

Sustainable Being(s): Becoming Mortal in a Technological Age

RANDALL TEAL

University of Idaho

INTRODUCTION

*A crocodile appears. It moves slowly and slides into the algae covered waters of a south pacific swamp, gradually sinking beneath surface. **Cut.** Sunlight streams though the tracery of an indigenous canopy as majestic trees and creeping vines intertwine in a living mass of tropical forest. **Cut.** Enter an island village where a society of natives and two American soldiers cultivate the natural surroundings through the situated use of tools. **Cut.** Enter a patrol boat. **Cut.** The world is at war.*

The opening movement of Terrence Malick's film *The Thin Red Line* provides a paraphrase of the history of 'being' in the West which culminates with the arrival of Modern technological thinking.¹ Through its depiction of war in the Pacific, *The Thin Red Line* reveals how the drift toward technological thinking gradually eliminates the meaningful interrelation of 'things' and how 'things' ultimately come to be seen only as resources. This trajectory is summed up in Sgt. Welsh's statement, "we're livin' in a world that blowin' itself all to hell fast as anyone can arrange it."

Under the hegemony of science the technological has frequently been viewed as the means to a sustainable future. Unfortunately, we find ourselves amidst a strange irony whereby attempts to fix problems brought on technological innovation are undertaken by way of new technological solutions. This endless circle misses the fact that it is actually *us* as human beings that stand at the root of the dilemma. Martin Heidegger adds a wrinkle to this confused state when he points out that the worst thing that might happen is that we actually solve all of our problems via the techno-

logical, as this would be the final homogenizing step whereby all meaningful differences would become leveled and the resource character of things would be all that remained.²

Christian Norberg-Schulz has said, "... (it is) one of the great paradoxes of our time... the fact that the development of science and the infinite possibilities of technology are still not enough to allow us to take care of the environment in which we live our lives."³ Over the course of history, technology has been an important aid to our capacity for situated engagement, and Heidegger's observation that, "...the essence of technology is nothing technological..."⁴ reminds us that technology is in fact a means of disclosing latent possibilities within a world, as seen in one moment of the film when Pvt. Witt traverses the lagoon in his canoe, revealing a particular affordance offered by this location, an affordance that could not be actualized simply standing along the shoreline. In this manner Witt uncovers a possibility of the lagoon through his use of the canoe and the water in turn frees Witt's ability to pilot a canoe. Through this exchange one can begin to understand how human and world may co-disclose one another. However, this type of engagement comes into jeopardy as technology slides under the spell of technological thinking. With this shift, technology undergoes a reversal, whereby the mindset of the technological becomes the primary means of comprehension, making every situation, every problem, appear to be of technological concern.

Similarly, when sustainability is viewed against this technological horizon it too transforms, taking on the appearance of an object for technological concern. Yet like technology itself, sustainability at its most basic level is directly tied to, and is perhaps

even synonymous, with our attunement to, and engagement with, an environmental whole. From this it follows that if sustainability is understood only technologically, then more robust means of addressing ecological concerns, such as the types of situated engagement mentioned earlier, will remain covered-up. Technological sustainability continues to be an extension of the 'willing' subject; the proverbial spotlight which isolates and reduces complex relationships to lonely singularities.

For sustainability to be engaged as a holistic, participatory, and mindful enmeshment with our world, then it must reestablish itself outside of the technological aegis. This necessarily requires revitalizing human's use of equipment in the service of the environment through relationships of mutual benefit and co-disclosure, as has been observed throughout history. In the end, perhaps we will come to find that ecological salvation never asked for technological innovation but rather depended on us, as humans, learning anew what it means to be attuned to our world.

WORLDS EMERGING

When Heidegger speaks of 'world' he speaks not of entity but rather the background or environment within which things interact. Thus, world becomes the basis for intelligibility. It is pervasive, affective, and something one is always already in as what Heidegger calls, "being-in-the-world."⁵

The opening frames of *The Thin Red Line* show a world of *physis*, which was understood by the Pre-Socratics to mean, "self blossoming emergence."⁶ With *physis* there comes a sense of wonder, discovery, and astonishment, as things are seen to presence, endure for a time, and then pass on.⁷ In *The Thin Red Line*, *physis* is the ever-present pulse of nature that is the canvas on which all else exists. *Physis* for Malick, it would seem, is all that is beautiful and perfect in the world, with the power to bear even the most terrible human abuses, witnessed in a butterfly that drifts in slow motion across the chaos of a battlefield.

