

The Malick Viewed: Is there any Cinematic Heir to Cavell's Philosophical Thinking Today?

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The question of the relation between Film and philosophy has been at the center of many intellectual debates since the foundation of cinema. It has been paraphrased and articulated in many disciplines such as Philosophy of Film, Film-Philosophy, Philosophy of Motion Pictures, Philosophy of Moving Images, even Film Theory. Nevertheless, as much as the technical aspects of the movies developed rapidly, the philosophical questions around it became more and more specific and the answers became more fallible by the end of the day. If you could agree before with some of the ontological conclusions of Bazin, Deleuze, Badiou or Cavell about celluloid-based Film, you certainly can not share that agreement to generalize that to the kind of digital imagery that we call 'Film' today, nor can you justify the Hologram or 3D IMAX footage as constituents of a motion picture. The irony is that the old question, 'what is Film?', is as often and as rapidly revised as the question, "what is philosophy?"

The fact that some Filmmakers today had proper training as philosophers as much as Filmmakers leads us to hope for an actual humane bridge between these two sides. Can we find a Filmmaker—or several—who have inherited a specific mode of philosophical thinking? Is there anybody out there who makes Films philosophically? You can be certain that one name who pops up on everyone's list is Terrence Malick. After all, he was a direct pupil of Stanley Cavell's, in philosophy, at Harvard and translated and published Heidegger's *Essence of Reason* to English. Unlike his mentor, who firmly believes that the mode of thinking you can find in certain Hollywood movies common in the 30s and 40s is a direct inheritance from the American Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau and late blooming of European Romanticism in America, Malick exploits high concept material and modern elliptical modes of expression which are rarely rendered on Film.

Like Malick, Cavell's readings have also been an exception to the trend of the figures who dwell on the realm of Film and Philosophy. We can easily call him a Philosopher of Film too; after all, Cavell dedicated a whole book to discussing the ontology of Film (*The World Viewed*) and in two different books, he grounded his own intuitional reading of genre (which is categorized today as "Remarriage Comedies" and "Melodramas of Unknown Women") even in Film literature. He further expanded his meditations on Television and Opera. Even in "Cities of Words," he read many of the classical Hollywood movies of 30s and 40s as companion texts to essential texts of philosophy of ethics. His use of autobiographical methods gave him credibility in using the Ordinary Language Philosophy of J.L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein to describe our experiences of watching movies. In a passage from "More of The World Viewed," he gives a fragmentary reading of some fragments of Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978):

I think the Film does indeed contain a metaphysical vision of the world; but I think that one has never quite seen the scene of human existence—call it the arena between earth (or days) and heaven—quite realized this way on Film before.

The particular mode of beauty these images somehow invokes a formal radiance which strikes me as a realization of some sentences from Heidegger's "What is Called Thinking?" (Harper Torchback, 1972).¹

When we say "Being," it means "Being of beings." When we say "beings," it means "beings in respect of Being." [...] The duality is always a prior datum, for Parmenides as much as for Plato, Kant as much as Nietzsche [...]. An interpretation decisive for Western thought is that given by Plato [...]. Plato means to say: beings and Beings are in different places. Particular beings and Beings are differently located.²

1. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), xiv-xv.

2. *Ibid.*, 227.

According to Plato, the idea constitutes the Being of a being. The idea is the face whereby a given something shows its form, looks at us, and thus appears, for instance, as this table. In this form, the thing looks at us. [...] Now Plato designates the relation of a given being to its idea as participation.³

The first service man can render is to give thought to the Being of beings [...]. The word [being] says: presence of what is present.⁴

The presence we described gathers itself in the continuance which causes a mountain, a sea, a house to endure and, by that duration, to lie before us among other things that are present [...]. The Greeks experience such duration as a luminous appearance in the sense of illumined radiant self-manifestation.⁵

If Malick has indeed found a way to transpose such thoughts for our meditation, he can have done it only, it seems to me, by having discovered, or discovered how to acknowledge, a fundamental fact of Film's photographic basis: that objects participate in the photographic presence of themselves: they participate in the re-creation of themselves on Film; they are essential in the making of their appearances. Objects projected on a screen are inherently reflexive, they occur as self-referential, reflecting upon their physical origins.

Their presence refers to their absence, their location in another place. Then if in relation to objects capable of such self-manifestation human beings are reduced in significance, or crushed by the fact of beauty left vacant, perhaps this is because in trying to take domination over the world, or in aestheticizing it (temptations inherent in the making of Film, or of any art), they are refusing their participation with it.⁶

If the question of finding a humane bridge between two disciplines seemed absurd, its existence is now undeniable after Malick's masterpieces. That mode of creation,

3. Ibid., 222.

4. Ibid., 235.

5. Ibid., 237.

6. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), xvi.

which Cavell emphasises, becomes central in Malick's other works (most notably in *Tree of Life* [2011] and *The Voyage of Time: Life's Journey* [2016]). One easily finds how reduced characters are in significance (they are normally wandering and barely talking) in relation to the objects capable of self-manifestation (*To the Wonder* [2012], *Song to Song* [2017], *Knight of Cups* [2015]) and crushed by beauty left vacant (*The New World* [2005] and *The Thin Red Line* [1998]).

If anyone has found a way to transpose Cavell's thoughts on film for "our meditative pleasure," it is Malick who did it first. He is the one who has discovered how to acknowledge that his thoughts can participate in re-creating themselves on Film. Beside his originally cinematic intuitions, his unique philosophical reading of—point of departure from—Heidegger in "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" is a key to understand Malick as both a unique filmmaker and a Cavellian—not a Heideggerian—heir:

For him the extraordinariness of the ordinary has to do with forces in play, beyond the grasp and the reach of ordinary awareness, that constitute our habitual world; it is a constitution he describes as part of his account of the technological, of which what we accept as the ordinary is as it were one consequence; it is thus to be seen as a symptom of what Nietzsche prophesied, or diagnosed, in declaring that for us "the wasteland grows." Whereas for me the uncanniness of the ordinary is epitomized by the possibility or threat of what philosophy has called skepticism, understood (as in my studies of Austin and of the later Wittgenstein I have come to understand it) as the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in common, or to pass them by. (By "the desire of ordinary language to repudiate itself" I mean—doesn't it go without saying? — a desire on the part of speakers of a native or mastered tongue who desire to assert themselves, and despair of it.)⁷

7. Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary: Tanner Lectures on Human Values," in *The Tanner Lecture on Human Values, VIII*, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin (Cambridge/Salt Lake City, UT: Cambridge University Press/University of Utah Press, 1988), 84.