

HOW FILM CAN CARRY BEING:
 FILM MELODRAMA AND TERRENCE MALICK'S
THE TREE OF LIFE AS A POST-RELIGIOUS FILM

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INTRODUCTION

What would a religious film look and feel like in a post-religious world?¹ This is the question guiding the argument of this paper. Such a film would need to offer its audience a religious experience not as the defining feature of this world, but as an “otherwise” possibility. Is such an experience possible in today’s cinema? Can the cinematic “apparatus”² — the figurations, gestures, technical codes and modes of address whereby film announces itself *as* film — offer its audience an experience equivalent to the kind of experience offered by religion itself?

Adrian Martin has identified the need to address the sacred in film from a non-religious perspective in the following way: “the problem, or challenge, for non-believers [is] to understand and use a language of the sacred or the spiritual but without religion; to approach and celebrate mystery — especially poetic mystery [...] but without the mystical.”³ In responding to Martin’s challenge to approach the “poetic mystery” of film and to “understand and use a language of the sacred or the spiritual but without religion,” my task will be to develop a critique of film using concepts drawn from German Idealist philosophy and more recent film philosophy and theory, setting out a way of thinking about religious experience in non-religious terms as it might apply to film.

More specifically, I will employ Friedrich Schleiermacher’s concept of religious experience as a feeling of the infinite released from systems of belief. In Schleiermacher’s terms, religious experience is an excess over belief, opening into a “beyond” without measure.⁴ My paper will examine how this “beyond,” as an excess over belief, has been captured and framed within the apparatus of Hollywood film melodrama as an ameliorative experience, moving from injustice towards justice, guided by divine providence. Through a reading of Mervyn LeRoy’s *Blossoms in the Dust* (1941), I will show how the task of melodrama is to unblock the protagonist’s blocked situation, releasing her for the moral good. Hollywood

film melodrama subjectifies audience's belief in the moral good within the mythic presentation of a world defined by ideals of historical progress linked to the power of industrialised capitalism. In such a world, elected individuals (protagonists) are provided with the means of effecting their own salvation through the auspices of a divinely decreed nation-state promising individual freedom. Their salvation becomes the salvation of all, embodied in those audiences subject to the apparatus of cinematic melodrama and its capacity to deliver an experience of the moral good through the pleasure of film. I will then show how Terrence Malick's film *The Tree of Life* (2011) counters melodramatic amelioration and the subjectification of its audience to the cinematic apparatus by breaching its own framework, opening to a beyond carried by the film itself in its own material becoming. My aim is to show that *The Tree of Life* restores faith in film to carry Being — the measureless-infinite of finite life. *The Tree of Life* breaks with the closure of melodrama and opens to the poetic mystery of film itself.

I. RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND FILM

SCHLEIERMACHER AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In his essays entitled *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers*, the nineteenth century German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher provides a critique of religion that rejects the reduction of religious feeling to autonomous subjective states as defined by the Kantian system of reason.⁵ Schleiermacher's essays, written early in his career under the influence of the *Frühromantik* philosophers, were well regarded in their day, and, along with other writings of the *Frühromantik* movement, call for a shift in emphasis away from inner aesthetic states and towards an experience of openness as an excess of feeling inhabiting rational systems of thought and meaning production.⁶ Schleiermacher's aim is no less than a complete reformation of religion, away from dogmatic rationalism and toward singular feelings of openness to the Absolute⁷ which he understands as "a sense and taste for the Infinite."⁸ This sense of the infinite is "the unity of intuition and feeling which is immediate";⁹ a sense of the infinite felt in the contingency of finite life.¹⁰

Schleiermacher's critique of religion is important for today's post-religious world because it characterises religion as an experience defined in non-religious terms. It does this by

drawing from critical philosophy responding to Kant's critique of reason. Critical responses to Kant by Schleiermacher and other post-Kantian thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries should not be seen as outdated historical arguments; rather, they begin the project of critical modernism that still claims our thinking today, posing fundamental questions about subjectivity and the transcendence of reason — questions we have yet to surpass. The guiding thread of this paper is as follows: how might Schleiermacher's concept of religious experience as an excess of feeling inhabiting systems of reason be applied to post-religious film; that is, how might this concept of excess — an excess that threatens to destroy systems of belief — be applied to film with a religious "structure of feeling"¹¹ offered to its audience in a post-religious world.

Raymond Williams defines a structure of feeling as "elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity."¹² A structure of feeling "cannot without loss be reduced to belief-systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and experienced."¹³ Rather, a structure of feeling exceeds belief-systems in the "generative immediacy"¹⁴ of finite situations, opening into absolute possibility, or possibility without measure.¹⁵ Evidence of a structure of feeling can be found in "semantic figures — which in art and literature, are often the very first indication that such a new structure is forming".¹⁶ In their generative immediacy, film texts are capable of offering a newly forming structure of feeling irreducible to the audience's subjectified belief in the systems of meaning that allow them to make sense of their already formed world. By the term "structure of feeling," Williams does not mean the feeling already instituted and normalised by the apparatuses of subjectification, but the feeling experienced in art and literature as the prefiguring of otherness; as the possibility of being beyond current modes of subjectification.

I will be concerned with the structure of feeling produced as an excess in the system of Hollywood film, which I will define in terms of melodrama: a systematic formalisation of feeling in which "fallen" human being is restored to the wholeness of feeling and meaning through an ameliorative process of retributive justice.¹⁷ Melodrama captures the excess of feeling that inhabits the systems of meaning of everyday life and guides it back into the cinematic apparatus as that which needs to be overcome and transformed in the amelioration of human existence. My aim is to show how a post-religious film, in particular Terrence Ma-

lick's *The Tree of Life*, refuses the ameliorative solution to the reparation of fallen human existence offered by film melodrama, thereby opening up an "otherwise" possibility — a possibility that equates with Schleiermacher's idea of religious experience as openness to the Absolute — in the "event" of the film itself.

In the first and second speeches of *On Religion*, Schleiermacher sets out the conditions under which religious experience can be postulated in critique. He defines religion as an *activity*; as something that happens in a primary sense of forces cancelling each other out: "religion, then, is a mixture of elements that oppose and neutralise each other."¹⁸ Religious experience is, like the experience of art, a stasis of contradictory forces — the cosmic forces of expansion and contraction — held together in the fact that singular things simply *are*. The critical issue for Schleiermacher is how singular things *can be* while still being part of the forces of expansion and contraction at the same time, as "the two original tendencies of spiritual nature."¹⁹ Like Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*²⁰ published around the same time, Schleiermacher's critique of religion attempts to think its object (religious experience) from primary activity, as the grounding and ungrounding of the forces of nature.

The activity that Schleiermacher ascribes to religious experience can be understood as pre-subjective and concerned with Being — the *possibility* that something can be. Possibility implies "being possible" irreducible to what the thing is. If things were nothing more than the being they already are, then they could not be otherwise, and hence all would be the same. To account for diverse modes of being, there must be Being irreducible to the being that things are. Being defines the being of things in their possibility as such. In his "Letter on 'Humanism,'" Martin Heidegger defines this kind of possibility as enabling possibility, to distinguish it from the possibility of calculative rationality.²¹ Otherness does not transcend beings, but is enabled in the "event of Being" itself. I will argue that film *enables* possibility in its poetic-technical turning-unfolding — as a carrying of the event of Being. From this critical, post-religious perspective, the otherness inhabiting film poses questions of onto-theology: Being as equivalent to God. Otherness is not located in a transcendent or divine order, but in the enabling-being of the film itself; in its "generative immediacy"²² as a meaningful event. Film opens itself to Being in the otherness that it makes possible as a finite event experienced by the viewer herself. A religious experience in this post-religious sense is an experience of Being as otherness felt in the event of film — in its poetic unfolding *as film*.

