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BEASTS OF THE DIGITAL WILD:
Primordigital Cinema and the
Question of Origins

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Festival circuits in recent years have witnessed the emergence of a group of films marked with narratives and aesthetics that blend analog and digital forms of realism in new ways. Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011), Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), and Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010) have stirred audiences with their elegiac narratives on human loss. Shot mostly on analog film and featuring artful cinematography, these works allowed a nostalgic return to photographic realism's humanistic vision, which has almost become obsolete in the age of CGI. At the same time, the films have also attracted criticism, since each featured digitally composited sequences that disrupted their humanist aesthetics by invoking sober visions of evolutionary biology and cosmic origins at crucial plot points.

In a much talked about twenty-minute sequence, Malick's period piece on a family's emotional struggle with the death of their son depicted the creation of the universe and primordial forms of life on earth leading up to the dinosaurs. The sequence had a polarizing effect on the audience as a significant number of viewers found its incorporation of special effects-enhanced imagery, such as NASA footage and computer-generated dinosaurs, detrimental to the deeply humane quality of Emmanuel Lubezki's poetic and spiritual camerawork. Critics also appeared divided in terms of whether the sequence added any value to the film or not, especially in relation to the encounter it depicts between two dinosaurs at the end. Notably, RogerEbert.com founding editor Jim Emerson and *Slate* critic Forrest Wickman carried the debate to their blogs, with Wickman focusing entirely on "what Terrence Malick meant with *The Tree of Life*'s dinosaurs." The dinosaur segment even puzzled Malick scholars in academia: "And then there is the dinosaurs. What do you do with that?" asked Robert Sinnerbrink in a Malick panel at the 2013 conference of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies, summing up the controversies surrounding the popular, critical, and academic receptions of the sequence.

A year after the release of *The Tree of Life*, Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, dealing with a little girl's battle for survival amidst rising waters in the Louisiana Bayou and her father's impending death, turned its gaze towards another extinct species, the aurochs. Like Malick's dinosaurs, Zeitlin's aurochs, which are depicted as fabled prehistoric beasts released from melting ice caps in the film, have been blamed for pushing Zeitlin away from the social problems facing the bayou community into the realm of fantasy. Lastly, Patricio Guzmán's documentary essay *Nostalgia for the Light* drew an unlikely parallelism among three unrelated groups of people populating the Atacama Desert in Chile: women digging the soil for the corporeal remains of family members (who disappeared under Pinochet's dictatorship), archaeologists studying pre-Columbian mummies, and astronomers examining distant galaxies. Although the film did not feature digitally concocted imagery of primordial life or extinct species, it related the desire to remember lost ones to the astronomers' search for our cosmic origins, which gave the documentary a science-fictional bent.

In focusing on the digitally composited or embellished sequences in these films, I want to argue that their two seemingly disjunctive aesthetic realisms – one based

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in the analog representations of human loss and the other in the digital imaginations of primordiality and extinction, which are essentially nonhuman temporalities – do not necessarily suggest a clash. Instead, they point to the emergence of what one might call a speculative realist aesthetics, which poses an alternative to the photographic, digital, sutured, or post-humanist realisms in cinema in the digital age. Here, I borrow the term "speculative" from Quentin Meillassoux and Ray Brassier, whose musings on primordiality and extinction led to the birth of the speculative realist movement in philosophy in mid 2000s.

The speculative turn

At first glance, speculative realism was born as a response to the global ecological crisis and the scientific advances in fields like neuroscience and physics, which challenged continental philosophy's traditional commitments to anthropo-centric approaches to reality. New finds related to the accretion and expansion of the universe suggested that one did not need empirical evidence or observations based on human experience or sensory perception in order to make assumptions about the nature and trajectory of matter. This led a heightened awareness of humanity's ontological insignificance on earth, creating a need to rethink reality in relation to the universe described by scientific thought (Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek 2011). In light of these developments, Meillassoux and Brassier called for radicalizing philosophy by speculating about realities that fell outside the perceptual and epistemological reach of humanity. Through their call, one of the most enduring problems of philosophy, that of whether we can imagine a world-in-itself (as existing independently from human observers) or not, was called into question again yet no longer as a means of challenging the possibility of a world as such. Rather, it was reframed as a question that concerned confronting the "irremedial realism"[1] of a universe, which not only exists in-itself but, quite possibly, without humans:

> While we can never experience the world-in-itself, we seem to be almost fatalistically drawn to it, perhaps as a limit that defines who we are as human beings. Let us call this spectral and speculative world *the world-without-us*. (Thacker 5)

In this respect, primordiality and extinction emerged as natural entry points to the speculative thought, since the realities of these two temporalities predated and superseded humanity (pointing to the times-without-us). Meillassoux's *After Finitude* inaugurated the movement bysetting primordiality as the benchmark for our understanding of the role of humanity or philosophy in the world and Ray Brasier's *Nihil Unbound* argued that one could not think about the question of origins without speculating about the broader trajectory of matter, namely, the trope of extinction.

The speculative realist movement got so popular since its inception only a few years ago that it has already created its own factions and camps, critiquing the

movement's basic premises from inside and outside the trenches. Even the phrase speculative realism has been called into question (with speculative materialism and object-oriented ontology offered as alternative names for the theory), so I want to make it clear from the outset that: first, I don't want to dive too deeply into the bifurcations of the theory since I am more interested in Meillassoux and Brasier's initial ruminations on the two nonhuman temporalities, and second, I'm only invested in the word "realism" in the nowadays-questionable phrase "speculative realism" because there is a connection between contemporary philosophical debates on the nature of reality and the cinematic aesthetics of realism in the three films that I am discussing here.

To go back to the question of reality, then, what I find arresting in the three films is the meeting of two realisms, analog and digital, through sequences that portray cosmological visions regarding the origins of the universe and extinction of species. The images of galaxies, stardust, and prehistoric beasts seem to have a speculative dimension in that they point to an understanding of human loss and mourning at a deeply philosophical and cosmic scale. This resonates with speculative realism's foreboding, at times nihilistic engagements with the idea of death (subjective, collective, and nonhuman) while addressing the questions of primordiality and extinction. *The Tree of Life*, for example, is commonly interpreted as a religious text – in the Christian theological tradition – due to Malick's quoting of the book of Job in the voiceovers and his fascination with light conveyed through Lumia imagery. However, the inclusion of digital dinosaurs undercuts the film's religious reading, much in the way they weaken its humanist analog cinematography, by suddenly pitting a Darwinian evolutionary perspective against religious theology in order to provide an explanation for human death and suffering. It almost seems as if Malick was trying to formulate a kind of "cinematic philosophy of death" through the film by amalgamating both evolutionary and theological perspectives.

What I am referring to with the philosophy of death here is the long tradition of thinking about mortality and finitude in the writings of philosophers like Heidegger (most famously articulated in his discussion of *being-towards-death*), Lyotard, Levinas, and Deleuze, to name a few. As Brassier argues, death has functioned as the motor of philosophical speculation since Hegel with regard to the fact that it constituted an internal limit of thought. In Heidegger, death was similarly "what sets human existence apart by endowing it with a privileged relationship to the future" (Brassier 224); it was a component that structured existence (much like Freud's *death-drive*) rather than an actual event contained within a living subject's experiential horizon (Cavi 69). In his 1991 collection *The Inhuman,* Lyotard disrupted this line of thinking in Western philosophy by taking up death as an event. More specifically, he problematized not just human death, but stellar deaths like the impending death of our sun and the foreseeable extinction of life in the solar system following that. According to Brassier, Lyotard's discussion of the solar catastrophe forced us to think of death and extinction as cosmic events that had far-reaching consequences: "Extinction is not to be understood here as the termination of a biological species, but rather as that which levels the transcendence ascribed to the human" (Brassier 224). With the

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introduction of extinction as a trope, death stopped being a limit for thought, as philosophy proved to be capable of imagining or contemplating the death of our thoughts in the future. In other words, it became possible to reconfigure thought as something that survives without a body and exists without its terrestrial shelter. It is perhaps this reimagining of death and thought filtered through the vision of humanity on the brink of extinction that made Lyotard a precursor to speculative thought for Brassier.[2]

