



# Un-poetically “Man” Dwells

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## Abstract

A sense of anxiety and ontological insecurity is an inescapable feature of the modern condition. We are threaded with diffuse yearnings for meaningful connections with people and place. Nowhere is this more evident than in Alexander Payne’s 2002 film, *About Schmidt*, the story of Warren Schmidt, 66 year-old retiree, coming face to face with the meaninglessness of life. I proffer an interpretation of this film that draws on the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, with critical interjections inspired by Albert Camus and Michel Foucault. Through Warren Schmidt, we bear witness to the search for meaning and self discovery as a painful and tragically comic journey. Schmidt gropes clumsily to engage life more fully, seemingly out of place at every turn, the antithesis of Heidegger’s notion of dwelling poetically: attending to the plenitude of Being in the World. Schmidt displays feints and flashes of existential questioning and insight that travel to the core of what it means to struggle, what it means to be human. Through the film we ponder the fragility of human connections and the perplexing question of “nearness” in the modern world. Heidegger’s philosophy of Being and dwelling inspires dazzling insights into the modern human condition but, ultimately, its contribution to meaningful collective action is stunted, as it privileges a quiescent ontological search for Being over concern for social relations and lived realities and practicalities of human affairs and encounters.

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What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man does not even think of the *real* plight of dwelling as *the* plight?

– Martin Heidegger

At first blush, the term “dwell” rings quaint, even a tad peculiar, in an age marked by mobility, speed and turbulence (Virilio, 2005). Fixed and bounded notions of place have been challenged (Massey, 1993, 2005), hastened by the “mobilities turn” in social and cultural thought (Urry, 2000; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2006). Yet, dwelling and mobility, as metaphors and material practices, are inescapable bedfellows, coupled in a dialectical dance of global proportions (McIntyre et al., 2006). A palpable sense of this tension is evinced in the title of the popular magazine, *Dwell: At Home in the Modern World*, a title that in this reading carries an implicit question mark.

The thinker who espoused the conundrum of dwelling in the modern world with greatest force is, arguably, Martin Heidegger. Julian Young (2000, 187-188) tells us that “dwelling can plausibly be said to constitute the central topic of the thinking of the late Heidegger.” In his recent book, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World*, Jeff Malpas (2006) develops the sweeping argument that all of Heidegger's thought can be construed as an attempt to articulate the “place of being” (p. 306). No matter how one reacts to Heidegger's existential phenomenology, his philosophy of Being and dwelling hangs like a pall over our heads (Heidegger, 1962, Dreyfus, 1991). Heidegger believed that a sense of “homelessness” and insecurity is an inescapable feature of the modern condition, signaled by *Gestell*, technological objectification, in which the world shows up as resource. To dwell, according to Heidegger, carries with it involvement and engagement in place, contentment and familiarity, and caring for place (Heidegger, 1971a). To dwell, modern man<sup>2</sup> must accept the existential centrality of death, as “finitude is what allows us to discern moral meanings in otherwise transient events” and “throw oneself into what life has to offer before time ... ‘runs out’” (Giddens, 1991, 50). For Heidegger, transcending the “oblivion of being” and embracing the oneness of the fourfold – earth, sky, mortals and divinities – is, above all, a poetic sensibility. In short, an “authentic” and meaningful life entails attending to the plenitude of Being in the World (Young, 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> I use “man” in the title and text of this paper owing to the English translation of Heidegger's 1951 essay “...*dichterisch wohnt der Mensch...*” as “...Poetically Man Dwells...” This is an exceptional case, as I do not embrace use of the term “man” in reference to human being or humankind.

Heidegger’s notion of dwelling permeated my thoughts in viewing Alexander Payne’s 2002 film, *About Schmidt*.<sup>3</sup> It is painful to bear witness to a 66 year-old retiree (played by Jack Nicholson) coming face to face with the meaninglessness of life. Warren Schmidt’s life is the antithesis of dwelling poetically, as he is seemingly out of step at every turn. The film is distressing. To exorcise the torment I decided to face it straight on as an existential statement of the human condition. Seen in this light, the film serves as springboard in a critical humanist reading of aging, place and self, drawing upon and elaborating the notion of dwelling. I hasten to add that I do not embrace Heideggerian philosophy uncritically. Like other terms in Heidegger’s formidable “vocabulary” (Rorty, 1989), dwelling is a complex and freighted concept.