For Schleiermacher, religious experience is the feeling of openness to the Absolute as an experience of the Whole of what is. This sense of wholeness is not something that is simply there for anyone to experience; rather, it must be gained from contradictory “impulses” in humans, to become either self-enclosed in subjective states or given over to pious feelings of the Infinite.²³ Schleiermacher suggests that this experience of wholeness can only come to those able to hold onto the opposing impulses, as a contradictory sense of the infinite in the finite “work[ing] in them as a creative power.”²⁴ This contradictory sense of the whole as infinite/finite impulse opens the experience to “the eternal and Holy Being that lives beyond the world.”²⁵ This “beyond” is not a transcendent or divine order in another world removed from the contingency of human existence, but a virtual space of otherness immanent to the historical time and place of singular human existence in *this* world. Someone inhabiting such an experience of the beyond feels a sense of all possibilities held for a moment in the opening event, where “all combinations [of being] are actually present in humanity.”²⁶ In a move that prefigures Heidegger’s concept of *Ereignis*,²⁷ Schleiermacher’s proposal of religious feeling as an activity inhabiting systems of reason opens critique to the possibility of an otherwise movement affirming itself within the closure of the subject in technical formats and aesthetic states. This otherwise movement in the post-religious film is the experience of openness into absolute possibility *enacted by the film itself*. The film turns *against itself* in opening otherwise. My aim in what follows is to pursue this line of thought in terms of the poetic-technical event of film.

BAZIN AND CINEMATIC BELIEF

Recently, film theorists have turned to the writings of André Bazin to address the issue of belief in cinema, in both a theological and ontological sense.²⁸ Bazin’s arguments are especially interesting in this regard because they promise a revelatory cinema — a cinema that reveals the beyond of absolute possibility — carried by the technology of film itself. Rather than identifying religious experience in terms of the content of film (its stories and characters), Bazin proposes an “ontology” of the film image — its mode of being — based on an underlying photographic realism:

The photographic image is the object itself, freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discoloured, no matter how lacking in

documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is a reproduction; it *is* the model.²⁹

The photographic image is not a degraded form of reality, but an event of being-with its object. The technology of photographic reproduction (“the very process of its becoming”) means that the image produced shares the same being as that of its object (“it *is* the model”). From this ontological realist position, Bazin argues that the photographic image becomes an automaton independent of human intervention:

Originality in photography as distinct from originality in painting lies in the essentially objective character of photography. [...] For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically.³⁰

Because of its status as an automaton (an “automatic” production), the photographic-cinematic image reveals the world “objectively,” as a revelation of the mystery of Being.

We can see how Bazin employs ontological realism as a revelation of the mystery of Being by turning to one of his film reviews. In his review of Augusto Geninas’s *Heaven Over the Marshes* (*Cielo sulla palude*, 1949),³¹ Bazin writes that the film presents a “truly religious experience,” not as hagiography or special effects, but through the realism of the images themselves: their fidelity to life. In the presentation of its subject matter — the rape and murder of a peasant girl later canonised for her forgiveness of the crime — the film suggests the presence of divine grace “through some ambiguous signs that can all be explained in quite natural terms.” The film presents “an ambiguous manifestation of a spiritual reality that is impossible to prove,” achieved through “the dictates of realism.” Through its realist images, the film expresses divine grace; that is, the film *becomes* the divine reality made apparent in realist images appearing on the screen.

This type of argument has been subject to much criticism for its assumption of an unmediated relation between the photographic-cinematic image and the object represented by it (the objectivist fallacy). It is for this reason that Bazin’s work has fallen out of favour over the past few decades. However, in seeking a transcendent-realist theory of film, scholars have recently turned to Bazin but with a new inflection. For instance, Robert Sinnerbrink

proposes that we understand Bazin's ontological realism in terms of "cinematic belief" or "the conviction that [the film image] bears the trace of a former presence."³² Sinnerbrink suggests that there is a certain psychological dimension to Bazin's argument, in effect shifting ground from an ontology of the photographic-cinematic image to an aesthetics of belief in the reality of "unique cinematic worlds."³³ These worlds are "liberated from the flow of time,"³⁴ enabling us to overcome our "fear of death"³⁵ and "reveal reality anew."³⁶ Cinematic belief revives "that sensuous love of the world, a belief in its reality, that we have forgotten or lost."³⁷

But has belief in the reality of unique cinematic worlds really been lost? Is such belief not simply the way audiences already relate to the cinema? Through its phantasmic-plastic power to present fictional worlds steeped in realist myths, cinema has always presented unique cinematic worlds soliciting audience belief. Film, especially Hollywood feature film, already reproduces "reality anew" in scenarios that invite the audience to overcome the fear of death through stories of struggle against adversity. Film already renews a quasi-religious "sensuous love of the world" in the mythic enactment of human life as meaningfully idealised. Thus, audiences have already come to believe in a cinematic realism that presents a world "liberated from the flow of time," as a way of being intimately connected with their lives. Cinematic belief in the reality of this world has not been "forgotten or lost," as Sinnerbrink suggests, but is constantly renewed in the mythic enactment of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, self-doubt, and the forces of otherness presented through the ameliorative film melodrama ruling popular cinema and culture over the last century.³⁸

A specifically renewed belief in the world through an experience of absolute openness in film cannot be a belief in the reality of unique cinema worlds, as these worlds are already subject to quasi-religious belief in cinematic realism expressed in the structure of feeling enclosed by melodrama. So what would such a belief be? Recalling Schleiermacher's sense of an immanent beyond in the contingency of finite life, I argue that such a belief would need to be a belief in the "beyond" of cinema worlds currently produced. This is not a belief in a cinematic beyond (a world constituted by yet more cinema), but a belief in the possibility of a "beyond cinema" — a beyond in the possibility of a *non-cinema* real. Such a belief would first require *faith* that another world could be; faith in the "nothing" of the cinematic world itself.

FAITH IN NOTHING

In his book *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology*, Simon Critchley discusses Pauline theology in terms of faith in “nothing.” He writes:

Paul is preaching a *meontology*, an account of things that are not. Furthermore, his is a double meontology: on the one hand, the form of this world is passing away or falling away and becoming nothing. This is the nihilism of world politics. But, on the other hand, what will take the place of the “god of this world” is at present nothing. It is simply the anguished vigilance of the Messianic standpoint defined by its relation to the futurity of *parousia* [the imminent Second Coming as presence of God]. [...] Paul is announcing something that [...] breaks with the order of being in the name of an event which is *not*. The event is something indiscernible in the situation.³⁹

Faith is faith in the possibility of otherness as the “not” of this current world that “breaks with the order of being.” Faith in nothing is a refusal to accept belief in the current system of being in order to prepare the way for the being to come. From this Pauline perspective, a revelatory cinema would not propose an alternative world of faith in new cinematic worlds where faith might be fully expressed, as proposed by the recent turn to Bazinian ontological realism, but faith in the nothing that lies beyond the cinematic world as it currently is. To do this, film must dismantle current belief in the cinematic world by standing against it. Film must stand *against itself* and open otherwise. Faith is faith in the nothing opening in this capacity of film to stand against itself, enabling a not-yet-discernable world to begin to appear. To demonstrate this point and counter the recent turn to Bazin’s photographic ontological realism, I will draw on Roland Barthes’s discussion of photographs in *Camera Lucida*, as well as Jacques Derrida’s analysis of the aporetic logic of the event of bearing witness in *Sovereignties in Question*.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes postulates that the photographic image testifies to the fact that “the thing has been there.”⁴⁰ The viewer’s belief in the reality of the event depicted in the photograph is based not on any inherent capacity of the technology to make the event real, as is the case in Bazin’s ontological realism, but on an ontological gap between the present and the past in which the viewer experiences the impossibility of their reparation. The experience of viewing photographs is one of disjunctive-chiasmic time in which the presence of the past is

felt as something irretrievably lost, yet *there* nevertheless. In looking at the photograph, I bear witness to the event in the “aoristic” sense of reliving the past as if for the first time.⁴¹ For instance, Barthes discusses his viewing of a particular photograph of a street scene in Nicaragua during the revolution in the late 1970s which shows a dead body covered in a blood splattered sheet:

here on a torn-up pavement, a child’s corpse under a white sheet; parents and friends standing around it, desolate: a banal enough scene, unfortunately, but I noted certain interferences: the corpse’s one bare foot, the sheet carried by the weeping mother (why this sheet?), a woman in the background, probably a friend, holding a handkerchief to her nose.⁴²

Barthes notes “certain interferences” that interrupt the generic conventions of street scenes, including an oddly placed boot poking out under the sheet covering the child’s body. These singular photographic gestures are not part of the symbolic register of the image — its capacity to convey the “ideal” of the revolution or the brutality of the regime — but the irruption of chance in the expectations of my viewing of the photograph. My viewing is interrupted by a *punctum* effect that stops me from reading the image in terms of generic conventions (the *studium*), sending it otherwise.⁴³ These interruptive gestures *resist* generic convention in affirming that this actually happened. They affirm that “this life was” by plunging me into a meaningless abyss, where I relive the feeling of death in all its singularity through the mark of the gesture itself — its specific resistance to generic convention.