One finds a recent revival of interest in the topic among the environmental debates surrounding the anthropocene, which according to Dipesh Chakrabarty have to do with the "contemporary moods of anxiety and concern about the finitude of humanity" in light of the current planetary crisis of climate change and human-caused mass extinctions (197). Going from Malick to this specific thread of philosophy is not an unthinkable leap. Film scholars often describe him as a philosopher-turned filmmaker, who is known for having studied with Stanley Cavell and translated/taught Heidegger. As David Sterritt notes, the Heideggerian word "shining," which appeared first in Malick's well-received war film *The Thin Red Line* (1998), makes a come back in *The Tree of Life,* continuing the director's tradition of making philosophical references in his films (55). Robert Sinnerbrink also links *The Tree of Life* with American transcendentalism (in the tradition of Thoreau/Whitman), romanticism, and Kierkegaard (2012, 2013). Therefore, the film's portrayal of a family's inability to come to terms with death immediately brings to mind how the narrative might have been shaped by Malick's philosophical investments. By invoking speculative realism, however, I do not wish to attach Malick or the film to any philosophical camp myself. Establishing a direct link between Malick and the speculative turn in philosophy would be problematic, considering that there is no proof of the filmmaker's interest in this block of theory and that speculative philosophers themselves usually take up an oppositional stance against Heideggerian, and more broadly, post-Kantian formulations of what death suggests in relation to time, memory, and reality. Further, I do not want to dismiss the theological references in Malick's work for the sake of an anti-religion, evolutionary science-based reading of the film, channeling the predominantly secular worldview of the speculative thinkers. Rather, my argument relates to the film's approach to reality mainly at an aesthetic, cinematic level. More specifically, it sees speculative realism as one way of looking at how the question of death, human loss, and suffering, which finds alternative formulations in theology and humanist philosophy (in the traditional "nature versus grace" dichotomy), gets mapped onto a third, cosmological perspective – perhaps subliminally – in the three films, making cinema a venue in which the tensions between these three perspectives get acted out.

From eschatology and thanatology to cosmology

As several critics and scholars have observed, *The Tree of Life*'s grieving mother (Jessica Chastain), whose son is presumably killed in the Korean War, voices the theological perspective or the way of grace in the film. She is nurturing,

compassionate, and spiritual, unlike her surviving son Jack (Hunter McCracken/Sean Penn) and her husband (Brad Pitt), who represent nature's more merciless, competitive, and volatile forces. At the beginning of the twenty-minute origins-of-the universe sequence, we hear her plea to God: "Lord, why? Where were you?" Her voiceover is laid under Lumia compositions recalling the third verse of the Book of Genesis, "Let there be Light." However, instead of continuing the religious/spiritual symbolism, the sequence takes on an increasingly scientific look as digitally embellished images of nebulas, Hubble photographs, volcanoes, early life forms roll, culminating with the arrival of the CGI dinosaurs. Nathan Brown gives further details:

> A son dies; he is mourned by his family. And on the anniversary of his death, decades later, the film's narrative focalisation upon the psychological interiority of his older brother gives way to one of the most remarkable 'flashbacks' in the history of cinema, even more grandiose than the famous analeptic cut which opens *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). From outside the office building where the eldest brother now works as an architect we return to what seems to be the origin of the cosmos, and from here we follow the expansion of the universe and the formation of our galaxy through the accretion of the earth, millennia of geological time, the self-organisation of RNA and DNA molecules, the emergence of mitochondria and multicellular organisms, the evolution of diverse animal species during the Cambrian explosion, the reign and extinction of the dinosaurs, and the beginning of the latest ice age during the Pliocene. (3)

The sequence, then, answers the mother's question with a vision of evolutionary biology (accompanied by Mozart's requiem Lacrimosa). However, I believe that this is an answer only in the dialogical sense; instead of dismissing the spiritual, the incorporation of scientific imagery helps to bracket the question of suffering and death between the two competing epistemologies of human thought: eschatology and thanatology. When interpreted as such, the sequence can be viewed as an elaborative statement on the film's title: it simultaneously alludes to both the biblical tree of life, provided as an explanation for the origins of humanity in *the Book of Genesis*, and Darwin's treatise on *The Origins of Species*. The tension between the eschatological and thanatological explanations for the necessity of death is never resolved; therefore, it is hard to say whether Malick favors one over the other (scholarship on Malick's work usually highlight his predilection for one). The much-scrutinized encounter between the two dinosaurs at the end of the sequence adds to the ambiguity:

> A healthy dinosaur happens upon an injured dinosaur, and the healthy dinosaur pins down the injured dinosaur's head with its foot; then, for reasons that aren't entirely clear, the dinosaur decides to leave it alone and walk away. (Wickman)

Although various critics have indicated that it is possible to interpret the gesture of the healthy dinosaur both as a display of mercy and Darwinian dominance, Malick's 2007 screenplay hints that the scene represents the first signs of maternal love and

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care among animals, thus reinforcing the view that the dinosaurs are simply anthropomorphized. This slight deviation from the scientific findings of evolutionary biology (which might be motivated by a narrative need to return to "the way of grace" or the POV of the mother) at the end of the sequence does not take away from the film's broader cosmological perspective in my opinion.

In the inaugural issue of *Sequence*,[3] Steven Shaviro looks at Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) and defines films that narrate events of cosmic significance, such as the end of the world or cosmic catastrophes, as "cosmological drama":
It connects inner personal experience with ultimate cosmic realities, skipping over whatever might lie in between. It produces a kind of short-circuit between the petty constraints of bourgeois society, on the one hand, and the massive, inhuman forces of Nature, on the other.

The Tree of Life is similarly a cosmological drama in that it connects personal experience (of loss and mourning) with cosmic realities (the big bang and extinction of species). It seems as though through cosmology, Malick wants to intensify the tension between the competing knowledge systems that provide an explanation for death or make it palpable, rather than resolving it.

In a much more subtle way, one can detect an intersection of eschatology, thanatology, and cosmology in Guzmán's cine-essay too. In *Nostalgia for the Light,* the veteran Chilean director, who is best known for his radical political documentaries, links Chile's suppressed history regarding the missing bodies of political prisoners executed under Pinochet's dictatorship to the secrets of distant galaxies. The filming is done in the vast expanses of the Atacama Desert, which itself resembles a Mars-like deserted alien planet. The footage mostly features HD-to-35 mm imagery of stars and deep space, captured in stunning clarity from within the observatories built on the desert, interlaced with a series of what Michael Koresky calls "Malickian images" – close-ups of mnemonic objects, rooms, or items like stained glass windows that connect Guzmán to the memories of his childhood and the haunting political period. What disrupts the film's realism, in addition to its unusual-for-a-documentary cosmological perspective and stream-of-consciousness style voiceover, is a recurring visual effect that the filmmaker superimposes onto scenes. As Chris Darke describes:

> There follows a bravura transition so simple in execution yet magical in effect that it's a pity to reveal it to readers who haven't seen the film. A cut takes us to an exterior shot showing the colourful facade of the house, a wind-tossed tree and what looks like a dust storm rising in the street; but the swarming motes sparkle with an unearthly lustre as a cloud of stardust swallows up the past. Performed with a conjuror's flourish, it also serves to establish the film's formal parameters and themes: earth and space, matter and void, and time – cosmological, archaeological and historical.

The digital stardust effect, which has received mixed (negative and positive) responses from critics, appears throughout the film, at times filling up the empty space in a room like the ghostly apparition of lives lost, and at others forming an

astral veil around the interviewed subjects (astronomers, archaeologists, survivor of concentration camps, and people searching for lost relatives). It is evocative, making the viewer think of a wide range of visual references like the trail from the big bang, the dispersed atoms and molecules that make up the fabric of matter in the universe, and, as the film suggests at one point, the amniotic fluid of the mother's womb. Yet also it inevitably brings to mind the traditional Christian burial formula, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust":

> Theologically, the "earth to earth" phrase was taken from the biblical *Book of Genesis* and its myth telling of the creation and fall of mankind. […] The primal man, Adam, is told that he is, in fact, dust, and will become dust yet again, after his death: "dust you are, and to dust you will return." (Davies 82)

Amidst the images of sandy nebulae, stardust, and the dry earth of the desert, the documentary's scientific realism puts on an eschatological face or religious symbolism, which seems to constitute a source of inspiration rather than an obstacle for Guzmán.