I begin by describing and situating Warren Schmidt, and interpreting his life as a tragic-comedic journey in self discovery with pronounced existential strains. This brings me to an elaboration of Heidegger’s philosophy on dwelling and nearness that conjoins with affective-emotional geographies and film as “extra-representational” artistic expression. I then draw a parallel between Heidegger’s “Being” and Foucault’s “being made subject” which is animated powerfully in *About Schmidt* in the arena of work and retirement. I conclude with a critique of Heidegger’s philosophy of dwelling qua place, accentuating his antimodernist stance and the elision of plurality and difference.

### **Zombie in the Heartland**

Warren Schmidt is portrayed in the film as an older ‘white’ guy, living a middle-class life, in the mid-American town, Omaha, Nebraska. There is ostensibly nothing unique about Schmidt, nothing distinctive that makes him stand out. Nothing, that is, other than blandness. Upon closer inspection there is something more disturbing than run-of-the-mill blandness at play. Schmidt displays an eerie state of emotional blankness much of the time. He is an automaton going through the motions of everyday life zombie-like, somewhere in the nether-world between alive and dead. On occasion, Schmidt’s eerie flatness is interrupted by an emotional outburst: anger, gripping sadness, a sudden misplaced romantic advance. These are short-lived upheavals that hint at a desire to break out, to engage life more fully.

Schmidt is at a crossroads. He has recently retired as Assistant Vice President and Actuary for Woodmen of the World Insurance Company, put out to pasture after decades of dedicated service, replaced by a young, disingenuous whippersnapper. While channel surfing on television Schmidt happens upon an

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<sup>3</sup> *About Schmidt* is a 2002 production of New Line Cinema Productions, Inc., a unit within Time Warner. <http://www.aboutschmidtmovie.com/>

infomercial for Childreach, a humanitarian organization which provides aid and support for impoverished children. The Childreach ad rips at the heartstrings with the pitch: “No, pity and guilt won’t help.” What will help is \$22 per month. Schmidt adopts a Tanzanian foster child. In addition to sending the monthly stipend, Schmidt begins writing letters to his foster child, Ndugu, blissfully unaware that a six year-old Tanzanian boy has no frame of reference for understanding the musings of a self-absorbed, American male retiree. It is through letters to Ndugu that the viewer gains a glimpse of the “inner world” of Warren Schmidt (Bosch, 2003).

Schmidt’s domineering wife, Helen, dies suddenly, just as they are about to embark on a new chapter in their lives: traveling cross country in a recently purchased Winnebago motor home. In wake of the funeral, Schmidt discovers that many years ago Helen had an affair with his best friend, Ray. After 42 years of pampering by Helen, Schmidt does not know how to care for himself. He goes into a downhill slide. Schmidt wishes to visit his beloved daughter, Jeannie, in Denver, in advance of her upcoming wedding. Jeannie balks. Chastened by his daughter’s dismissal, Schmidt takes a road trip solo in the Winnebago.

### **Journey of Self Discovery**

Schmidt’s road trip symbolizes the journey in life – the inexorable journey in aging that often engenders questions about the meaning of life (Moody, 1986). Warren returns to his birthplace, Holdrege, Nebraska. On the very spot where his childhood home once stood is a Tires Plus business establishment, metaphor for the rolling mobility of un-tethered, rootless Americans (Leach, 1999). Schmidt travels to Lawrence, Kansas, to visit his alma mater and fraternity, where he appears as dinosaur from the past. Then back to Nebraska as tourist, skimming over history and place like a skeeter bug on a pond, leading Warren to superficial and stereotypical “insights” about people and places of his home state:

I stopped in at the Custer County Historical Museum in Broken Bow to see their fine collection of arrowheads. Later that same day I happened to meet a real Indian or Native American as they like to be called nowadays. We had a nice chat about the history of the area, and he really opened my eyes. Those people got a raw deal, just a raw deal.

The pinnacle of Warren’s road trip is contemplating his relationship with departed wife, Helen, via nighttime vigil on the roof of his Winnebago. Seated before Hummel figurines (collected by Helen) and votive candles, Schmidt looks to the heavens and asks: “Helen, what did you really think of me deep in your heart? ... I let you down. Can you forgive me?” The pathos is comic. He awakes next morning to an epiphany: “I awoke from my night in the wilderness completely transformed,” writes Schmidt in a letter to Ndugu. “I’m like a new man. For the

first time in years I feel clear. I know what I want. I know what I've got to do. And nothing will ever stop me again." This revelation proves false, the variety that millions of people experience everyday. Nothing has changed really, nothing can change, for, ultimately, Schmidt cannot escape the person he has become.