Barthes’s reading of the *punctum* effect can be understood as a *bearing witness* to the death after the event, as if the viewer were reliving the event for the first time. In Derrida’s terms, this “as if” is a carrying of the “truth” of the event: its singular happening as a truth that has to be believed.⁴⁴ If life is to go on, then one simply has to believe, despite the impossibility of the restoration of the event to full presence. Derrida calls this “having to believe” a “performative-pragmatic, [which] is as determining as ‘I believe’.”⁴⁵ In following this line of thinking, cinematic belief must be grounded in an experience of nothingness as “having to believe.” This having-to-believe is based on a pragmatic imperative felt in the chiasm between past and present lives, as a *fall* into otherness triggered by the event of the film itself. From this fallen state, the viewer cannot speculate about the possibility of a “beyond” (she

cannot size it up, propose alternatives, come to believe in it) since there is insufficient stability of ground from which it could be projected. Rather the viewer simply has to believe, if life is to go on. Derrida calls this pragmatic imperative “an appeal to an act of faith.”⁴⁶ Faith comes before belief as its condition of possibility. As Critchley argues in relation to religious belief, “What is true, then, is an experience of faith, and this is true for agnostics and atheists as it is for theists. Those who cannot believe still require religious truth and the framework of ritual in which they can believe.”⁴⁷ In a post-religious world, we can do without belief, but we cannot do without faith without falling into the nothing of nihilistic meaninglessness.

Following this line of thinking, the task of a revelatory cinema is not to confirm belief, but to appeal to an act of faith from its audiences. This act of faith is faith in the “otherness” catalysed through a collapse (fall) in the continuum of the cinematic world; a collapse into the nothingness of absolute possibility as the mystery of Being. The onto-theological experience of otherness, as indicated in Schleiermacher’s essays in *On Religion*, is not to be found in belief in the capacity of film to carry the ultimate meaning of the world, but in a crisis of belief in this world through the shattering “interference” (*punctum*) of a chance event in the generic order of things, triggering a momentary openness into absolute otherness. This openness is the “nothingness” or the non-being at the heart of being; the absolute possibility of being otherwise experienced in the finitude of life as it confronts its limit in death. A cinematic faith in nothingness thus requires that film resist its own drive towards the cinematic fulfilment of a meaningful world. It must refuse belief in this world in order to open itself otherwise, thereby restoring faith in otherness as the very condition of life as freely opened possibility.

II. FATE AND MELODRAMA

In the second part of this paper, I will advance the proposition that Terrence Malick’s film *The Tree of Life* is a post-religious film that opens itself to absolute otherness through a collapse in its own formal structure. This collapse, brought on by specific techniques and cinematic gestures, carries the audience into an abyssal beyond which is also the film’s very unfolding as film. The film’s own “being” — its mode of technical presence — is a “standing against” conventional film structure, which I will define in terms of melodrama. By standing

against conventional melodrama, the film challenges the audience's belief in the possibility of an ameliorative solution to the fall of human being into injustice and distance from God (idealised Being), posing onto-theological questions that call us forth and challenge us "to be" through the event of the film itself.

In order to demonstrate this otherwise mode of being enacted by *The Tree of Life*, I will compare it with Mervyn LeRoy's 1941 film *Blossoms in the Dust*. Despite differences in theme, period, style and narrative structure, there are compelling reasons to compare the two films. Both films are set in provincial Texas towns, and feature a fall of family fortune where the main male characters, both entrepreneurial inventors and believers in the American Way, lose their standing in the community, ceding power and authority to female principles and ideals. Most importantly, both films feature the accidental death of a son, triggering a cathartic "death event" felt through the entirety of each film. Indeed it is difficult not to conclude that Malick drew from LeRoy's film in composing his own epic version of life in provincial mid-twentieth century Texas. My aim is to show how the presenting of human being as fated for meaningful life in film melodrama, as exemplified in *Blossoms in the Dust*, is resisted by Malick's film — a resistance that carries its audience into a non-cinematic beyond equivalent Schleiermacher's definition of religious experience.

THE BLOCKED SITUATION

Melodrama underlies most Hollywood films. It offers a mode of experience to its audiences in which human being is fated for a meaningful place in a universe from which God has withdrawn. Melodrama attempts to make sense of this universe by substituting its own version of fate as a kind of divine providence acting in all things, leading humans towards salvation from their fallen condition in the contingency of life beset by chance and the will to power that governs both nature and the social order. Melodrama reshapes these indifferent and hostile forces so that they appear to make sense to the audience as an amelioration of human being, moving from injustice to justice in a world where a just moral order is gradually discerned. As Ben Singer argues: "melodrama expressed the anxiety of moral disarray and then ameliorated it through utopian moral clarity."⁴⁸ Melodrama offers its audience an amelioration of human existence thrown into indifference, into a higher moral good as a substitute for belief in religious solutions to human injustice. Melodrama is thus deeply concerned with the fate of human existence withdrawn from God and subject to the law of

chance: “melodrama has persisted as a dramatic mode because, in a fundamental sense, it succeeds in expressing ‘the truth of life,’ capturing a crucial existential truth, an aspect of life that affects everyone — namely that, ultimately, we are all governed by random forces of happenstance. We are all flotsam and jetsam adrift in the ‘tides of chance.’”⁴⁹ If there is a divine providence at work in melodrama, it is one put there by the mechanics of plot and filmic technique to account for and overcome the rule of chance in human existence.

In the nineteenth century stage melodrama from which Hollywood film melodrama takes its cue, the fate of human being is presented in quasi-religious terms. Jeffrey Mason writes:

the absolute imperative of melodrama is the restoration of the moral, social, and domestic order — and consequently, the reassurance of the audience — by subjecting characters to a high degree of risk and uncertainty and then lifting them out of danger. [...] [T]he melodramatic imperative, operating under the guiding hand of divine providence and moving the action toward reconciliation, offers a guarantee that reduces the hero’s achievement. By its very nature and method, melodrama must satisfy its audience’s expectations rather than present a confrontation between belief and value.⁵⁰

Stage melodrama restores the audience’s belief in a moral order threatened by nihilism and indifference by presenting the “guiding hand of divine providence” as part of the machinery of plot. The audience is offered a “reconciliation” of the opposing forces of good and evil, where victims of injustice are restored to a just world. In a similar vein, Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs argue that stage melodrama is “motivated by a notion of divine order.”⁵¹ Here Brewster and Jacobs are referring to the unlikely plot coincidences of stage melodrama in which individuals are either blighted by misfortune or blessed with luck. Lacking a complex middle ground, stage melodrama swings between good and evil potentials, enacting a presentation of fate through the transformation of chance into eschatology where the human is restored to justice and the moral good. The nihilistic meaninglessness of the world and the subjectification of human being to the indifference of nature is ameliorated through the manifestation of what Peter Brooks has termed the “moral occult,” or “the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface reality [...] as the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth.”⁵² Melodrama

transforms chance into a quasi-religious belief system based on what remains of the sacred still operating at an underground level in the post-religious world of western human existence.

