

11-25-2016

## The God-Camera of Theology and Memory in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*

Sherry Coman  
*Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, scoman@wlu.ca*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

 Part of the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Coman, Sherry (2016) "The God-Camera of Theology and Memory in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*," *Consensus*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol37/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

## The God-Camera of Theology and Memory in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*

Sherry Coman<sup>1</sup>

In his very personal film *The Tree of Life*,<sup>2</sup> American master filmmaker Terrence Malick presents a unique vision of how the moving image embodies and expresses what memory does and how it can work itself upon the subjective review of one's own life. This vision evolves in rapidly unfolding tidal images. The object he uses to set these images in motion suggests the earliest formative beginnings of the medium of film itself: a single flame behind glass. A votive candle set down in an otherwise barren kitchen is the first indication of grief as a dominant emotional context of the film. Jack, a successful architect/engineer, a builder of buildings in a city empire sets down the votive candle and stares into it. His physical world and the world of his memory are filled with the transparencies of glass and of mirrors, of doorways and of diaphanous curtains, through which life and light stream. The filmmaker, engaging these signs and symbols, reinvents them to bring together ideas of building and creativity, of suffering and guilt, of redemption and new creation. Jack the character and Malick the filmmaker explore and conquer grief-laden memory through which we experience the creative movement of God.

*The Tree of Life* breaks many traditions of the North American film industry in ways which will be explored. Terrence Malick, a notorious recluse, released the film without anything to guide audiences in understanding it, except very explicit notes for how it must be projected.<sup>3</sup> There are no interviews, nothing which might help us interpret the work. The only clue we are given is a quotation from Job 38:4a, 7 which appears at the very beginning of the film: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (KJV) As this paper will demonstrate, the textual prologue from Job acts as a portal through which we might glimpse Malick's meaning and through which we can enter the filmmaker's vision of God-as-artist. Another clue might be in the 'tree of life' title and the frequent moments of interaction with a tree outside the home of the family whose story is being told, invoking Genesis 2 and 3 and Revelation 22, where trees provide a guiding symbol of God's provision of abundant wellbeing in a fully restored creation. Biblical image and event are at the heart of the director's method with his film. For Christian viewers and perhaps adherents of other religious traditions, there is an opportunity to reflect on how Malick offers us a theology of creation and recreation, a chance to not only observe but participate in a vision of how God works in us to restore ourselves and our world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sherry Coman is a writer, educator and story editor with experience in theatre and film as the author of her own plays, screenplays and fiction, and as the consultant on story editing and film production for clients ranging from young new filmmakers, to emerging playwrights and established international film producers.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tree of Life*. (Terrence Malick. Fox Searchlight Pictures, USA. 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See Oliver Lyttleton, "Terrence Malick Wrote A Letter Of Instruction To Every Projectionist Showing 'The Tree of Life'", *IndieWire*, 3 June, 2011, <http://www.indiewire.com/2011/06/terrence-malick-wrote-a-letter-of-instruction-to-every-projectionist-showing-the-tree-of-life-118233/>

Exploring the film's construction shot-by-shot in its first moments provides insight into how the vision is established. "Brother, Mother. It was they who led me to your door." These words are the first we hear in the hushed voice of the character whose story we will be in. They are spoken overtop the image of a vibrant orange flame which might signify the origin of all being.

After the image of the glowing flame, the next thing we see is a young girl on a farm, looking in wonder at the world around her. We hear the voice of the adult mother in the film saying, "The nuns taught us there are two ways through life." Terrence Malick and editor Mark Yoshikawa place the pauses very carefully in all of the narration that occurs in this opening sequence. One of those pauses occurs now, as we look on the image of this same girl holding a baby lamb. While we see her, the narration continues, "The way of nature...." We then cut to a close-up of the sun, and then to an image of a sunflower as the voice adds, "...and the way of grace. We have to choose which one you'll follow." The voice pauses as we return to the girl with the animals and a moment in which she holds her hand out towards cattle, flexing and curling her own hand and examining it. The narration then continues: "Grace doesn't try to please itself." Again another small pause as the image of the girl is joined now from behind by the figure of a man, someone we immediately assume to be a father. The woman's voice then says, "It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked." Again another pause. We now see the girl being held by the father, with her head draped over his shoulder. We hear, "It accepts insults and injuries."