Fate as the culmination of actions over a lifetime is captured brilliantly in Albert Camus' (1991) essay, "The Myths of Sisyphus." The gods condemn Sisyphus to eternal repetition: rolling a large rock to the top of the mountain, only to see it descend back down. The cycle is repeated ad infinitum. Camus tells us it is the pause between reaching the summit and the downhill descent that is most illuminating: a moment of pure consciousness. Fate is crystallized in this pregnant moment:

At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his stone, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death (Camus, 1991, 121).

Schmidt's midnight epiphany is an attempt to attend. We sense he is on a path, a route that may lead to self discovery and acceptance. Pathos springs from our hope that Schmidt attains what Camus articulates with eloquence: acceptance of who he is, who he has become. An alternative is to hope that Warren Schmidt engages more fully and smoothly in life; in short, that he become someone else. This is a less arresting trajectory anchored in the saccharine desire for films and lives with happy endings. The nagging wish that Schmidt attain self realization and acceptance engages the viewer.

In an erudite essay, "The Meaning of Life and the Meaning of Old Age," Harry Moody (1986) explores the question of meanings at three levels: my life, human life, and the cosmos. In Moody's discussion of literary and philosophical meditations we discern a contrast between a desire for totality, a summing up of the meaning of life in older age, and expressions that eschew any final summation. Nodding in the direction of the former is the radical anxiety of existentialists, which privileges the necessity "to choose, once and for all, the final meaning of our lives in every one of our actions" (p. 24). This tendency finds societal expression in the sanction and practice of older people engaging in reminiscence and so-called life review. Postulated originally by Robert Butler (1963, 65) as a "universal occurrence in older age," reminiscence and life review are touted by gerontologists as therapeutic, as instilling strength and affirmation in later life (e.g. Hendricks, 1995; Ruth et al., 1996, Webster, 1999, Coleman, 1999). Warren Schmidt's solo trip can be interpreted as a road to reminiscence, a sad and comic search for final meaning in a life heretofore bereft of introspection. We see through Schmidt that looking backward for final meaning in one's life can be no substitute for the everydayness of Being in the World. His road to reminiscence exhibits a peculiar

innocence and naiveté, as Warren has failed to attend to people and place throughout his life; thus, Schmidt, taking a road trip at 66 years of age, is attempting to “see” his native state of Nebraska for the very first time. The insight that there may be no final summation – no Archimedean point from which to “see life steadily and see it whole” (Moody, 1986, 26) – does not cross Schmidt’s mind.

### **Dwelling Poetically**

One can begin to grasp the stumbling block in Warren Schmidt’s later life search for meaning via consideration of Heidegger’s philosophy on dwelling. I draw on scholars who explore Heidegger’s later philosophy, especially Julian Young (2002, 2000). Heidegger argues that modern man fails to dwell yet, ontologically, all men dwell. Heidegger is distinguishing here between two notions of dwelling: “existential” and “essential” (Young, 2000, 194). To dwell in the existential sense relates to the experience or feeling of “being at home”, of engaging in, and caring for, place. Essential dwelling, on the other hand, refers to the transcendence of existence, transcendence into the “Other” of beings. Essential dwelling is a quality possessed by all regardless of one’s experiences and feelings. Existential dwelling, then, is the “taking over” into one’s experience and life the truth of essential dwelling (Young, 2000). Why is contemporary man unaware of essential dwelling? Why is it that we, like Warren Schmidt, experience a world threaded with anxiety and insecurity?

The answer rests upon Heidegger’s critique of Western metaphysics (Young, 2002). We moderns are limited by horizons of disclosure – propositions subjected to an “ontic” reality of apparent things and facts – accepted matter-of-factly in terms of a correspondence theory of truth. That is, truth is a property of propositions and statements that correspond to the facts. For this to be possible we must, of course, share background understanding as to the “things” and, hence, “facts,” under consideration (Young, 2002). Beyond such horizons of disclosure related to perspective, Heidegger posits ultimate or transcendental horizons. This raises the thorny question: how does one “know” the world at an ontological level? One finds oneself thrown into a historical-cultural epoch, an “ontological world” where language and social practice constitute limits of intelligibility. The transcendental horizon “elevates its account of the being of beings into *the* (one and only) categorical account of reality itself” (Young, 2002, 29). Truth both reveals and conceals. The error of the metaphysical interpretation of being is that it precludes other possibilities of revealing. Ultimately, truth is more complex than correspondence theory which is dominant in the modern world, the unceasing tide of technological rationality that privileges instrumental means over serious contemplation of ends (Freenberg, 2005). In this milieu, human beings are adept in evading existential questions about self and identity, which may rise to the surface at fateful moments in life (Giddens, 1991), such as the crossroads where Warren