How are these remnants of the sacred carried into film melodrama? Brewster and Jacobs note that “what survives from popular nineteenth century theatre in the 1910s feature [film] is “a set of staging practices linked with situational dramaturgy.”⁵³ The “situation” in stage melodrama is the presentation of “an unstable constellation of forces precariously held in check but nonetheless liable to break out into action.”⁵⁴ This “static state of affairs”⁵⁵ or tableau configuration compressed and made manifest the contradictions and tensions requiring resolution and action so that “the linear progress of the narrative is arrested or blocked.”⁵⁶ The configuration of gestures presented in the tableau situation interrupted narrative flow and pointed to what was to come. They “anticipate or sum up a series of cause and effect relationships”⁵⁷ waiting to be released. The blocking action of the tableau brings the plot into a temporary stasis, prefiguring the release of the blocked forces into a resolution in the restoration of justice at the end of the play. For the audience familiar with the conventions of stage melodrama, the blockage indicates an injustice demanding to be put right. The logic of melodrama is that the righting of injustice does not come from heroic action, but from the machinations of the melodramatic plot. As Mason argues, melodrama “reduces the hero’s achievement.”⁵⁸ Although present in melodrama, heroic action is not an expression of individual free will, but of divine providence enacted in the resolution of contradictory forces in the blocked situation. Thus to understand how the sacred is carried into film melodrama, we need to look at how the blocked situation of stage melodrama is transformed into film, from a unity of action and gesture presented on the stage to an audiovisual becoming spread throughout the film.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE IN *BLOSSOMS IN THE DUST*

In this section I will show how classical Hollywood cinema engages its audience through the unblocking of a blocked situation. My aim here is to describe the ameliorative movement of melodrama as one based on the elision of time that secures the revelations of plot in a transcendent moral order. By showing how this works in Mervyn LeRoy’s *Blossoms in the Dust* (1941), I also describe the limits of melodrama and what it does not allow to be presented.

Mervyn LeRoy's melodrama *Blossoms in the Dust* is set in a provincial town in Texas in the early twentieth century. It concerns the campaign by Edna Gladney, a real historical person (played by Greer Garson), to have Texas state legislation changed so that children without parents will no longer be designated as illegitimate. The film depicts Edna's early life as a young woman from a wealthy Wisconsin farming family swept off her feet by a handsome Texan man, Sam Gladney (Walter Pidgeon), who takes her back to Texas where they marry and begin life together, raising a young son and furthering the family's fortune in the flour milling business.

Blossoms in the Dust begins with two deaths, both of which prefigure the rest of the film. The first death occurs with the suicide of Edna's step sister Charlotte (Edna's double), whose plans to marry into a wealthy family are foiled when her fiancé's mother refuses to accept her because she is discovered to be illegitimate when signing marriage documents. Stricken with shame Charlotte locks herself in her room and shoots herself dead. The second death occurs a little further into the film. Edna and Sam are happily married with their five year old son, Sammy, living in a luxurious mansion in Sherman, Texas. On Christmas eve, Edna sends Sammy out to play much against his wishes, but soon after, a servant returns with the news that the boy has drowned, presumably in a nearby lake where he had been playing. Each death is sudden and dramatic, cutting short young lives and suggesting a malevolent force working to undermine the family's good fortune. But instead of dwelling on the deaths and their consequences, the film rushes straight past them as if they had hardly happened. For instance, immediately after the scene in which Edna cradles Sammy's lifeless body in her arms, the film shifts abruptly to a sumptuous party where we see Edna, clothed in a fine dress and jewels, attending to her role as hostess to the wealthy citizens of Sherman. Although we are told that some years have passed, Edna is presented as if she lacks appropriate concern over her son's death, suggesting that she has not grieved properly and is in serious denial.

Through this elision of time, the film provides no opportunity for the audience to see how Edna might have dealt with her grief.⁵⁹ It is as if Edna had blocked her grief by immediately plunging into a life of excess and self-indulgence. In this way, the film presents us with a blocked situation requiring Edna to be released so that she can follow the path set for her, which, as we soon find out, is to establish day-care homes for the children of working mothers and eventually to campaign for change in state legislation to take away the stigma of ille-

gitimacy on abandoned children. The release occurs just as precipitously as Charlotte's and Sammy's deaths, when Edna is confronted with her denial by the family doctor also attending the party, and she collapses into her husband's arms. This scene dissolves into the next scene where we now see Sam and Edna no longer living in the luxurious mansion we saw previously, but happily inhabiting a neat suburban house full of children. Edna's self-indulgent, childless life has been magically transformed into a life of sober industry founded on the care for children. These major reversals in Edna's life happen within the space of a few scenes and, in the instance just described, in a single dissolve. The film rushes through events, eliding story world elements that would otherwise provide the audience with a sufficient explanation of them. What are we to make of this?

The task of the melodrama here is not to provide immediate answers to the calamities that have befallen the family, but to make the audience bear witness to them. By bearing witness to them, the audience carries the truth of their injustice as part of the restitution of a just moral order. The truth of these calamities cannot be found in causal explanations at the level of individual lives, but in the way they contribute to what the film is pointing towards in a more general sense — the moral good of the world. Although Charlotte's and Sammy's deaths appear to be blighted events — the consequence of malevolent forces and indifferent chance — they nevertheless prepare the way for a bringing-forth of the Good. This Good will gradually become apparent as the action progresses and Edna is released from her blocked state in order to follow the destiny that the film is preparing for her.⁶⁰

The film is asking its audience to accept that the deaths are not what they first seem (a misfortune blighting the family), but part of a divine providence ordering the world according to the principles of justice in which everyone will eventually receive their fair share (exemplified by the legislative righting of the wrong of categorising abandoned children in law as illegitimate "foundlings"). The deaths are thus sacrifices in the name of a providential order fated in the melodrama itself. The audience's belief in a just world is affirmed through faith in the machinery of melodrama — its ellipses, compressions and coincidences of plot — to deliver such a world in the amelioration of human existence from injustice to justice revealed in the unfolding of the film. After further sacrifice by Edna (she gives up her adopted son to a worthy couple), the film ends on an elevated note with patriotic music playing over the end titles, leaving the audience in no doubt about who the guarantor of this just world really is.

The audience is *called* into the “structure of feeling” of melodrama through an interpellation whereby they recognise their own fate as that of the characters in the film. The elision of time and the coincidences of plot keep the audience focused on the release of the protagonist from the blockage of forces that prevent her from attaining her assigned goal. Her release is also the release of the audience, who no longer feel themselves trapped in a world ruled by chance and indifference, but freed for the coming of the Good. They bear witness to the fate of the protagonist, carrying its liberating truth with them. However, the melodramatic structure also has its own form of blockage. By calling the audience into its structure, melodrama blocks the possibility that the events might lead otherwise. This is not an otherwise that is already known, but the “not” that makes this film possible in its very self-affirmation. This “not” is what the film excludes in its faithful rendering of the American Way as a progression towards the Good. It is not another way that the film could have been made (for instance by thinking of different plot machinations to gain different outcomes), but the other of melodrama itself — a counter-melodrama that this film can never be. The revelations of melodrama always point to a “beyond” fully anticipated by the machinations of plot and narrative drive; a beyond already prepared for at every step of the way by the reversals of ill-fortune into good fortune, and through coincidences that circle the story back onto itself. But it also reveals another beyond — the “other beginning” in the excluded possibilities not shown.⁶¹ This beyond cannot be seen by seeing with the ameliorating movement, but by seeing it otherwise, in the other beginning foreclosed by the film’s own closure in the moral Good.

Audience belief in the cinematic world with its affirmation of the American Way is locked in place through faith in the machinery of melodrama to deliver the feeling of release and liberation required to sustain such belief as a quasi-religious sense of a divine providence rescuing human being from chance and the meaninglessness of life. To counter this locked-in “structure of feeling” and take the “other beginning” prepared by, but not offered by film melodrama, film would need to call its audience in a different way. Film would need to resist the appeal to a transcendent order delivered by the machinery of plot, thereby refusing the solution to the ills and misfortunes of the world through a divinely ordered providence. What would such a film be required to do? It would need to render the fate of the audience unrecognisable in the events presented by the film, thereby defying the divine providence offered by film melodrama, and opening into the “otherness” of the film calling

against itself. To do this would be to invoke a “beyond” unbound from the structure of feeling of the cinematic real — a beyond of a non-cinema real. In the rest of this paper I will look at Terrence Malick’s film *The Tree of Life* as offering its audience an experience of beyond cinema, in the opening of the film frame against itself.