Human participation in a world of *physis* comes by way of *techne-poiesis*, or a revealing of "...that which does not bring itself forth"⁸. Embedded in this relationship lies the essence of technology as *techne*, which "denotes neither art or technol-

ogy but a knowledge..."⁹ *Techne-poiesis* was most famously expressed in Michelangelo's statement regarding his freeing the statues from the marble, and it is glimpsed in the island village through the co-disclosing relationship the natives have with this location; from the rocks the children use to open the shellfish; to the bamboo that becomes fishing rods; to the native grass that is transformed into a thatched roof for a primitive dwelling. In these examples the resource character of these things is nested within the environmental whole, where for example, the house discloses a new identity for the grass and the grass, in turn, allows the house to be a house by becoming a roof.

Heidegger suggests that these types of examples can be helpful aids to our contemporary understanding, pointing out that "primitive phenomena are often less concealed and less complicated" and can therefore bring out "the ontological structures of phenomena in a genuine way."¹⁰ This is to say that considering less complex situations allows one to get clear as to the structures of our dealings and perhaps to uncover those things more fundamental to our own world. Heidegger is also sure to remind us that, "everydayness does not coincide with primitiveness,"¹¹ meaning, it is not a question of throwing off this life for a nostalgic past, as he reiterates in a later comment saying, "we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we...evade it."¹² Rather than demonizing technology, improvement comes in developing more sensitive implementations within our current engagements. In this regard, Malick too is quick to point out that a return to a 'simpler time' is not a valid option as we must face our own world on its own terms. This message is delivered in the form of a patrol boat which collects the American soldiers who, by hiding with the natives, have attempted to evade the technology of their own world.

WORLD OF RESOURCES

Fade in. A hulking troop ship appears ominously perched atop the ocean as it disinterestedly plows across the channel. The sheer mass of this vessel appears out of scale with the surroundings and its machine-like physiognomy separates itself from the soft natural beauty of the islands in the background. This vision is punctuated by a thick black

cloud of smoke that billows from the beast into the sky. **Fade out.**

The earlier scene showing Witt in the dugout canoe, where man, oar, boat, and water all moved together in unison stands in stark contrast to the vision of the troop ship. The disparity between these two images appears a perfect illustration of what both Malick and Heidegger see lacking in the Modern technological vision. For them being-in-the-world centers around situated engagement in a particular place that is facilitated and magnified by a network of inconspicuous equipment.¹³ The importance of situatedness and the corresponding relational whole is repeated throughout the film, as Sgt. Welsh comments, 'in this world, a man, himself, is nothing.'

As the world of *physis* fades into memory the tone of the film shifts. The interactive play of world and things seen in the opening sequences is replaced by a place-less world of resources, embodied in the troop ship, and, "...the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct."¹⁴ With this shift the potential for participatory co-disclosure deteriorates as it is subsumed by a way of interaction chiefly interested in the acquisition of commodities. The bleak state of affairs is driven home, as usual by Sgt. Welsh who says, "Property. The whole fucking thing's about property."

The Modern technological world is discernable in part, through Heidegger's concept of "standing-reserve"¹⁵. Like men turned into soldiers, standing-reserve is what becomes of 'things' in a world of ordering and optimization where eventually all comes to be seen as stock, and with this aims and involvements become purely speculative. Ordering for the sake of order, pervasive in our contemporary world, is illustrated in *The Thin Red Line* by the following example: the Americans encounter an unnamed land form (Guadalcanal) in a nameless body of water. They must control it. Resources (soldiers) are thrown at this land form in hopes of subjugation and possession. Overcoming 'the enemy' (fellow human beings) via the employment of more resources (soldiers), the Americans establish a new base to extend regional power, centering operations for the procurement of new properties. In this example all is undertaken for strategic value.