Schmidt finds himself in wake of retirement, death of his wife, Helen, and dismissal by the one person he truly loves, his daughter Jeannie.

Heidegger’s phenomenology challenges us to contemplate and face the mystery of Being in the World (*Dasein*) as a constellation of truths that surround human existence. To this end, Heidegger contrasts two types of thinking: meditative and poetic (Young, 2002). The former is philosophical thinking that, like other forms of discursive reasoning, relies on representation. Philosophical thinking can suggest “mystery” (what truths conceal) but it remains, necessarily, horizon bound. Poetic thinking is intuitive and direct, bringing mystery to presence (Young, 2002). Heidegger remarked during a visit to Provence, “These days in Cézanne’s homeland are worth more than a whole library of philosophy books. If only one could think as directly as Cézanne painted” (cited in Young, 2002, 19). Heidegger seeks to overcome metaphysics by invoking a poetic sensibility that transcends ordinary language. This finds expression in essays that mingle thinking along meditative and poetic lines, such as “Building Dwelling Thinking” (Heidegger, 1971a), “... Poetically Man Dwells ...” (Heidegger, 1971b), “The Origin of the Work of Art” (Heidegger, 1971c), and “The Thing” (Heidegger, 1971d). For Heidegger, poetry breaks open horizons of disclosure, as “it says, means, more than can even be captured in words” (Young, 2000, 196). George Pattison (2000, 190) echoes these sentiments in summing up Heidegger’s later work: “There is certain plausibility in seeing the later Heidegger as essentially a poetic thinker.” This is reinforced by Richard Rorty (1989, 114) who comments that, for Heidegger, “philosophical truth depends upon the very choice of *phonemes*, on the very *sound* of words.”

Heidegger (1971d, 179) calls to our attention the need to “step back from the thinking that merely represents – that is, explains – to thinking that responds and recalls.” And in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” he expresses the view that all art possesses poetic qualities: “*All art*, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially *poetry*” (Heidegger 1971c, 70, emphasis in original). Not all contemporary readers will be enchanted by Heidegger’s elliptical writing style, his love of wordplay, etymology and pre-Socratic Greek thought (Caputo, 1993), nor even enjoy reading poetry for that matter, but many appreciate film as an art which conveys poetic sensibilities, imparting understandings that are “beyond” words, beyond representational thinking. This non- or extra-representational quality of art dovetails with innervating scholarship on affect and emotional geographies, inspired in good measure by a Spinozan-Bergsonian-Deleuzian notion of affect (Deleuze, 1986, 2001; Massumi, 2002; Connolly, 2002; Thrift 2002). Film creates virtual affective fields and vectors which are amplified and channeled, registering and resonating within bodies as emotion (Carter and McCormack, 2006; Aitken and Dixon, 2006).

The climax of the film *About Schmidt* is a case in point. The ending scene suggests the *possibility* that Schmidt attains a poetic bearing, grasping that he is part of the larger world. In returning to Omaha the meaninglessness of his life hits home:

I know we're all pretty small in the big scheme of things. And I suppose the most you can hope for is to make some kind of difference. But what kind of difference have I made? What in the world is better because of me? ... I am weak. And I am a failure. There's just no getting around it. Relatively soon I will die, maybe in 20 years, maybe tomorrow. It doesn't matter. Once I am dead and everyone who knew me dies too, it will be as though I never even existed. What difference has my life made to anyone? None that I can think of. None at all.

Right on cue, at this nadir moment, Schmidt notices a post from afar. It is a handwritten letter from Sister Nadine, Order of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, acknowledging his support of Childreach and foster child, Ndugu. Sister Nadine provides some information about little Ndugu and includes a crayon drawing created by him: two stick figures holding hands under sunny blue sky, Ndugu and Schmidt together. Schmidt's eyes well up; he breaks down in waves of sobbing tears. The film ends.