BEYOND CINEMA: *THE TREE OF LIFE*

Terrence Malick’s film *The Tree of Life* poses a series of questions to its audience through character voice-overs that concern the meaning of human life made meaningless by the indifferent force of nature that strikes individuals and families with calamities and death. Like *Blossoms in the Dust*, *The Tree of Life* presents human being as challenged to renew faith in something beyond when faced with calamitous events. These voice-overs speak in a language that is both spiritual and at times specifically Christian. It is tempting to read the film in the terms set by these voice-overs, as if they held the key to the ultimate meaning of the film. However, there is a danger in taking this approach, as it reduces the film to one of its elements, rather than in terms of the film as a whole. Voice-overs and their accompanying images are part of this whole, but they do not explain it. To reduce *The Tree of Life* to a film about religion based on its invocation of religious terms and images is to overlook the presentation of the film as such. It risks a reading that too readily affirms the symbolic language of the film at the expense of its self-presentation: its appearing *as* film, as distinct from what is said by the characters about the world that appears in it. In *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin proposes a way of reading literary and cultural texts in terms of how they allegorize their symbolic content. Allegorical readings show how cultural texts always run up against their own limits in the failure to deliver the promised symbolic content.⁶² They invoke the destructive principle that is itself the very life of finite human existence as the deathly nothingness of possibility — of a beyond without measure. By reading *The Tree of Life* in terms of its allegorizing of symbolic content, I will show how the film both offers and withdraws its promise of transcendent meaning. In its very self-presentation, the film deconstructs its symbolic “message,” opening to the beyond of the non-cinematic real.

As I have indicated at the beginning of this paper, a post-religious film is a film that employs religious content within a framework of belief in which human being is no longer grounded in a religious metaphysics. A religious film in a post-religious world accounts for religion not as the truth of this world, but as one of the ways in which human being is able to

have a world. *The Tree of Life* presents a certain vision of human being as having a world through religious belief, but places this “having” within an evolutionary scheme in which the religious elements are themselves the result of an evolved way of being. Consequently, the religious content of the film can only provide partial answers to the question of being — what does it *mean* to have being? — that the film poses to its characters and to its audience. In posing this question of being in religious terms, the film is not necessarily affirming a Christian message, but enacting its own historical finitude in order to re-affirm the mystery of Being as the unattainable “beyond.”

The film opens with a quote from the Book of Job: 38:4,7: “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.” The film thus begins with a question: a question concerning the whereabouts of an unnamed “you” — someone missing from the primary event of the creation of the earth filled with divine grace. In the Book of Job this “you” is Job, who is challenged by God to retain faith despite the calamities visited upon him. But the “you” is also addressed to whomever hears it — the audience of the film. The voice interpellates audience members into the film, challenging them to account for their absence from God’s grace and their own fall into a meaningless world beset by calamities. As audience members, we are challenged to restore our faith in a world deprived of divine grace.

Precisely what is it that Job is asked to do? This is what Slavoj Žižek has to say about Job’s biblical task: “After Job is hit by calamities, his theological friends come, offering interpretations which render these calamities meaningful. The greatness of Job is not so much to protest his innocence as to insist on the meaninglessness of his calamities.”⁶³ Job’s task is not to see signs of a divine plan in the calamities that beset him, but to simply bear up to them, thereby affirming the absence of a divine order watching over him. The lesson of Job is that God resides not in a transcendent order but in the very being of things, in their possibilities as chance events. As Žižek goes on to say:

the legacy of Job prevents us from taking refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret Master who knows the meaning of what appears to us as meaningless catastrophe, the God who sees the entire picture in which what we perceive as a stain contributes to global harmony.⁶⁴

The “greatness” of Job is to refuse doctrinal solutions to the evils of this world, while still retaining faith in God. Faith in God is faith in the “otherness” of this world not as a transcendent order, but in the very possibility of a “beyond” through the strike of chance that brings bad fortune and calamitous death, and challenges our belief in this world as divinely ordered. In Simon Critchley’s terms, faith is faith in the nothing of this world, a nothing that makes otherness possible. This faith in the nothing as faith in the something beyond lies at the heart of Malick’s film *The Tree of Life*.

Within a few minutes of the film’s beginning, we are presented with a death. A telegram is delivered to the front door of a neat suburban home in Waco, Texas. It is not long before we learn that the telegram contains terrible news — a family member has been killed. The woman who answers the door (Mrs. O’Brien, the mother of the dead son, played by Jessica Chastain) slowly reads the telegram, a look of despair gradually appearing on her face as the news sinks in. Suddenly she is shifted to one side through two successive jump cuts, accompanied by a twisting and foreshortening of the camera as she moves around the room in despair. She then sinks to the floor with an anguished sob and just as quickly, rises again. This “genuflection” continues the unsettling sequence of movements already enacted in the scene, as if she were being thrown around by an invisible force.⁶⁵ What are we to make of these gestures?

In their analysis of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Hélas pour moi* (*Woe is Me*, 1993), Bersani and Dutoit describe a moment in the film where “a non-transitional displacement occurs entirely within the framed scene.”⁶⁶ In the scene in question, a female figure is thrown slightly to one side while retaining the same position:

she is twice thrown a few inches to the left where she has been sitting. [...] [S]he does not move from one position to another; rather, she simultaneously disappears and reoccurs to the side of herself. [...] [I]t might seem that some positional “mistake” were being corrected by an agent unconstrained by the distance between points. Being is transferred without being moved.⁶⁷

In Godard’s film, the female figure is possessed by God, who comes to her in the form of her absent husband. In this visitation, the film “carries” Being — the measureless infinite of finite life — in the disjunctive jump of the female figure so that she appears both “here” and

“there” at the same time. This carrying of Being is effected through a violent deframing gesture, exposing a crack within the framing of the film that opens “otherwise.” In *The Tree of Life*, a similar displacement occurs, as the female figure is taken out of herself while remaining where she is within the film’s frame.⁶⁸ Death comes to her as a crack in the structure of the film so that she seems to be possessed by a force that moves her around the room. But we also see something else. Although falling almost to her knees, the female figure immediately rises again as if she were willing herself to stand against the momentum of the force pulling her down. All this happens in the blink of an eye, but it is telling.

Just what she is resisting becomes apparent in the following scene, which shifts to her husband (Brad Pitt) speaking on the telephone at an airport terminal. As the husband hears the news of the death of his son over the telephone, he falls to the tarmac as if in prayer (he too appears to be hit by jump cuts, but this time accompanied by a doom-laden tolling bell). Later, we see him at prayer again, this time alone in the family home, with his wife looking on from an adjacent room. The respective falls of the husband and wife — both as if possessed by an invisible force — suggest different “ways of being” in relation to the death of the son. While the husband appears to have accepted the son’s death as part of a divine order, the wife refuses and looks away. This glancing away, repeated elsewhere in the film, is a “looking otherwise”: a way of not being with the “will” that fates human being to a divine order in death.⁶⁹ The wife is looking away from what she is already fated to be: subject to the “will to power” enacted in the nuclear family, obeying the patriarchal authority of the husband and the obligation to God defined by a Protestant work ethic, all linked to the industrial-economic-nation nexus. In looking away, the mother is resisting her own “being” as part of the American Way. What is it that she seeks?

What she seeks can be found in the way women are positioned in the film’s story world. The fragmentary narrative presents the life of a nuclear family in mid-twentieth century small town America, attempting to meet the demands placed on them by the industrialised capitalist system and its underlying ethos of work, progress, and success through male entrepreneurialism, embodied in the figure of the father. We see the father disciplining his sons into the “way of being” of competitive capitalism (a *Bildung*, which will be addressed shortly), requiring individual toughness and an ability to take knocks. However, this masculine toughness fails to bring the hoped for success and the father loses his job and patent applications for his inventions are rejected.⁷⁰ His eldest son Jack eventually becomes a success-

ful architect, but has lost faith in the American Way. The film suggests that the evolution of human being through a masculine will to power has run its course, opening up the possibility of another beginning led by the feminine principle. This other beginning, blocked by the masculine will to power, now begins to open, as we see images of Jack being led through a mysterious gateway by a female muse that could be his wife or any one of a number of women whose faces we have glimpsed in the film.