In a technological world, one encounters a phenomenon Heidegger calls "enframing"¹⁶, in which attention becomes focused in such a way that things offer only limited affordances. In this reduction, technological enframing creates equivalency between 'sustainable' and 'good'. The moralizing of sustainability makes it similar to the notion of a 'just war' which masks absurdity and inhumanity, becoming the rationale for ad-hoc mechanized solutions. Under this banner, the technological way of thinking pushes the idea of making the most of resources as the pinnacle of ecological awareness. This in turn aligns sustainability with productivity and resource management as the way to the survival of humanity. With this comes an 'anything sustainable is good' mentality, which tends to cover-up other potential concerns such as beauty, culture, and the question of necessity. The genuine need for sustainability makes looking critically at its practices difficult. However this examination is vital as non-holistic sustainability regularly leads to dissociated solutions with new problems often created by the remedy itself; machinery introduced into third world countries and its inevitable unserviceable breakdown is a case in point.

A sustainability that holds optimization and efficiency as its highest virtues is closely aligned with one final characterization of the technological which Heidegger terms, "a challenging-forth."¹⁷ This challenging is manifest in forcibly seeking premeditated ends of the highest yield such as Lt. Col. Tall's 'solution' of a full frontal assault on a fortified position when subtler maneuvers might have proved less costly. Lt. Col. Tall's world of war is a perfect analog to the technological world, as it is a homogenous realm where all problems look the same and human beings are no more valuable than the bullets that will ultimately kill them. Challenging via technology is selecting options that do not actually exist, marking the disappearance of *techne*. With the loss of *techne*, truth is reduced to that which is 'merely correct'¹⁸ and agreement becomes the only measure of the true as significance evaporates.

NO PLACE

The erosion of place is an example of this disappearing truth and is a primary indicator of challenging-forth. For when Nietzsche asks, "How are

we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun?"¹⁹ he identifies the beginnings of emancipation from the 'inconveniences' of place and situation.

In *The Thin Red Line* the loss of potency that can be initiated by human distraction is shown as the island, referred to as 'the rock', is no longer experienced in its fullness. It is not because this locale is any less striking; rather it is that other concerns have become principal. This is made vivid as groups of soldiers move through a series of wildly different and equally breathtaking landscapes that go completely unnoticed as landscape, despite the fact that no combat is going on, each landscape is reduced to a potential battlefield. This example underscores the power of singular attention to obstruct one's openness, in this case rendering a multitude of phenomena invisible.

Environmental consciousness must move in the opposite direction, not becoming clouded by intention and, by definition, remaining open and receptive. Life in the native village shows how this might look, where sustainability is simply concerned being-in-the-world. Place here means climate, seasons, resources, temporality, and culture all as one totality. Understanding is unspoken and lived by coping within the world, a world that is irreducible to the various elements that inform it. Comprehension takes shape as certain objects and actions make sense by way of a deep familiarity that is this life. Learning from this example, it is again important to bear in mind, as Heidegger suggests, "...we do not repeat a beginning by reducing it to something past and now known, which need merely be imitated; no, the beginning must be begun again, more radically, with all the strangeness, darkness, insecurity that attend to a true beginning."²⁰ In other words, true progress requires a leap into the unknown.

THE DARKNESS OF DEATH

In a series of later essays Heidegger speaks of an existential structure called the fourfold, which consists of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. Gathering the fourfold is 'the thing'. Although all aspects of the fourfold are equally important, the

position of 'mortals' as beings "...capable of death as death"²¹, is intriguing, in terms of the role we play in allowing a 'thing' 'to thing', as such, we may perhaps be key in the turning of the technological.

The darkness of a true beginning might be brought on in owning our role as mortals. As beings privy to our own eventual demise, living with knowledge of mortality is one of the most basic distinctions of humanity. Hamlet wondered if it is better "to be or not to be" and realized, in fact, that is *the* question. Finding reason for engaging the difficulties of life under the looming presence of death is in itself significant, whereby undertaking the smallest efforts presuppose something meaningful in those actions. For sustainability, when mortality is not affective, attitudes toward the world have a tendency to drift toward an implicit selfishness, whereby, saving the planet is taken seriously only as it pertains to 'my' survival. Furthermore 'survival' is quite often understood as the perpetuation of life exactly as it stands. Propositions interested in saving 'my' existence, 'my' money, and 'my' lifestyle certainly do not reflect the spirit of the holistic sustainability we should be striving toward. With echoes of Heidegger's concerns regarding leveling, Jean Baudrillard comments on this misguided search:

"Blindly, we dream of defeating death and achieving immortality, whereas that is our most tragic destiny...Whereas living matter has done its utmost for millions of years to wrest things out of sameness, to wrench itself out of this kind of primitive entropy and incest, we are currently, through the very progress of science, recreating the conditions for entropy and incest, and working on the disinformation of the species by cancelling out differences."²²