This cathartic scene is rife with ambivalence. What are we, the viewers, to take from this emotional climax? That Schmidt realizes his life matters after all? That he has found redemption? That he is attending to the World, entwined in the great round dance of belonging? Or does this scene indicate that his tenuous link with Ndugu is indicative of a person wandering aimlessly through life, threaded with vague anxieties and diffuse yearnings, failing to attend and engage meaningfully with people and place?

Nearness lies at the heart of Heidegger's notion of dwelling. Edward Casey (1997) argues that "a preoccupation with the nature of nearness spans the entirety of Heidegger's work" (p. 272), for "dwelling or inhabiting is residing in the nearness of things" (p. 273). Nearness in a Heideggerian sense does not refer strictly to proximity or distance but, rather, accentuates familiarity, intimacy and care in responding to the gathering of "things" (not mere objects) within the unity of the fourfold: earth, sky, divinities, and mortals (Heidegger, 1971c). The opening and ending scenes in *About Schmidt* are striking bookends that illuminate the conundrum of dwelling cum nearness in the modern world.

The opening frames of the film create an affective field that conveys a tonality of loneliness, disconnection, and alienation. Alexander Payne begins with a stark, oblique aerial view of Omaha neighborhoods with downtown visible in the background. It is a grey, overcast day. Leafless trees line empty streets. Silence

(there is no musical track). No movement of any kind. The camera switches to a second shot: a ground level view of train tracks running beneath an overpass adjacent to downtown. No train is in sight; the silence is broken by the lonesome wail of a distant train. Third shot: backyards of two older, well-worn homes situated near downtown. We hear dogs barking in the distance. This is followed by a sequence of seven brief images of downtown Omaha, with the landmark Woodmen Insurance building progressively dominating the frame.

Not a single human being is visible in these motionless scenes of Omaha. Payne’s introduction to place consists of ten images in forty seconds depicting a grey, eerily quiet, people-less town. For the remainder of the film, then, we witness Warren Schmidt’s disconnection from people and place, his awkward, bumbling attempts to attend and find meaning. Schmidt displays none of the natural ease and bearing, a sense of place, one might expect of an older person who has lived in Nebraska all their lives. Schmidt appears placeless, a “homeless” being who seemingly hails from anywhere or nowhere.

This brings “home,” so to speak, the pathos of nearness conveyed in the climactic scene. Throughout life Schmidt has failed to attend to that which is near. The film ends with Schmidt’s cathartic response to something ostensibly remote, a young Tanzanian boy, a sponsored foster child, whom he has never met. Importantly, I think, it is Ndugu’s crayon drawing of himself and Schmidt holding hands under sunny blue sky, a poetic expression, which evokes nearness, bringing Schmidt to tears.

Ndugu’s artistic expression can be contrasted with Schmidt’s serendipitous path to his foster child shown early in the film. Sitting at home in his La-Z-Boy recliner and channel surfing, Schmidt happens upon a TV infomercial for Childreach and its stereotypical representation of impoverished Third World children. Are such television images indicative of attenuated or “thinned-out” place, removed from dwelling as “thickly” lived experience (Sack 1997)? Casey (2001a, 684-685) argues that thinned-out spaces lack the “rigor and substance of thickly lived places,” and he cites television and the World Wide Web as exemplar: “Think of the way in which programs on television or items on the Web melt away into each other as we switch channels or surf at leisure. In such circumstances, there is a notable *lability of place* that corresponds to a fickle self who seeks to be entertained”(emphasis in original).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Casey’s (1997) argument seemingly rides upon a tidy separation of “real” and “mediated” place, failing to consider the collapse of the “real-reel” binary in contemporary culture (e.g. Baudrillard, 1994; Aitken and Zonn, 1994; Cresswell and Dixon, 2002).