In addition to the cosmological perspective freely drawing from eschatology and thanatology, I find an additional speculative dimension in these films because they are unafraid to explore "the troubling, disruptive power"[4] of death (and its contingency) for thought. In order to show how they do so, it might be helpful to shift the focus from the spiritual and scientific references in the films to the tropes of primordiality and extinction, which I took up as crucial speculative elements of their cosmology at the beginning of the essay, and talk about how the films affectively map death and human loss onto the two distinctly non-human temporalities.

Anticipatory affect and proleptic elegy

In all the three films the protagonists and the documentary subjects try to come to terms with death and human loss by imagining a world in which humanity hasn't emerged yet or is threatened by extinction. The films highlight the cosmic scale of these imaginations by establishing a parallelism among extinct prehistoric creatures, dead stars, and mournful characters, searching in past and future millennia palliatives for their own mortality in the face of incommensurable loss. From an aesthetic point of view, both *The Tree of Lif*e and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* appear deeply invested in maintaining the façade of an analog aesthetics of realism, despite the amount of technical wizardry that their cosmological visions call for. Even the digitally concocted or enhanced elements appear naturalistic. Zeitlin takes pride in the fact that he used special effects and digital compositing in the aurochs sequences quite sparingly, to make the aurochs appear lifelike. Domestic pigs were costumed and filmed in front of a green screen in order to achieve the menacing look of the larger-than-life creatures (which were originally an extinct species of wild cattle converted into wild boars for the film). Reportedly, the technical crew only used compositing in the sequences that show the aurochs

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coming back to life from within melting ice caps. Despite its dominant analog aesthetics of realism, however, the film has still received criticism for its use of elements that some found more fairytale-like than socially realistic or politically sensitive, as expected from a film that came out in the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. For example, Christina Sharpe accused Zeitlin of romanticizing precarity and disagreed with critics like Nicholas Mirzoeff, who lauded the film for having "the dramatic achievement of being perhaps the first film to create a means to visualize climate resistance" by mixing magical sequences with cinematic realism. According to Sharpe, the screenwriter's introduction of a black father-daughter relationship into the narrative, which in its original theatrical play version only featured white male characters, revived some of the stereotypes about black life as being associated with poverty and wild ways. Further, thinking of the response of protagonist Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) to response to death and poverty as "resistance to climate disaster" gave the audience the license to naturalize the conditions that the Bathtub community were forced to live in and prevented them from wishing to alleviate the little girl's devastation.

Here, Sharpe's insights bring the film's representation of the locals of "the Southern wild," who find a form of resistance in self-destructive defiance (the rejection by Hushpuppy's father [Dwight Henry] of medical treatment for his illness plays into this interpretation), close to the trope of the "self-exterminating savage," the ghostly twin of the "noble savage" stereotype in Western literature. According to Patrick Brantlinger, "from the late 1700s on, an enormous literature has been devoted to the 'doom' of 'primitive races' caused by 'fatal impact' with white, Western civilization" (1) and the non-white races have often been depicted as self-extinguishing savages causing their own destruction. The prominent genre of this literature came to be known as "proleptic elegy," referring to the type of romantic narratives or discourses in art, literature, journalism, science, and governmental rhetoric that take up extinction narratives to mourn the disappearance of an object/race before it is completely lost. Although I find the readings of the film through this kind of lens reductive, it is possible to frame *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as a kind of proleptic elegy. First of all, the film offers an elegiac narrative, which invokes a discourse of extinction to provide a commentary about a social reality, in this case climate change. According to the debates on the anthropocene, climate change is self-inflicted by and threatening for the human race, therefore pointing to its self-destructiveness. Secondly, the protagonist Hushpuppy mourns the death of her father and the demise of her community in the narrative before these events have actually happened or fully taken effect, which suggests that her grief is anachronistic – nostalgic of the future. The affective import of the film is different from that of *The Tree of Life*, since the mourned person in the latter film is already dead. Perhaps, what I am gesturing towards is something more along the lines of Patricia Rae's formulation of the genre here. In her study on modernism and mourning, Rae comes up with an expanded framework that frees the genre from its associations with the colonial gaze and identifies it with narratives that revolve around anticipatory affect:

> I define proleptic elegy as consolatory writing produced in anticipation of
> sorrow, where the expected loss is of a familiar kind. Its occasion is the need

for "psychological rearmament" in the face of a threat, its opening strategy the pragmatic one of marshaling resources already known to be useful in the work of mourning. It records and responds imaginatively to "anticipatory grief." (247)

The film's mapping of the little girl's grief onto a world threatened by climate change, which is heralded by the prehistoric aurochs coming alive from melting ice caps, does not quite romanticize the post-Katrina social reality. Rather, it points to a broader shift in the meaning of death (what Douglas J. Davies calls "death's paradigm shift") in the ecological age: death becomes a part of a secular, ecological eschatology and things like personal survival and immortality get subsumed into the survival of the human species amidst other species (Davies 68-89). Hushpuppy suggests in a sequence early in the film:

> The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece… the entire universe will get busted.

As her father's health deteriorates, the whole world starts unraveling almost in a self-fulfilling prophecy; Antarctic ice shelves collapse, the aurochs drift into the ocean, and the little girl finds herself pondering her own survival "in a million years." Therefore, the grief of a little girl over her father's impending death is transformed into an anticipatory elegy for the future of humanity as a species (making the story about species-thinking more than anything else).

A speculative aesthetics for cinema

Although Malick's dinosaurs are made entirely of CGI, they too appear lifelike, calmly waiting for their extinction by roaming the boundless reserves of lush prehistoric forests if not by showing a final act of compassion to a dying mate on the shores of a stream. The aesthetic speculative dimension of this sequence lies, first and foremost, in Malick's desire to represent through cinema a reality that not only predates cinema but perceptual experience itself (in other words, the desire to make cinema witness to a reality without a witness). The advent of life restaged in the sequence by the legendary visual effects master Douglas Trumbull, who worked with Stanley Kubrick on *2001: A Space Odyssey* as well as in films like *Star Trek: The Movie* and *Blade Runner*, cannot necessarily be described as fictional, as there is no phenomenological reality that corresponds to our knowledge of how things took place. Conversely, we still consider our scientific knowledge of the cosmic origins and the look or behavior of extinct prehistoric species to be factual based on the speculative statements of science. As Meillassoux argues, while philosophy refuses to make statements about temporalities like primordiality due to the post-Kantian tradition's general view of reality as unknowable beyond direct human experience, contemporary science shows that developments like the accretion of the earth, the formation of stars, and events preceding not only the

emergence of humans but also the advent of life on earth can be speculated about without recourse to empirical evidence. What this means is that reality does not need a witness to affirm it as real. In other words, we can reliably reconstruct a reality belonging to times without witnesses through speculation, and our assumption, "what is un-witnessed is un-thinkable," (Meillassoux 19) is unwarranted.

In this regard, the digital dinosaur sequence can be argued to be both digitally realistic (it subscribes to perspectival laws of human vision, as Lev Manovich defines digital realism) and realistic in a speculative sense: it makes plausible visual statements on the origins and extinction of life based on NASA's documentation of space and paleontological finds on how dinosaurs might have once looked or behaved. (This is the sense in which documentary film scholars interpret 3D dinosaur documentaries as representations of reality). The question, then, is not whether the film strays away from reality in incorporating the sequence or not, but whether it provides a synergy between the distinctly humanist aesthetic realism of Emmanuel Lubezki's analog cinematography and the speculative realism of Douglas Trumbull's CGI. The answer to that question is also polarizing, yet affirmative in my opinion. I side with scholars like Timothy Corrigan, who appreciate the film precisely because of the CGI sequences. However, while Corrigan appreciates Malick's dinosaurs, he seems to find the dominant aesthetic of the rest of the film problematic. More specifically, he reads *The Tree of Life* as a nostalgic family melodrama, the story of which is dissipated by the film's disjunctive editing (with "aggressively unmotivated" flashbacks that reveal nothing of a coherent history). It is at this point that I want to return to Richard Grusin's notion of *post-cinematic atavism* (2013), which is itself a response to Steven Shaviro's *post-cinematic affect* (2010) in digital cinema, to offer a possible reconciliation. I believe that what provides a link between the two realisms in the film is Malick's mediation of the two aesthetics through an atavism that is endemic to contemporary digital cinema[5] and his filtering of both analog and digital imagery through post-cinematic affect.