Covering-up the reality of death, the Modern technological world pushes situatedness and temporality into the shadows. With all actions taken for the sake of some eternally future event, 'ends as ends' are lost and 'life' is viewed as something to be experienced later on, and so it follows that significance and meaning become impossible, as without us as mortals, 'things' cannot be 'things'. Furthermore, mortals are not only those capable of "death as death" but must also be those capable of dying "...indeed continually..."²³ In other words, taken from an existential perspective death becomes scalable, understood as every

event dying to the next. With this understanding a thing is allowed to become an end or foci, and when this occurs it provides "constancy and resistance," emerging as exactly opposite of standing-reserve.²⁴ The commitment to a life that is made up of finite moments within a finite world is the act of resoluteness that gives life meaning. The courage to participate in this temporal structure is critical, confirming death as a real phenomenon, thus reestablishing ends as ends.

Pvt. Witt: (flashback) "I remember my mother when she was dyin', looked all shrunk up and gray. I asked her if she was afraid. She just shook her head. I was afraid to touch the death I seen in her. I couldn't find nothin' beautiful or uplifting about her goin' back to God. I heard of people talk about immortality, but I ain't seen it. I wondered how it'd be like when I died, what it'd be like to know this breath now was the last one you was ever gonna draw. I just hope I can meet it the same way she did, with the same... calm. 'Cause that's where it's hidden - the immortality I hadn't seen."

Mortality awakens care, which is vital to the future of the planet as Heidegger states in 'Building Dwelling Thinking': "... mortals nurse and nurture the things that grow and specially construct the things that do not grow."²⁵ Concern fosters participation, reciprocity, and one's ability to respond genuinely. In everyday coping this type of dealing is known as *phronesis* or practical wisdom.²⁶ Hubert Dreyfus explains:

"Like the *phronemos*, the resolute individual presumably does what is retroactively recognized by others as appropriate, but what he does is not the *taken-for-granted*, average right thing – not what *one* does – but what his past experience leads him to do in that particular Situation. Moreover, as we have seen, since the Situation is specific and the *phronemos*' past experience unique, what he does cannot be *the* appropriate thing. It can only be *an* appropriate thing."²⁷

With *phronesis* the uniqueness of an environment may be recognized and activated, and the skillful 'mortal' dealing is a foundational imperative for a sustainable future.

ENDS AS BEGINNINGS

Pvt. Witt, in full combat gear, runs through thick jungle. Japanese soldiers pursue him. Witt comes into a small clearing and is immediately surrounded by Japanese. He is commanded to lay down his

weapon. (a pregnant pause) Witt raises his rifle. Shots ring out. Witt is dead. Fade.

At first glance this is an enigmatic moment in the film where it would appear Witt, who has been the epitome of attuned respondent -- as native islander, prisoner, stretcher bearer, soldier, captor -- is unskillful in reading a situation. However, contrary to appearances this act is the apotheosis of Witt's attunement. From a Western perspective Witt's act looks to be simple suicide, 'giving up,' as the cultural baggage would have it. But consider again the situation, as he is literally encircled by Japanese soldiers and from this circumstance a world wells up that is steeped in the *ethos* of a Japanese warrior caste. In this world Witt's act is more properly understood as a form of *seppuku*, or Japanese ritual suicide. Reflecting on Witt's life during the film where he is seen to be fully absorbed in every situation crystallizes this revelation. As Witt is drawn up into a world of Japanese warriors, demonstrating *phronesis*, responds with his *only* appropriate action – death.²⁸

Witt's response is significant not only for being the right thing to do at the right time, but also because, like his mother, this is Witt's moment of immortality. Through his experiences Witt discovers there is more to life than staying alive, and by synthesizing his past with this moment he finds a higher ethic in his own death than he ever could have by attempting to flee.