There is then a fade to black and a fade up into the 1950s world of the story in which the girl we have been watching is now the grown mother whose voice we are hearing. We see her from behind, swinging on a rope swing hanging from a tree. There are several elliptical edits<sup>4</sup> of her pushing and playing on the swing with the second of three boys in the family, who is the focus of the film's emotional memory. (He is never named in the storytelling, but is listed in the end credits as "R.L."). A dog enjoys their play. It is brief, and then the sequence cuts to inside the kitchen of the house that is nearby.

R.L. and the younger brother (also not named in the film but listed in the credits as 'Steve') are going to a window in the kitchen where the curtains are blowing back -- we see them from behind. Then we see for the first time, also from behind again, the father character. R.L. and Steve continue to look out the window. The mother enters and as we move in on her face, her voice continues the narration. "Nature only wants to please itself." With this the camera track-pans around to the reverse image (replacing what would normally be a simple cut or reverse shot) to show the father's face for the first time as he says grace over the food they are about to eat. It is in this image that we also first see the oldest son, Jack, whose story we are in. The father and the oldest son are first presented side by side, grouping them as similar characters. We then cut back to the mother's face as we hear her say, "Get others to please it too."

---

<sup>4</sup> An elliptical edit is one in which the passage of time is compressed by putting two seemingly sequential images together in a way that shortens the narrative experience of what is being portrayed. Quite often, elliptical editing is used to help focus story. In *The Tree of Life*, however, editor Yoshikawa and others working with Malick are instead using the compression to *elongate* a moment. Our expectation of compression is fooled in us by the extension of similar images, so that we dwell in the moment longer emotionally than we might if we were primarily focused on story. For more on elliptical editing, see D. Bordwell, K. Thompson and J. Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), p. 285.

Until now, and continuously, running underneath image and voiceover, is a choral excerpt from John Tavener's "Funeral Canticle." It lends the film an immediate ethereal quality that helps to underscore that we are in some liminal world of memory and history.

Two narrative lines continue: the mother's voiceover narration and, running underneath, the blessing on the meal being said by the father, heard only fragmentally. His words "in loving and faithful service" are heard over the mother's face associating her with this idea, even while her own narration quickly reverts our attention back to the way of nature. For the next moment, the voice of the father in blessing is in dialogue with the mother's narration and with the choral language of the "Funeral Canticle." As she speaks of the harsh way of nature, he is petitioning for God's grace on the family. "Likes to lord it over them," she says, while we hear the father say, "bless these boys" and while the music reminds us that all of this is happening in a context of death, a loss we have not yet been introduced to but which somehow circles in and through all that we are seeing.

The sequence cuts outside again as the mother pulls the eldest boy up from the ground in play. "To have its own way," her voice continues over a handheld shot of the whole family playing after supper. "It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it." Instead of an image of an unhappy man, we see instead the evidence of a shining world: the mother being chased down the street by her boys, playfully.<sup>5</sup> "And love is smiling through all things," she says as she bobs and weaves among them. We return to the tree in the yard where the eldest boy is hanging from a bough that has a rope and tire suspended from it. The camera moves up into the boughs of the tree and moves almost like the wind within it. We briefly glimpse R.L. and Jack in its branches. We too are inside the tree.