It could be argued that the film is the presentation of Jack's childhood memories in flashback. However, this would be to give too much authority to Jack's version of events and to privilege the ontological status of Jack at the expense of the film as a whole. Rather, Jack's "flashbacks" are better understood as moments in the film, mixed in with other moments, all of which are orchestrated into an experience of disjunctive-chiasmic time (time that crosses over itself so that the past is experienced as the future and vice versa).⁷¹ The film presents the life of the O'Brien family as a series of vignettes, as if the audience were looking at a family snapshot album in which the photographs mysteriously come to life. In this way, the audience bears witness to the life of the O'Brien family in fragmented image-events that carry their truth in the disjunctive opening between life and death in the manner described by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (discussed earlier in the paper). Each image-event bears witness to the "life-death"⁷² of the O'Brien family: its "having to believe" in order to go on living in the event of the calamitous death of the son. The events presented cease to be about the life of a particular family, and become universalised as the very possibility of life faced with mortality.

In this universalised "life-death," women are positioned to go along with but resist the will to power required of them in the nuclear family as an evolved way of being based on the masculine principle operating in mid-twentieth century America. The evolution of this way of being is signalled in the film through a lengthy "beginning of time" sequence, a third of the way into the film, featuring a dinosaur scene where we see one dinosaur spare the life of another as the first evidence of the will to power in nature. The dinosaurs in this scene are presented as neither male nor female, indicating that the will to power comes to evolving life without a specific gender. This will have consequences for how we read the gendering of power relations later in the film where the will to power becomes associated with the masculine principle. Male authority in the modern nuclear family derives, so the film suggests, from an evolved way of being that is not essential to the will to power as such, but to other

factors, such as the ideological practices of self-formation (e.g., when we see the father training his sons in the skills of manhood) that reproduce this way of being as part of the industrialised capitalist-state-religious nexus. The will to power is not essentially masculine but takes a masculine form at a certain evolved stage of human being. It can always be otherwise from any finite moment of historically evolved way of being.

The sparing of life by the dinosaur suggests self-consciousness and a capacity to control power over others. It places the “fall” into freedom as the awareness of possibility in life well before humans. Human being is thus placed in evolutionary time *after* the coming of freedom. The film thus suspends the traditional mythical explanations of human existence in terms of a divinely decreed world entrusted to humans as superior free beings. What we see happening in mid-twentieth century America is the acting out of an already evolving will to power, including rationalisations of life through religion, science and industrialised technology. These higher rationalisations contribute to and explain the evolved way of being embodied by the O’Brien family and their neighbours *but they do not comprehend it*.

The dinosaur scene is repeated later in the film when the eldest son (Jack) comes across his father working under the family’s jacked-up car. Having previously been admonished by his father for disobedience and consequently suffering overwhelming resentment, the boy is tempted to release the jack. However, he refuses the temptation⁷³ and, as a consequence, suddenly grows up; he no longer reacts to the world by lashing out in frustration, anger and resentment, and begins to see his life in a more independent way, taking the first steps towards assuming responsibility for others. Like the dinosaur who discovers the will to power as the freedom to either kill or spare the life of the other, Jack discovers the will to power as freedom to “be otherwise.”⁷⁴ This freedom however implies a moral responsibility to others and an awareness of the contradictory nature of human existence: he realises that he is now burdened with a sense of freedom where, in his own words “whatever I want to do I can’t do; I do what I hate.” In an ensuing scene, we see Jack testing one of his younger brothers in a game of trust, where he commands the brother to place his finger over a loaded air gun. As the brother goes to place his finger over the end of the barrel, the gun suddenly goes off and he runs away in fright. Later, Jack seeks out his brother and asks for his forgiveness, something he could not have done previously. Jack’s coming-of-age through resisting the temptation to kill his father not only gives him power over others, but also fills him with a sense of guilt and responsibility. In a decisive way, he now becomes a moralised human being.⁷⁵

These tests and trials of trust are part of a *Bildung*: the development of the self from a natural way of being towards consciousness of the universal order, shown here as the way in which male children learn how to become moral human beings, aware of their responsibilities to others.⁷⁶ In this case the *Bildung* is shown in terms of the coming of the will to power as an evolved state of being, initially through the dinosaur scene and then repeated in the coming of age of the O'Brien children. The film is saying that human morality is part of the broader evolution of life.

The *Bildung* presented in *The Tree of Life* takes up a significant amount of the film and involves tests and trials between the boys as well as training by their father in "how to be a man." The *Bildung* is focalised through Jack, and involves challenging his father's authority as well as asserting his authority over his younger brother in the formation of the masculine self as part of the will to power of mid-twentieth century American industrialised capitalism. This power is disciplinary power, as distinct from the control power of the post-industrialised societies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.⁷⁷ Jack has to learn obedience to the father not only by obeying his commands but also by feeling the father's power through the grip his father has on his body (there are numerous images of the father gripping and holding the boys' bodies as he playfully teaches them how to "be a man"). He also has to learn how to become a father himself, first by breaking away from the father's controlling grip, and then by letting go of his childish love of his mother and by displacing his burgeoning sexual desire onto other mother-like female figures. In one scene he sneaks into the house of a female neighbour and steals her sheer nightgown after first laying it out on her bed. He then runs out of the house and into the woods where he hides the nightgown in a hole under a plank of discarded timber. Thinking better of it, he takes the nightgown out of the hole and throws it into the nearby river where he watches it float away. Here we see the enactment of displaced sexual desire: unable to seduce the woman as a man might do, the boy does the next best thing — he turns the garment that covers the woman's nakedness into a sexual fetish. By first burying and then disinterring the nightgown, he releases his sexual desire into the flow of the river (the river of life), preparing himself for the life to come as a fully sexualised man.

These trials of strength and rituals of desire prepare Jack for his life as an adult male. Significantly, the moment when Jack challenges his father's authority and begins to take on the moral responsibilities of an adult male, his father's own authority begins to wane and he

starts to treat Jack as a man. It is also at this point that the father recognises his own failure in life, and where he realises something else as well: he has failed to see the glory. In a moment of regret, the father confesses: "I dishonoured it all, and didn't notice the glory." In now recognising that he has failed to see the glory, he is making a tacit comment on the masculinised way of being required of him and his sons in having to live up to the demands of a discipline society in mid-twentieth century American capitalism. These demands requires a *Bildung* in which sons become fathers (i.e., bearers of self-affirming patriarchal authority) through learning the strategies of survival and success within competitive capitalism. This *Bildung* is also linked to the church and to the state which justify disciplinary authority of fathers over their wives and sons by teaching obedience and trust.

Although taking up almost half the film, the masculinised *Bildung* is presented as a failure: in adult life, Jack has rejected the capitalist will to power that affirms the masculine, and has turned to the feminine as a means of escape. Throughout the film the feminine is seen but has no voice. In further examples of the masculine will to power, the father exercises a brutal control over his family when one of the sons dares to challenge his authority at the breakfast table. Exploding with rage, he reaches over the table, gripping the offending son and marching him out of the room while the wife looks on in alarm, afraid to speak out. Later, he accuses his wife of turning his sons against him, and she fights back by striking him on the chest with her clenched fists. He then grips her in a smothering hold as one might subdue a frightened animal. This "taming" of the wife restores his authority and the masculine will to power that defines the way of being of the O'Brien household. But it also acts emblematically for the universal restoration of authority of the masculinised way of being throughout America at that time. By showing how the masculinised will to power blocks the feminine, the film sets up the possibility of an unblocking as well. Throughout the film, we see this possibility in repeated images of the force of nature opening into a glorious beyond. These images are associated with the feminine as the unblocking of the blocked spirit into a rigid masculinised way of being that leads to a dead end.