Both the analog and digital imagery in the film show an atavistic tendency. Lubezki's analog imagery returns to the mythopoeic world of the 1960s, the look of which is shaped by nostalgia for a proto-digital sense of naturalism. The famous shot, in which the analog camera accidentally captures a butterfly landing on the mother's hand, is emblematic of this "decisive moment" style observational aesthetic. On the other hand, the CGI imagery is also atavistic not only in terms of its return to primordiality, the origin of all origins, but also in its re-creation of one of cinema's most nostalgic objects: the dinosaur. From Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) to Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993), the figure of the dinosaur has always been at the forefront of cinema's nostalgic remediation of popular cultural images through new technologies. Here, one can think of Svetlana Boym's take on the tradition of dinosaur revisionism in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (I thank Jason Sperb for reminding me of the connection). Yet, we can also think of how cinema often sets the image of the dinosaur as a criterion to test the aesthetic limits of new formats. This common thread of atavism becomes a binding factor in the film. One can locate a similar atavistic tendency in the title of *Nostalgia for the Light,* which in its

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original language translates both as nostalgia *for* and *of* the light, referring simultaneously to the light of dead stars and the source of cinema that now traverses through the veins of fiberoptic cables instead of leaving chemical traces on analog film.

The other strategy binding analog and digital realisms is disjunctive editing, which, instead of diluting the stories, intensifies the existential angst and splintering of thought caused by grief. This type of intensification is what Steven Shaviro identifies as the post-cinematic affect: a complex structure of feeling, which emerges in tandem with new media technologies and rapidly changing visions of the world. In *The Tree of Life*, the disjunctive imagery and the "aggressively unmotivated" flashbacks resonate with the splintering of thought that modern subjects in the 21st century experience through immersive engagements with dispersed media as well as through a knowledge of the possibility of extinction — of individual life, cinema, and humanity – raised by the global environmental crisis. Although it does not feature flashbacks, the editing of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is similarly disjunctive, complemented by the constantly mobile camerawork.

In conclusion, I want to argue that there is an emerging aesthetics of realism in the three films analyzed in this essay, and, perhaps, one can extract from this aesthetics a commentary about the ontology of cinema in the digital age, too. For a very long time, cinema did not fathom the possibility of its own extinction, the finitude of the analog. Now that the digital has made extinction a possibility, cinema, any cinema (past or future, analog or digital) cannot escape confronting the question of finitude and loss. This is probably why we are obsessed with the idea of death and nostalgia in contemporary films. At the moment in which cinema's temporality has become non-human, it has also become truly human for the first time, precisely because it confronts the question of finitude. What interests me here is that the answers current cinema gives are speculative. Instead of resorting to humanism and the traditional formal strategies of aesthetic realism, it stretches its scope (oversteps or steps beyond its own origins) towards pre-cinematic and after-cinematic times.

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Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982)
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ENDNOTES

1. Meillassoux argues that when science makes hypothetical statements about the nature or origins of the universe, philosophers need to take these not just as assumptions without a referent / verifiable object but as a form of reality: "either this statement has a realist sense, and *only* a realist sense, or it has no sense at all." (17) ↵
2. It might be interesting to note here that speculative thinkers are commonly concerned with themes related to disruption, destruction, and cataclysm. Extinction, contingency, ecological catastrophe, post-industrial apocalypse, and *Collapse* (as the title of the journal that spearheads the movement suggests) are among frequently visited tropes. ↵
3. This essay is written, partly, as a response to that issue. ↵
4. Robin Mackay describes what Brassier values in nihilism in these terms in his blurb on the back cover of *Nihil Unbound;* the book surveys philosophies of death from Nietszche to Heidegger and Lyotard, only to suggest that none responds to the disruptive impact of death adequately. ↵
5. Richard Grusin, author of SEQUENCE 1.3, and I came up with the term *primordigital cinema* to draw attention to this tendency in an eponymous panel at the 2013 annual conference of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies. ↵