Then comes perhaps one of the single most heart-breaking moments of the film and the image marking the end of the first small unit of it. The camera is moving behind R.L. as the mother's narration continues. "They taught us," she says, meaning the nuns from her earlier sentence, "that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end." The bad end of R.L., whom the film will depict as being full of grace, provides the catastrophe at the heart of the film's memory. Even as we hear these words, the boy is looking half-back at us over his shoulder in a way that feels ominous. "I will be true to you,..." the mother continues as the image goes first to a plunging dramatic waterfall and then back in to the heights of the tree, before briefly fading to black. We hear the rest of the sentence "...whatever comes" over the footsteps of a man bringing a telegram to the late 1960s house of the mother and father.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Just as Malick's use of elliptical editing allows an inversion of a technique normally employed by directors, Malick's use of voiceover and image is different from traditional methods. Voiceover often describes something we are seeing or provides the thoughts of a character. In this case, the voiceover does neither, but presents a condition of the characters, an action of being in prayer. The inversion of traditional film techniques has been occurring gradually over the course of Malick's film career. See Matt Soller Zeitz, "Your Guide to Terrence Malick's 'Tree of Life,'" *Salon*, 2 July, 2011, [http://www.salon.com/2011/07/02/watching\\_tree\\_of\\_life/](http://www.salon.com/2011/07/02/watching_tree_of_life/). For more on Malick's unconventional approaches see Bilge Ebiri, "Growing The Tree of Life: Editing Malick's Odyssey", *They Live By Night*, 12 October 2011, <https://ebiri.blogspot.ca/2011/10/growing-tree-of-life-editing-malicks.html>. In the article, Ebiri interviews the editors of the film.

<sup>6</sup> The use of two contrasting shots side by side: the plunging waterfall followed by looking up into the trees creates the sense of vertical line. The previous shot of R.L. walking away from us provides a horizontal line. In this way, Malick has essentially formed a visual "Cross" out of images, at the moment that he is revealing R.L.'s death.

The telegram carries the news of R.L.'s death as an adult, that provides us with the context of our journey.

In less than three minutes, Terrence Malick and his collaborators have established a richly layered and highly nuanced preview of everything we are about to see, entirely in poetic, imagistic and non-narrative methods of filmmaking. Like the facade of a gothic cathedral, in which one can read the entire architectural language of what is inside, these opening minutes are the portal we pass under into Malick's world of memory, offering us a full map of its narrative content and aesthetic vision. They also draw us into the journey of spiritual transformation which Jack, the eldest brother and main character, will experience.

The words, "brother, mother. It was they who led me to your door," at the very start of the sequence I've described, invite us into the emotional and spiritual centre of the film's preoccupation, for it is these two characters who are acting as the way in which grace invites the character of Jack, the storyteller, to be in relationship with God. Jack was led to the door of knowing God by his brother and his mother. (Later, in a very overt use of symbols, Malick actually places a doorframe between Jack's life in Houston, and his imagined life of reconciliation with his family.) We understand, by inference, that he has fallen away from that relationship. The memory play of the architect/engineer Jack and the memory play of Malick's film I believe are an attempt to get it back, a painful and loving elegy to faith lost and sought again, and the transforming way in which remembered grace, embodied through memory and sought through repentance and forgiveness, transforms the lives of the characters. Perhaps even Malick himself.<sup>7</sup>

Even before that line, "brother, mother, it was they who led me to your door," we have had a strong sign of a biblical or theological context in the form of the Job quotation that appears over black, and in place of the opening credits for the film. Since the opening credits in a film usually provide a context of who the contributing artists are, Malick is subtly positioning God's voice as the 'artist'. The text is from the King James version in which God says to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? (38:4a) and "when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (38:7) Malick omits the "tell me if you have understanding" as well as verses 5 and 6. These omissions are notable because they remove the more punitive or potentially patronizing voice of God which might distract the viewer into believing the film we are about to see is about a punishing God.<sup>8</sup>

In order to emphasize the creativity of God as creator, Malick disengages from traditional North American filmmaking techniques, which include long or wide establishing shots, medium shots and the use of moving shots to reveal information or show connectivity between people and places. Similarly, traditional film editing allows for match cuts (images

---

<sup>7</sup> I will not discuss here the way in which the film reflects the events of Malick's own life. However, that information and influence is easily found. See Drew Taylor, "12 Things You Need To Know About The Making Of Terrence Malick's 'The Tree Of Life,'" *IndieWire*, 27 May, 2011, <http://www.indiewire.com/2011/05/12-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-making-of-terrence-malicks-the-tree-of-life-118355/> (Item 07).