The questions posed by the characters in voice-over throughout the film in terms of Christian notions of grace and nature are attempts to give voice to the "question of being," as each character rises in his or her own way to the challenge set by God (the indifferent force of nature and the event of chance) in visiting calamities on the family that plunge them into nihilistic despair. But these responses can only provide partial answers. This is because they,

like human being itself, are subject to evolved time. Evolved time is time that reproduces a specific way of being, but in doing so, blocks other ways of being from coming about. Thus, the masculinised, patriarchal way of being presented in the O'Brien family as part of evolved nature, blocks other ways of being in its very presentation. The female way of being — the way of grace — is presented as the way of being that the film allows us to see, *but in its blocked state*. It is the "not" of the film; the "other beginning" revealed in the film's turning against itself. This is why we see the mother glance away from her kneeling husband on hearing of the death of their son: she is looking otherwise, resisting the evolved and hence *naturalised* way of being that demands obedience to the law of the father; a way of being that she must nevertheless accept as part of who she is.

The flaw or defect of the film is the *fall* of human being into otherness — in the ontological gap in time where the possibility of a reconciliation between the past and the present is both affirmed and denied. As we saw with Barthes's *punctum* effect, the presence of an irretrievable life or event is felt in its loss when viewing photographs against the grain of their generic meaning. This sense of loss is not a melancholic pining, but a "bearing witness" that carries the loss with it as a "truth of life" — an enactment of faith in life that must go on. This enactment of faith comes through the interference of the chance event that "rises out of the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me."⁷⁸ This piercing of my being when confronted by the chance event of death portrayed in the photograph, shatters my belief in the meaning of the event — its generic denotation as part of a system of belief in the capacity of technology to reproduce life as factually real — and turns me otherwise into a truth that has to be believed: the truth of the inescapable contingency of mortal life and the demand that life must go on. In terms of the "death event" in *The Tree of Life*, this shattering of belief comes through the death of the son which hits the family like a thunderbolt, shaking them to their foundations. On receiving the news of the son's death, the mother and father literally fall to their knees, while the frame of the film splits apart, plunging the scene into a spiralling motion as it follows the mother around the room and tracks the husband as he seeks solace in prayer.

This splitting and twisting of the film's frame triggers a collapse in the temporal ordering of events. The scene ends with a shot of the telegram delivery man leaving the house, but instead of appearing hatless and in the zip-up bomber jacket we saw him wearing at the start of the scene, he is now wearing a full blue uniform and peaked cap. It is as if we have been

taken back in time while staying in the present. This crossing of time is continued through the rest of the film. For instance, we learn later in the film that the death of the son occurs in his late teens, yet there is nothing in the scene to suggest this. Rather, we are encouraged to think that the son has died in the childhood just presented in the previous scene. The blending of time frames is compounded when, a few scenes further on, we see a boy drowned in the local swimming pool. The body of the dead boy, who looks much the same age as the O'Brien boy, is pulled out of the water and offered to Mr. O'Brien kneeling at the side of the pool as if it were his own son. This confused blending of time and doubling of characters and events produces a chiasm in the structure of the film, where current events appear to be affecting events that have already happened. The death event visited upon the O'Brien family is not contained within their own lives but reverberates through the community and throughout the entire film, affecting everyone and everything with a mortal sense of life and the proximity of death in all things. Narrative drive is thwarted and characters are drawn away from their fate in a higher moral order predicated on the American Way, causing them to question their existence and belief in God.

In *Blossoms in the Dust* the deaths of Charlotte and Sammy are sacrifices, enabling Edna to move along her destined path to ameliorate the condition of illegitimate children. Their lives thus have meaning. The ellipses of time and coincidences of plot harness the randomness of thrown life — life subject to chance in a world from which God has withdrawn — by smoothing it into a purposeful event. Their lives are given meaning in terms of the apparatus of melodrama in which a divine providence is seen to be working through the presented events leading to the affirmation of a higher moral order. However, in *The Tree of Life*, no such solution can be found. The death of the son is not a sacrifice, but an enigmatic event that poses unanswerable questions. The film does not elide the death in order to suture itself into a higher order in the manner of melodrama, but carries in its reverberating effects — in the fragments of its collapsing narrative framework. In this breaching of the film frame a possibility appears in the shining of nature. The lesson of the film is the same as the one that Job has to learn: that God's presence is not to be found in a transcendent moral order that explains the occurrence of chance events and the ills of the world, but in accepting such events as part of life itself in its opening into the void of otherness, as *this* life and no other. Thus the "answer" to God's question with which the film began is not to be found in pondering on the meaning of religious doctrine or in seeking solace in prayer, but in a joyous sense of being-

open to the “beyond” offered by the film itself in its images of nature shining through all things. This beyond cannot be seen through the will to power of the masculinised way of evolved human being, predicated as it is on discipline and patriarchy. Rather, it can only be seen through the way of grace carried by the feminine principle, as the other way that the film presents but in a blocked state.

CONCLUSION

Schleiermacher defines religious experience as an “activity” felt in the stasis of human being blocked from being otherwise. This activity is an “immediate experience”⁷⁹ felt by resisting systems (“[s]eeing I have rejected systems, commentaries and apologies”)⁸⁰ that smooth away the effects of calamities and chance events through pious feelings and elevated thoughts.⁸¹ Religious experience does not seek solace in doctrine or a transcendent God, but calls for a release from the blockage of being into divine life as an immediate experience of the finite in the infinite. The possibility of divine life is always *right there* where we already are, but experienced otherwise, in the release from blocked being.

My claim in this paper is that Terrence Malick’s film *The Tree of Life* enacts this releasing of blocked being into a “beyond” equivalent to Schleiermacher’s religious experience as a release into the infinite-divine. The release of blocked being in *The Tree of Life* is triggered by a breaching of the cinematic framing of the events presented in the film such that they turn against the frame itself, collapsing temporality and opening the film otherwise. This turning of the film against itself counters the normalisation of belief in the cinematic experience of melodrama, where chance events are smoothed into an ameliorative movement, serving the purpose of a divine providence that reaches towards the moral Good. The collapsed framing of *The Tree of Life* breaches the cinematic real — the expectation delivered by the apparatus of melodrama that things will turn out all right, that defeats are really a prelude to victory and that death is the necessary sacrifice for the living — and opens into a non-cinematic beyond, challenging the audience’s belief in the capacity of the cinematic apparatus to fulfil the promise of divine providence. The film enables its audience to bear witness to this beyond, restoring the audience’s faith in the film to carry the event of Being with it. The film is itself an event of being-with the beyond of the cinematic real itself.

1. There are many different worlds, both religious and non-religious. A post-religious world is not a world without religion; rather, it is a world in which religion continues to be configured within its belief systems but in a non-determining way. I propose that those cultures defined by modernity, scientific rationalism and the principles of the Enlightenment (what we routinely term “the west”) are post-religious in the sense that they continue to have religion as part of their belief systems, but not as a transcendental order of meaning that defines their mode of being.

2. Giorgio Agamben defines an apparatus as follows: “The term ‘apparatus’ designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject.” — Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 11. A cinematic apparatus interpellates its audience as subjects.

3. Adrian Martin, *Last Day Every Day: Figural Thinking from Auerbach and Kracauer to Agamben and Brenez* (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), 12.

4. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 1.

5. *Ibid.*

6. For the relation between Schleiermacher and the *Frühromantik* philosophers see Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 46.

7. In German Idealism, the Absolute refers to the “unconditioned” of thought — the limit that thought runs up against in its thinking; a limit that is itself irreducible to this thought. See Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 24ff.

8. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 39.

9. *Ibid.*, 40.

10. Schleiermacher thus engages in the restitution of the unity of intuition and feeling in *symbolic* forms. The finite is subordinated to the infinite through the symbol. The reverse of this is allegory, where the finite *presents* the infinite in finite terms. For the distinction between symbol and allegory along these lines, see Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 163-67.

11. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

12. *Ibid.*, 132.

13. *Ibid.*, 133.

14. *Ibid.*, 133.

15. Absolute possibility is immeasurable in the sense that it cannot be calculated in advance. It is simply an openness in being — the freedom “to be” opened in generative immediacy.

16. *Ibid.*, 133.

17. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James and the Mode of Excess*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 20.

18. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 29.

19. *Ibid.*, 4.

20. Schleiermacher was influenced by Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*. See Friedrich Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1988) and *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

21. Martin Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 242.

22. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 133.

23. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 4-5.

24. *Ibid.*, 6.

25. *Ibid.*, 1.

26. *Ibid.*, 4.

27. Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 4-6.

28. See for instance the special issue on Bazin in *Angelaki* 17.4, “Belief in Cinema: Revisiting Themes from Bazin” (2012).

29. André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

30. *Ibid.*, 13.

31. Bazin's review of Augusto Geninas's *Heaven Over the Marshes*, was initially published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1951. My reference to it in this paper is to an English translation, published as "Cinema and Theology: The Case of *Heaven Over the Marshes*," trans. Bert Cardullo, *Journal of Religion and Film* 6.2 (2002).

32. Robert Sinnerbrink, "Cinematic Belief: Bazinian Cinephilia and Malick's *Tree of Life*," *Angelaki* 17.4 (2012): 97.

33. *Ibid.*, 98.

34. *Ibid.*, 99.

35. *Ibid.*, 100.

36. *Ibid.*, 100.

37. *Ibid.*, 100.

38. I take melodrama to be a dramaturgical mode beginning in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century as a specific theatrical style, and gravitating to film in the early twentieth century. Melodrama emerges as a means of simplifying the complex political and social realities of revolutionary Europe and the annihilation of the pastoral way of life by modern industrialization. See Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts* (New York: Columbia Press, 2001). See also Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). In industrializing England, melodrama emerged at a time when church attendance was on the wane. The 1851 census on church attendance in England revealed that over forty percent of the population did not attend church — see G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (London: Methuen, 1962), 148-49 — a fact considered shocking by the ruling class at the time. This fact, coupled with the rise of popular culture (sports, music hall entertainment, popular drama) in the middle of the century, suggests that the moral education of the working class was shifting from the domain of the church to the domain of popular culture through a dramaturgy found in popular newspapers, pamphlets and magazines, as well as theatrical melodrama.

39. Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2013), 178.

40. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Press, 1993), 76.

41. *Ibid.*, 96. The aorist tense concerns an ontological relation to time and death. In his discussion of the peculiar temporality of looking at photographs of people who have since died, Barthes suggests that this ontological dimension is "an anterior future of which death is the stake."

42. *Ibid.*, 25-26.

43. "The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is the element which rises out of the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me." — Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26. The *punctum* effect is like a little death that I suffer; a fall into the abyssal gap between the present and the past carried by the resistive *mark* of its presence in the photographic image.

44. For a discussion of the future anterior tense as a bearing witness of truth that has to be believed, see Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (Fordham University Press, New York, 2005), 76-77. Having to believe is not an imperative on the subject to believe (as if the subject had no choice), but the pre-subjective condition of truth-telling. Having to believe is an ontological condition of being that precedes and enables the possibility of belief.

45. *Ibid.*, 76.

46. *Ibid.*, 79.

47. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 3.

48. Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 46.

49. *Ibid.*, 52.

50. Jeffrey D. Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 18.

51. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism in Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26.

52. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 5.

53. Brewster and Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema*, 29.

54. *Ibid.*, 23. Note here the similarity to Schleiermacher's idea of the stasis of contradictory forces, held together in things as their immanent possibility.

55. *Ibid.*, 22.

56. *Ibid.*, 24.

57. *Ibid.*, 22.

58. Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, 18.

59. The film does however provide an intertitle separating the two scenes: an image of blooming gladiola acting as a motif of the family's name (Gladney) as well as a symbol of life. Interestingly, in Malick's *The Tree of*

Life, we also see a series of similar intertitles: fluted flower-like images turning on their axis also separate scenes eliding vast time spans in the narrative.

60. Although Edna's actions are heroic, she is not a true hero, as her decisions are already made for her by the film's plot machinations. Her character is better described in terms of election: she is someone "elected" to undertake an arduous task to fulfil divine providence. The task is thus characterised by a Protestant sense of the fulfilment of a political-spiritual destiny bound up in the fate of human being as it exists in twentieth century American industrialised capitalism. Edna's actions and the event they enable — the repeal of legislation that stigmatises abandoned children as illegitimate — can be understood as part of an American "manifest destiny," initially proposed as a means of justifying colonial expansion to the west, but later as the "way" of America's future in all things. In this case manifest destiny becomes a quasi-religious movement towards moral amelioration of the poor, fully revealed in the final scenes of the film. For the concept of manifest destiny in American history see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).

61. Heidegger refers to the "other beginning" (*Ereignis*) as the turning of the event of Being out of an already enclosed way of being. See Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 4-6.

62. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 163-67.

63. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 152.

64. *Ibid.*, 153.

65. For an analysis of this scene in terms of the actor's gestures, see Warwick Mules, "Mise-en-scène and the Figural: A Reading of Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*," *Cine-Files*, no. 4 (2013), <http://www.thecine-files.com>.

66. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity*, (London: BFI, 2004), 4.

67. Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, 4.

68. Compare these non-transitional displacements with the transitional events in *Blossoms in the Dust*. In the latter film, there is no dwelling in the disjunctive event as is the case in *The Tree of Life*; rather major disjunctures (for instance, the deaths of Charlotte and Sammy) constitute a clean break between events, so that they appear to be marching logically from one to the other towards the fulfilment of an implicit destiny.

69. The wife's looking away is a gesture of non-willing of the will to power. Heidegger calls this non-willing "twisting free" (*Verwindung*). See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrel Krell (New York, HarperOne, 1991), 201-2. See also Warwick Mules, *With Nature: Nature Philosophy as Poetics through Schelling, Heidegger Benjamin and Nancy* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014), 117.

70. Compare this patenting of inventions with *Blossoms in the Dust*. Sam Gladney's invention of a new strain of wheat is successfully lodged and approved. Sam embodies the spirit of entrepreneurial capitalism as does Mr. O'Brien. The difference between them is that while Sam succeeds with his invention, Mr. O'Brien does not. *Blossoms in the Dust* maintains belief in the American Way, whereas *The Tree of Life* does not. The fact that Sam dies suddenly half way through the film is due to the requirements of the melodramatic plot (and perhaps to be faithful to the real life characters on which the story is based). Sam needs to be eliminated to clear the way for Edna's success.

71. A similar chiasmic structure of remembered childhood moments mixed in with later moments of the life of an adult male narrator can be seen in Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* (*Zerkalo*, 1975).

72. In German Idealism and Romanticism, the condition of "life-death" describes the consciousness that my life is predicated on death: all living being (nature) entails mortality that both enables and limits life. See David Farrell Krell, *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease, and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 2.

73. Like the dominant dinosaur who places a foot on the injured dinosaur three times before moving away, Jack hesitates beside the jack three times before he too moves away.

74. We are told in an earlier scene that Jack will "inherit" the legacy of the dinosaurs when he comes across a dinosaur bone in the field in which he and his brothers are playing.

75. The development from childhood to adulthood equates with a transformation from nature (mimicry) to spirit (self-consciousness). The O'Brien boys lack self-consciousness; they can only mimic the world around them and remain bound to an "animal" way of being. In one scene, the boys accompany their mother on a trip into town where they come across three men with various physical impediments (a drunken man, a man stricken with polio and a shackled criminal). The boys mimic the impeded gait of these "deformed" men without understanding their predicament. In another scene, the boys team up with other boys from the neighbourhood to roam the streets as an animal pack, vandalizing buildings and engaging in violent pranks with no thought of the consequence of their actions.

76. In the German Classical and Idealist philosophical and literary tradition, *Bildung* is the striving to transcend the natural state of the particular self towards the universal. See Friedrich Schiller, "Third Letter," in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004). Schleiermacher equates *Bildung* with the releasing of religious feeling for the infinite blocked in the particularised state of the self. See Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 146.

77. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 177-82.

78. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

79. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 36.

80. *Ibid*, 33.

81. *Ibid*, 5: "[the powers of the infinite in the finite] are smoothed away to dull mediocrity in which no excess appears, because all fresh life is wanting."