Schmidt's disconnection from that which is nearby and his grasp for meaning via a tenuous and fragile connection is seemingly scripted from Heidegger's (1971c, 163-164) thoughts on nearness expressed in "The Thing," an essay penned in 1950, long before globalization and time-space compression entered the lexicon:

*All distances in time and space are shrinking. ... The peak of this abolition of every possible remoteness is reached by television, which will soon pervade and dominate the whole machinery of communication. ... Yet, the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness. What is least remote from us in point of distance, by virtue of its picture on film or its sound on the radio, can remain far from us. What is incalculably far from us in point of distance can be near to us. ... What is happening here when, as a result of the abolition of great distances, everything is equally far and equally near? What is this uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near – is, as it were, without distance? ... What about nearness? How can we come to know its nature? Nearness, it seems, cannot be encountered directly. We succeed in reaching it rather by attending to what is near (emphasis in original).*

### **The "Subject" of Work and Retirement**

In an intriguing essay, Hubert Dreyfus (2003, 30) draws parallels between the thought of Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault, the former accentuating "how in our modern world *things* have been turned into *objects*," the latter focusing on "*selves* and how they became *subjects*" (emphasis in original). Heidegger's "Being" and Foucault's "power" are neither fixed entities nor structures; they are incarnated in historical social practices that constitute the very ways that people act, speak, and relate to one another (Dreyfus, 2003). In viewing the film *About Schmidt* I was struck by this parallel: Schmidt's "being" is indeed that of being made "subject" in the very process of individualization, of becoming who he is.

This relates to Foucault's overarching mission "to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subject," including "the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject" (Foucault, 1994, 126). In Heideggerian terms, drifting along with the crowd enacting stereotypical roles unthinkingly is indicative of "inauthentic" existence. Judith Butler (1997, 2) elaborates and extends Foucault's discursive formation of the subject in *The Psychic Life of Power*, exploring the paradox that "power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings we are." That is, "Power not only *acts on* a subject but, in a transitive sense, *enacts* the subject into being" (Butler, 1997, 13).

Butler’s insight helps us understand Warren Schmidt as a character (or caricature) of modern life, a fragmented self whose subject positions offer moving images of conformity, control and self-surveillance. Schmidt is attached to his own subordination, rendering attempts to “break out” all the more meaningful and poignant. Here I illustrate Schmidt as subject in the realm of the venerable institution of work and its near relation, retirement. Schmidt first appears sitting robotically in his sterile office, staring blankly at a wall clock. The second hand moves with mechanical precision. At precisely 5:00 PM Schmidt stands up and exits the office. This is his last day of work at Woodmen of the World Insurance Company; one imagines Schmidt following this precise routine for 35 years. Schmidt’s bodily movements are paced and stiff, paralleling the hands of a wall clock. That he is employed as an actuary is no accident, as this reduces human life to one entrance (birth) and one exit (death), in a table of precisely ordered numbers: death rates, survivorship, remaining years of life at age x.

Schmidt has been a dutiful employee – the ideal subject – working steadily, never rocking the boat at Woodmen. Pride in yeoman’s duty at Woodmen’s is tinged with regrets, as Schmidt relays youthful aspirations to foster child, Ndugu, in his first letter:

When I was a kid I used to think maybe I was special, that somehow destiny tapped me to be a great man. Not like Henry Ford or Walt Disney or somebody like that, but somebody, you know, semi-important.

Schmidt had visions of being a notable captain of industry, but “life” got in the way, as he lays blame for not achieving his dream at the feet of his authoritative wife, Helen.

I was planning to start my own business someday. Build it up into a big corporation, watch it go public, maybe make the Fortune 500. I was going to be one of those guys you read about. But somehow it just didn’t work out that way. You’ve got to remember I had a top-notch job at Woodmen and a family to support. I couldn’t exactly put them at risk. Helen, that’s my wife, she wouldn’t have allowed it.

It is at the critical juncture of retirement that a burst of anger and resentment rises to the surface in this heretofore placid “company” man. In writing to Ndugu, Schmidt unexpectedly explodes:

I am 66 years old and recently retired as Assistant Vice President and Actuary at Woodmen of the World Insurance Company. [Pause] And God dammit, if they didn’t replace me with some kid who – all right, so maybe he’s got a little theory under his belt and can put a few numbers in the computer – but I could tell right off that he doesn’t

know a damn thing about genuine, real world risk assessment, or managing a department for that matter. The cocky bastard!

Schmidt visits his young, hot shot replacement at work and, to his dismay, discovers the new guy has no interest in learning anything from him. He quips: "My business degree from Drake ought to be good for something." Disillusioned Schmidt exits the Woodmen building only to find his office files piled up, waiting to be hauled away as trash. Schmidt is obsolete, discarded for a "new" and "improved" model. Our age-graded society prizes productive adulthood. Retirement, ballyhooed and justified as a period of earned leisure and deferred self-actualization (Ekerdt, 1986), often entails diminution in status and lessened feelings of self worth.