<sup>8</sup> The omission of verses 5 and 6 becomes is more surprising when it is considered what these verses use as image: measuring the line of the foundations of the earth, its sunk bases, its cornerstones. Malick has left out verses which would have provided a nice foreshadowing of the profession of his main character, an architect/engineer who measures cornerstones and sinks foundational bases. Perhaps these verses provided the inspiration for that choice.

responding to other images) which create rhythms to be established in the narrative and the emotional lines that the audience follows.<sup>9</sup>

Malick and his collaborators abandon these conventions almost entirely. Instead, we are presented with camera and editing choices that put a priority on the emotional relationship between the camera and the characters. The camera becomes a kind of omniscient presence, a God-figure within the film construction. All of the characters in this film are first introduced from behind. The camera swoops in on them and observes them, moving about like the butterfly which lands delicately on the outstretched hand of the mother on the street only to move off again somewhere else. The camera is the omniscient heavenly being who delights in creation, who seeks to find and hold each character -- and succeeds, or doesn't. The camera's elasticity is entirely about being present everywhere at once, sometimes mirroring and accompanying the behaviour of the people, as when it follows the running boys around the exterior of their house jubilantly and dives with them into water. The camera is a God-everywhere character, a way of seeing which can be seen as an animation of the breaking of the 'fourth wall' in the cinematic or theatrical experience.<sup>10</sup> It is as if Malick and cinematographer Lubezki are trying to destroy that wall by forcing us into an *experience* of camera more than letting it be our storyteller.

If we accept this idea of the camera as God, then much of the voiceover narrative can be experienced as God being present to the voices of prayer whenever and wherever they happen to occur. The mother's "was I false to you?" (which comes about ten minutes after the sequence described) is the question that initiates the journey of the film. It parallels Job's calling on God to name his iniquity (Job 37), which calls God into dialogue with Job. God's discourse in Job 38-41 does not answer Job's question ("what is my iniquity to deserve this?"), but instead demonstrates for Job the utter complexity of the cosmos and all that it is. It conveys a cosmos whose brutality and combustion and rage and silence are far too vast and complex to be embraced by the human mind. In Job, the voice of God is rhetorical, the answer to each instance of "were you there..." that God poses is obvious -- no, Job wasn't there. Neither was Malick's mother figure or his father. There is no answer to such intense suffering except to look at the history of creation and say that suffering and extreme moments of joy are experienced by all of these characters during the film as part of the very essence of what creation is. Creation flows in movements of brutality and grace working side by side. The dinosaur of the primordial section of the creation sequence of the film is both brutal and gentle -- in the same moment. The beings God created are always capable of both of these things. The mother tells us that, "we must choose the path we take" of nature or grace. But as the film will unfold for us, choosing the path of grace does not mean that we solve forever the problem of our wellbeing; however, the film suggests that such a choice is more likely to continue to engender and create goodness in ourselves and others.

---

<sup>9</sup> For more on camera and editing conventions, see Bordwell and Thompson, pp 112-217.

<sup>10</sup> 'The fourth wall'. In the theatre or the cinema, there is the invisible wall that separates the viewer from the action being presented. In cinema, that fourth wall is the screen itself -- the surface on which the images are being projected. For more on fourth wall theory, see Elizabeth Bell, *Theories of Performance*, Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008.