This act might be taken metaphorically as an exemplar for selfless human action, the supreme vision of a mortal. In application perhaps it is analogous to an appropriate response in the face of dire circumstances where clinging to an outmoded lifestyle obstructs a skillful response. For example, the growing reality of peak oil production might be a similar situation where a 'dishonorable' struggle with finite resources is given over to an 'honorable death'. In fact, we may find that the death of oil is not actually the devastating loss we believe it to be, as its demise might spawn rejuvenated local business, increased public transport, and reduced sprawl.²⁹ Like Witt, we too might demonstrate courage and appropriateness by resolutely facing the extinction of our habitual ways of life as they show themselves to be no longer situationally appropriate. The darkness of existential death may be the terror that brings one close again to

physis and the sense of astonishment it conveys, with the moment of salvation coming in facing the terror of a real end, thus beginning again.³⁰

CONCLUSION

Sustainability enframed by technological thinking "...blocks the shining forth and holding sway of truth,"³¹ as technical innovation is substituted for cultural adjustment. In response we must be vigilant and steadfast, acting as mortals on the earth, under the sky, before the divinities so that 'things' remain 'things'.³² If we are to rest on a myopic sustainability ethos of resource management, where for example a Wal-Mart constructed and maintained with little energy output is construed as an ecological venture, we risk the total loss of our humanity. As mortals we dwell in such a way as to 'save the earth,' where save "...means to set something free into its own presencing,"³³ and our "being among things in such a way that they show up thus"³⁴ is a critical point for sustainability as "learning to dwell among things...involves our taking care of them..." and this taking care may "amount to 'rescuing the earth'".³⁵

In this struggle, it is critical that technology, as a freeing of that which cannot free itself, assist us in becoming more involved, with world situated equipment activating and bringing us, as mortals, into greater communion with the land and our places of habitation. Instead of seeking standards and generalized solutions it might be wise to heed Aristotle's advice:

"...we must ...not look for the same precision in everything, but in each case whatever is in line with the subject-matter, and the degree appropriate to the inquiry. A carpenter and a geometrician approach the right-angle in different ways..."³⁶

In this way I believe the essence of technology is to be found in actively reacquainting humans with culture and place via technology that is understood to be an extension of our being, thus disclosing through reciprocal affect, diversity, meaning, and significance within the world and ourselves, moving toward a more robust sustainability and arresting the trend toward the opposite.

The encouraging message of *The Thin Red Line* lies in what it says about the human ability to be appropriate and resolute even in the face of to-

tal annihilation. From this it should be clear that under far less demanding circumstances, we too have the ability to act resolutely in our environments with the promise of truth requiring only that we be able to be filled with wonder:

"Oh my soul let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining."³⁷

A sprouting coconut tree begins the process of gathering a new world. **Fade.**

ENDNOTES

1. Malick is a former philosophy PhD student and teacher. In 1969 he published an English translation of Heidegger's *Essence of Reasons*
2. Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology and Politics," (2004), 14.
3. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Architecture: Presence, Language, Place* (Milan: Skira, 2000) 33.
4. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 35.
5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Seventh ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962).
6. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1959) 14.
7. George Joseph Seidel, *Martin Heidegger and the Pre-Socratics: An Introduction to His Thought* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964).
8. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* 13.
9. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* 16.
10. Heidegger, *Being and Time* 76.
11. Ibid.
12. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* 4.
13. Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
14. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* 27.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid. 16.
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1974) 181.

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20. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* 39.
 21. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 184.
 22. Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Verso, 2001) 28,29.
 23. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 148.
 24. James C. Edwards, "The Thinging of the Thing: The Ethic of Conditionality in Heidegger's Later Work.," in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
 25. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 149.
 26. Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Could Anything Be More Intelligent Than Everyday Intelligibility? : Reinterpreting Division I of Being and Time in the Light of Division II," (2004), 4.
 27. Ibid.
 28. Traditional seppuku would be properly executed through the disembowelment of oneself. However the Samurai code of honor valued self-willed death in general. Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). Vestiges of this are seen even in World War Two as Japanese were known to use rifles and leap from cliffs (Saipan) to complete this 'honorable' end.
 29. Greg Greene, "The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream," (Canada: The Electric Wallpaper Co., 2004).
 30. Michael Haar, "Attunement and Thinking," in *Heidegger: A Critical Reader*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Harrison Hall (Oxford UK; Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1992).
 31. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* 28.
 32. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*.
 33. Ibid. 148.
 34. Charles Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology," in *Heidegger: A Critical Reader*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Harrison Hall (Oxford UK; Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1992), 265.
 35. Ibid.
 36. Aristotle, "Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics," (Port Chester, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12.
 37. Pvt. Edward Train's statement and the closing scene of *The Thin Red Line* Terrence Malick, "The Thin Red Line," (USA: Fox 2000 Pictures, 1999).