On this score, a scene from Schmidt's retirement dinner is especially poignant. Ray, long-time co-worker and friend, delivers a toast to Warren on "what it all means," striking a chord with accent notes on devotion and work ethic. In slightly tipsy voice:

What means something, what really means something, Warren, is the knowledge that you devoted your life to something meaningful. To being productive. And working for a fine company. Hell, one of the top-rated insurance carriers in the nation. ... At the end of his career if a man can look back and say, "I did it – I did my job," then he can retire in glory and riches far beyond the monetary kind. So, all of you young people here, take a good look at a very rich man.

What is most revealing is Schmidt's response, a scene that exemplifies the artistry and subtlety of film in conveying the ineffable. After showing a faint smile and shaking hands with Ray, Schmidt slips quietly from the dinner proceedings and walks in paced fashion to the restaurant bar where, sitting alone, he orders a vodka gimlet. This existential gem of a moment is played in understated perfection by Jack Nicholson. The slight hint of scorn on Warren's face places him as the tragic hero conscious of being made subject, conscious of his torture. Camus (1991, 121) writes in his meditation, "The Myth of Sisyphus:"

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? *The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd.* But it is tragic only in the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn (emphasis mine).

Warren Schmidt as tragic hero, illustrated in his knowing walk to the restaurant lounge, calls to mind Peggy Lee’s hit song, *Is That All There Is?* In reviewing life’s disappointments – from childhood to the anticipated last breath – Miss Lee returns repeatedly to the existential refrain:

Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that’s all there is, my friends,  
then let’s keep dancing. Let’s break out the booze and have a ball. If  
that’s all there is.

In viewing this scene in *About Schmidt*, I cannot help but hear Peggy Lee’s haunting voice playing as background music in the restaurant lounge.

### **The Holy Search**

Alexander Payne’s film, *About Schmidt*, is a moving portrait of the predicament of dwelling in the modern world. The film strikes an existentialist chord, which resonates when passed through Heidegger’s phenomenology, Camus’s absurdist register, and Foucault’s subject. It is Heidegger’s thought which takes center stage in the paper. This is not without disquiet, for he is recognized as one of the most imaginative and controversial thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Wolin, 1993, 1990). Invoking Heidegger in an essay on the problematic of dwelling and place raises two critical concerns that I discuss in this final section: his antimodernist stance and the elision of plurality and difference.

We see the problem of dwelling embodied and emplaced in Warren Schmidt. Heidegger’s philosophy helps us diagnose the “malady” but what is the cure? Like others, David Harvey (1993; 1989), Doreen Massey (2005) and Troy Paddock (2004) take Heidegger to task on this front. Harvey (1993, 11) articulates the conundrum: “What might the conditions of ‘dwelling’ be in a highly industrialized, modernist and capitalist world? He [Heidegger] recognizes explicitly that we cannot turn back to the Black Forest farmhouse, but what is it that we might turn to?” Heidegger rejects Enlightenment principles and modernist logic and calls for Being in the world as firmly rooted in place (dwelling), an organic and spiritual bond between people and things qua place (“authentic” community). Communitarian and exclusionary impulses in this romanticized, conservative view are notable. Heidegger’s own life, of course, is a case in point. In an arena of tangled debate, many (but not all) scholars argue that Heidegger’s philosophy cannot be separated from his personal politics, namely championing National Socialism, joining the Nazi Party upon being posted Rector of Freiburg University in 1933, and failing, after the war, to repudiate the Nazi regime (see Pattison, 2000; Wolin, 1993, 1990; Ott, 1993; Farías, 1989).<sup>5</sup> Pattison (2000, 46)

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty is a well known philosopher who does not adhere to this view. When asked about his position on the link between Heidegger’s fascism and his philosophy, Rorty responded: “I

presents a balanced account of views regarding links between Heidegger's philosophy and his personal politics and history, and then concludes the chapter with an ominous, if not hyperbolic, question: "Can one go any way at all 'with' Heidegger without falling under his spell and becoming vulnerable to analogous seductions, even if they will only rarely have as terrible outcomes as the events of 1933?"

Heidegger's focus on dwelling runs counter to contemporary relational views of place championed most strenuously by Massey (2005). She holds up Heidegger's thought as privileging the local and rooted: "It is for me, the real difficulty of Heidegger's reformulation of space as place ... in the end, Heidegger's notion of place remains too rooted, too little open to the externally relational" (Massey, 2005, 183). This engenders a persistent counterposition of space and place, a misleading separation between *place* (real, everyday, lived, grounded, secure) and *space* (abstract, universal, ungrounded, threatening).