Some critics have suggested that Malick is setting up opposing values in nature and grace.<sup>11</sup> But with the Job in mind, something else is possible: that Malick is actually setting up a binary value, an inextricable relationship between the two as being part of how God works. Grace and nature participate equally in creation, each in a constant role as an active agent in God's purpose. In the film, it is too reductive to assume that nature is only associated with the hard, commanding nature of the father's character. It is as if Malick is responding to the nuns of the mother's memory, by showing a father who is oppressive yes, but nonetheless has his own moments of grace, visible in his self-awareness and self-honesty, and his confessional moments to himself and his children. One of these occurs after he hears of the news of the death of his son. "I made him feel shame – my shame. Poor boy. Poor boy," he says.

Each of these sequences describe the complex ways in which the memory play and the theological themes of the film are woven. The character Jack also has a personal relationship with God that the film describes in the sequence just after the words spoken by the father above. A very long shot shows the father moving away from us in the long distance through the thick of a wood and seemingly into a lighter place. A hint of the upcoming creation sequence is given then. After another few frames of black, the creation flame of the opening is repeated, followed by a rapidly moving colour field that evolves through many contemporary colours (perhaps neon in fast motion) to primordial colours of orange and black. The adult Jack's voice is heard saying, "How did you come to me?" (The 'you' of this sentence is understood to be God.) A fast-motion view of traffic on a freeway shot without sound is followed by the same voice saying, "in what shape?" as we cut to a fast move-in on a wooden door ajar, met by a hard edit to a gate frame sitting in the middle of nowhere and the adult Jack, now visible for the first time, looking back at it, over his shoulder, as if unable to go through. Over a shot of birds dispersing in sunlight, he adds, "what disguise?" In each of these moments we see how binary the experience and journey of all of the characters are. The mother, the father and the adult Jack are each the Job of the movie's witness and the God-camera is always weaving between them, inviting them to be both expressions and respondents of the way in which nature and grace work in God's world. Each character will speak in audible prayer that we hear, and God-the-camera, responds visually, in movement that is often one of a circling embrace.

The primary emotion of the memory play, however, is grief. It is evoked in that plea of the mother's near the end of the opening, "was I false to you?" Later, a few moments after the sequence above, the adult Jack sits in front of a votive light. A close-up of his hands shows him lighting a candle inside a blue glass jar. A wider angle shows a woman we might presume to be his wife or partner standing over his shoulder, observing. The adult Jack says, "I see the

---

<sup>11</sup> See Jeff Saporito, "Q: In 'The Tree of Life,' how are grace and nature contrasted through the film's characters," *ScreenPrism*, 11 June 2015, <http://screenprism.com/insights/article/in-the-tree-of-life-how-are-grace-and-nature-contrasted>; Daniel Garrett, "Nature and Grace, Image and Thought: Terrence Malick's The Tree of Life," *Offscreen*, April 2012, [http://offscreen.com/view/nature\\_and\\_grace](http://offscreen.com/view/nature_and_grace); and Alira Ashvo-Muñoz, "Celestial Experience of Life," found in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Ed, *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research, Vol. CXV: From Sky and Earth to Metaphysics*, Hanover: Springer, 2015, pp. 31-40. For an opposing point of view, and one that finds nature in grace within the film, see Marcelo Gleiser, "'The Tree Of Life': Need We Choose Between Grace And Nature?," *NPR Cosmos and Culture*, 17 August 2011, <http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2011/08/17/139680194/the-tree-of-life-need-we-choose-between-grace-and-nature>.

chapel that was” in voiceover as we cut to a 1950s era shot of his own character as the young boy, observed without sound as he tosses a football at a boy who is also himself, in the next edit, swinging a baseball bat. A new silent image shows the brothers sitting side by side at the base of the tree. “I see my brother” is heard over playful sunlit images of R.L. in happier times, fast-edited in two-shots of him standing in grass and then wiping his face from the drenching water of an unseen sprinkler. “True. Kind.” These words are spoken over more grass and then an interior shot (from behind of course) of the boy playing guitar while seated on a chair. In silence we then cut back into the modern kitchen where the votive candle is burning, without anyone there now. “He died when he was 19” is said partly over this image and then over black. The black is sustained. “I see the chapel that was” is a profound line, thrown away quickly in voiceover so we don’t attach too much significance to it. The chapel that was, is the serene interior place within himself that Jack knew as a child during a period when, because of his brother and his mother, he actually knew and was close to God.

