidegger's view of being. With all being said previously, it is nice to know Lubezki himself has felt personally impacted by Malick's choice of filmmaking. Lubezki explains, "Working with Terry has changed my life. I'm a different parent, I'm a different husband, and I'm a different friend. I see nature in a different way since I started working with Terry." He goes on further to express, "I have much more respect for things that I wasn't aware of as much. He is one of the most important teachers in my life." (Lubezki)

In conclusion, this thesis has succeeded in providing an in-depth analysis of how Terrence Malick's films engage with both Heideggerian and Sartrean philosophy. I have succeeded in entertaining the interdisciplinary level of study I said I would set out to achieve. By using my background in cinematography, I was also able to grasp back to my own personal understanding of cinema, which I feel became of merit when it was the time to navigate this inquiry.

Lastly, through this analysis, it becomes clear that Malick's cinematic approach offers a rich and complex interpretation of existential themes, elevating his films beyond mere storytelling to a philosophical exploration of human existence. In this sense, Malick's work is not only a meditation on the personal search for meaning but also a larger reflection on the way in which human beings navigate a world that often seems indifferent to their struggles. The philosophical undercurrents in his films challenge viewers to reflect on their own place in the world, encouraging a deeper understanding of the self and its relationship to the surrounding environment. By doing so, Malick's films contribute to a broader sphere which is regarding the

understanding of the ways in which art, philosophy, and cinema intersect, providing an opportunity for philosophical inquiry that is both accessible and profound.

I will end this thesis with a quote from Jameson, that makes, regarding this thesis, and interesting statement to sum up everything. "The cogito is therefore a possibility of perpetually checking ourselves; and Sartre's philosophy, which is undoubtedly a reply to and a completion of Heidegger, a rectification of him and inconceivable without him". This means that Sartre's existential philosophy only builds upon and responds to Heidegger's ideas, particularly in relation to the nature of being. Sartre doesn't just repeat Heidegger's thoughts but rather adds to them, offering his personal view of human freedom and, consciousness. Sartre's philosophy could not exist without the foundation provided by Heidegger, but Sartre goes further in ways that Heidegger didn't, addressing questions about human freedom, existence, "The fact from which we have to start is the fact of our unique, individual, isolated consciousness; we cannot leap to a thought as large as the world itself and forget that this great entity is mediated through our own subjectivity."

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