An understanding of the world in terms of relationality, a world in which the local and the global really are "mutually constitutive," renders untenable these kinds of separation. The "lived reality of our daily lives" is utterly dispersed, unlocalised, in its sources and in its repercussions. The degree of dispersion, the stretching, may vary dramatically between social groups, but the point is that the geography will not be simply territorial (Massey, 2005, 184).

I amend a question posed by Massey (183-184): "Where would Warren Schmidt draw the line around the lived reality of his daily life?" Sidestepping the sheer complexity of Massey's rhetorical query, we *can* say that Schmidt's "lived reality" stretches, however tenuously, to Childreach and a village in Tanzania, home of Ndugu. Attending to, and caring for, are pivotal in Heidegger's philosophy of dwelling. In moving beyond place as bounded, in promoting a relational view of place, Massey (2005, 186) makes a poignant remark apropos here: "Why do we so often and so tightly associate care with proximity? Even those who write of care for the stranger so often figure that relationship as face-to-face."

Richard Wolin's withering and scathing critique of the political philosophy implicit in Heidegger's thought is a provocative work. Wolin (1990, 14-15) captures and crystallizes in stirring language a nagging disquietude about Heidegger's philosophy:

The chief aim of the Heideggerian polis is to make the world safe for the flourishing of Being – not human action. It is our contention that

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think Heidegger's philosophy and his politics can be explained on the basis of some of the same biographical facts. But I do not think the politics contaminate the philosophy" (Mendieta, 2006, 33).

the interests of the former and the latter not only fail to coincide, but in fact prove inimical to one another. In his political thought, Heidegger willfully sacrifices the plurality and difference of human practical life on the altar of an atavistic Eleanic totem – the totem of “Being.” And, thus, the requisites of human action as an autonomous sphere of life prove unable to come into their own in face of the all-consuming nature of the ontological search. ... The precarious potentials of political life are thereby left to wither under the shadow of this holy ontological quest.

Wolin is referring to Heidegger’s post-*Kehre* (Turn) radical antihumanism that, ironically, vitiates his earlier claims to existential concreteness and historicity (*Being and Time*). The agency of man is swept away by the oppressive omnipotence of Being: “it is not *we* who are ultimately responsible for the outcome of our actions ... rather, it is the ‘destiny of Being’” (Wolin, 1990, 153). This is a transcendent, mystical outlook in which humankind must be receptive and ready for the call of Being, a quiescent posture exemplified in Heidegger’s famous statement in his 1966 *Spiegel* interview: “philosophy will not be able to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavor. Only a god can save us” (cited in Wolin, 1990, 155).

In radically privileging ontology as the holy search for Being over the “merely” ontic, the messy world of human affairs and encounters, Heidegger’s philosophy “lacks the all-important counterweight of *the Other*” (Wolin, 1990, 149, citing Levinas, 1969, emphasis in original). This is illustrated in the film *About Schmidt*, for there may be others in the frame but the film is, after all, about Schmidt, all about his grasping search for meaning. Alexander Payne emplaces the viewer in the stunted life-world of this older, middle-class, ‘white’ guy, living in a mid-American town, a person for whom we feel empathy owing to his bumbling, “pathetic” nature even as we are cognizant of his privileged position from the standpoint of gender, social class and race. In its obsessive attention directed toward Schmidt the film mirrors, in some fashion, Heidegger’s obsession with the holy search for Being. In failing to attend to difference and plurality, Heidegger’s philosophy elides social relations and the lived materiality and practicalities of being in the world.

This elision of the social and political extends to contemporary philosophers and scholars who approach place within a Heideggerian embrace (Casey, 2001a, 2001b, 1997; Malpas, 2006, 1999; Young, 2002, 2000). In *Place and Experience*, Jeff Malpas (1999), for example, makes the powerful phenomenological argument that “the human relationship to place is a fundamental structure in what makes possible the sort of life that is characteristically human” (p. 13), yet also tells us that he does not attempt “any real investigation of the vexed

question of the ‘politics of place’ that seems to dominate so much discussion” (p. 15). Heidegger’s philosophy of Being and dwelling inspires dazzling insights about the modern human condition but, ultimately, is stunted in terms of contributing to meaningful collective action in the arena of public life (Rorty, 1989,120).

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