If we follow the conceit of God-as-camera, then it is easier to understand how we are meant to embrace the grief being sustained by all three mourning characters in the film (the mother, the father and Jack). Their very different responses reflect the ways in which grief is an emotion of great variance.<sup>12</sup> The three responses, however, are unified by the editing, which treats each of them the same. The editing simulates the disconnections, disorientation and anxiety created by grief and it does so by immersing itself in the elliptical technique. Elliptical editing can include what is sometimes referred to as a ‘jump cut’ — when a sequence appears to be moving a bit suddenly to something else within the same frame or scene and the visual line seems to jump from one moment to the next.<sup>13</sup> *The Tree of Life* takes this further and does it intentionally so that we will experience the two aspects of the same moment almost simultaneously.

In more traditional film editing, a ‘jump’ cut is seen as a problem in need of fixing. As previously discussed,<sup>14</sup> Malick is inverting the convention and suggesting that we receive the images intentionally this way. In the opening sequence, an example of elliptical editing happens almost right away. As we watch the mother swing, we are suddenly seeing her receive the swing as R.L., the second boy is on it. In these ways, the film makes a conversation with the viewer, presenting pathways of engaging meaning instead of describing and conveying a visual narrative in conventional terms. Although we are indeed Malick’s captive in the movie theatre, the film itself presents many points of entry into dialogical engagement so that any of us can come away with any number of possible meanings, and even perhaps, no meaning at all.

The use of the God-camera, which offers the viewer an experiential condition of God’s presence, both to the characters, and to us, combined with an elliptical editing technique which forces us to have the uncomfortable and disorienting experience that simulates a heightened emotional state like grief, are the means by which Malick guides us to his ultimate presentation, which is how the film describes the role of the artist. I believe that Terrence Malick is looking backward to his own life and career to speak volubly to what it means to be an artist in contemporary times. The architect/engineer ‘Jack’ character is a kind of artist,

---

<sup>12</sup> Jack’s response is one of very private depression. The mother reacts with open sadness and despair. The father seems almost unmoved except for how the voiceover reveals his thoughts.

<sup>13</sup> See Bordwell and Thompson, p 289 for a discussion of ‘jump’ cutting.

<sup>14</sup> See Footnote 4.

who offers constructions out of vision, much like Malick himself does with his own films. Earlier I characterized the mother, the father and Jack as the 'Jobian' figures of the film. The source of their suffering is the death of R.L., who is shown to be an artist: he is a musician, and a painter. He is an artist as a child, though we see the evidence in the opening sequence of the film that he was an artist as a young adult too. Malick's characterization of God, performed by the camera, fulfills the Job quotation used in the film, by revealing God to be a kind of artist whose creative language has been misunderstood by Job/the family.

Acting on God's behalf, and using the camera, Malick gives us the tour of creation that God gives Job in chapters 38 through 41. In the book of Job, God rhetorically engages Job and never answers Job's question as to what iniquity caused his punishment. Similarly, Malick reaches back through the rich visual imagery showing the primordial void out of which life is formed to indicate how the suffering of the mother and father and Jack participate in a vast overarching panorama of the history of creation itself, one in which nature and grace collude and collide over and over again as the world comes into being. The film lands on the hopeful edge of that: the transformation of the adult Jack occurs by the waters of the river of Revelation 22, not of the waters of Genesis 1. He has evolved to a place where he is able to live out his transformation in his own everyday life. He has reclaimed at the very least a place of lost peacefulness. He can walk into a Houston skyline, looking upward, completely in the moment, rooted again to his own wellbeing, and feeling the embracing love of a God who rejoices with human beings who have worked out with God their own restoration. He can leave us with a feeling that we might do the same, through the memory-soaked images of our own lives.