

Book Review

Christopher B. Barnett / Clark J. Elliston (eds.): Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick

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The pilgrim's progress from this world to that which is to come,
delivered under the similitude of a dream,
wherein is discovered the manner of his setting out,
his dangerous journey and safe arrival at the desired country.

After this voice-over at the opening of *KNIGHT OF CUPS* (Terrence Malick, US 2015), a camera pans on a landscape with a sea and desert below mountains, with a sole male moving downwards. Three cuts show his back and hands, his front with a small pool in the background, and him walking before a black car passes along a road. Ralph Vaughan Williams's musical prologue sets the tone. The viewer is led into an allegorical world, an unknown destination, while Terrence Malick's previous films, particularly *TREE OF LIFE* (US 2011) and *TO THE WONDER* (US 2014), were explorations in the life of the filmmaker (the former of his childhood and the latter of his marriage and divorce, in the sense of Proust's *Bildungsroman* on film). The voice-over continues to describe this pilgrimage in the words of John Bunyan:

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den and I laid me down in that place to sleep. And as I slept I dreamed a dream. I saw a man clothed with rags standing in a certain place with his face from his own house, book in his hand and a great burden on his back.

To say that Malick's own journey has been an allegory of this kind is to overinterpret the film. That being said, the release of three films in five years, all seemingly autobiographic, is a record. And with *SONG TO SONG* (US 2017) as well as the Criterion Collection release of *TREE OF LIFE* in 2018 with 50 additional minutes added to the film, and *A HIDDEN LIFE* (US/DE 2019) to be shown at Cannes Film Festival, Malick fans are well satiated if productivity represents quality. The lone character at the beginning of *KNIGHT OF CUPS* speaks: "All those years [...] living the life of someone I didn't even know."

In her contribution to this volume, M. Gail Hamner writes,

The camera cuts sharply to a brightly lit highway tunnel and tracks down the tunnel in rapid motion, as if the camera is bolted to the hood of the car. The flooding light we are barreling toward at the end of the tunnel cuts to the back of a toddler's head with the beach stretching out before him or her, and this image of a small head and body then sequence to a number of quickly shifting images of sky, trees, and children. (262)

Her analysis of this film puts into words what is difficult to express about these films, and what is most entrancing: nature, identity, spiritual journey. Each of these aspects of the Bunyan passage as well as Hamner's description of the camera are simultaneously the macrocosmic journey of the universe, the personal struggle, and a religious or theological search for meaning.

Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick is a welcome edited volume introducing various themes in Malick's filmography, which at the time this work was published included eight feature-length films and one IMAX documentary film, *VOYAGE OF TIME* (US 2016). Besides the documentary film and Malick's most recent *SONG TO SONG* and *A HIDDEN LIFE*, all of the films are given theological treatment from a variety of perspectives that cannot be easily unified. With thirteen contributors, including three chapters from the editors themselves, this makes for a dizzying array of theologies and readings of Malick's own quite broad-ranging oeuvre from early 17th-century Virginia (*THE NEW WORLD*, US 2005) to the 1920s Texas panhandle (*DAYS OF HEAVEN*, US 1978) or East Asia during the Second World War (*THE THIN RED LINE*, US 1998). For those familiar with his films, this book will deepen their knowledge of various theological interpretations. For those unfamiliar, it might be worthwhile to watch the film before reading the chapter devoted to that film. But since watching a Malick film is rather like entering a thicket of philosophical, religious, moral, and filmic themes, this book is no different: "Infamous difficulty", to use the words of one author from the volume, Jonathan Brant (146), who takes up an earlier interpretation by Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy.¹ This book, then, does for Malick's films what Rowan Williams says about scripture and tradition: "They need to be made more *difficult* before we can accurately grasp their simplicities" (147).

In order to give a sense of the structure and arguments of this book, we will choose four contributions on which to focus, which is not to say that these are any more profound or important than the others. In "The Divine Reticence of

1 Compare, however, with Leithart 2013 (Peter Leithart also contributes to this volume), for a monograph interpretation of one of Malick's films with themes such as "water", "flame", "music", "hands", and "memory", in which a single Malick film is analyzed and made easier to understand.

Terrence Malick”, Peter Leithart describes Malick’s palette as polyphonic, following Dostoyevsky and Bakhtin (as well as in conversation with Alter and Auerbach) – that is, nature provides its own symbolic system, the trees and grass, birds, animals, water and light, Homer and Genesis. In *THE THIN RED LINE* most explicitly, grass becomes a kind of character: “All flesh is grass, but flesh at war is the grassiest of grass, mown down at a moment’s notice by a strafing of machine gun fire. Grass is not only a sign of the vulnerability and brevity of human life but of its glory” (53). Leithart uncovers this palette in each of Malick’s films, displaying a visual equivalent to dialogism where the nihilist anthropology (i.e. the state of nature) is put on par with a theist one (i.e. the way of grace) without proving, but rather being reticent to prove, either one over the other. More than in *THE THIN RED LINE*, these options are starker through Anna’s voice and Fr. Quintana’s in *TO THE WONDER*, where the latter is exemplified in St. Patrick’s *Lorica*. If “Malick’s world is the world of Job, where suffering takes place before a beautiful but implacable heaven” (57), is this really reticence, then?

In “Who Has Eyes to See, Let Him See: Terrence Malick as Natural Theologian”, David Calhoun compares filmmakers who are anti-theology (such as Stanley Kubrick, Brian De Palma, Ridley Scott, Lars von Trier, or Woody Allen) to Malick’s natural theology. “Where natural theology uses observation of nature and rational inference to make a case for the reality of the supernatural, contemporary naturalist films employ imaginatively constructed naturalist explanatory accounts of the natural world to question, discount, or even reject theism” (67–68). As Leithart did with Dostoyevsky’s dialogism, Calhoun does with Tolkien’s fairy stories and their power to enchant. Malick’s way of telling is more of a fairy story than a traditional religious or “providential” film such as *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS* (Cecil B. DeMille, US 1956), *IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE* (Frank Capra, US 1946), or *HEAVEN IS FOR REAL* (Randall Wallace, US 2013). Calhoun contrasts the polysemic character² of Malick’s films with what Leithart would call dialogism. Both David Davies and Calhoun are interested in the problem of interpretation and while Davies supports a Merleau-Pontian reading of Malick,³ Calhoun appears to be holding a Kierkegaardian view (90). This book as a whole is thus challenging the anti-theology interpretations of Malick’s films such as the Heideggerian or Nietzschean interpretation.⁴ This Kierkegaardian interpretation is also seen in Christopher Barnett’s, Paul Martens’s, and Paul Camacho’s contributions to this volume. As in Tolkien’s fairy stories or Stanley Cavell’s writings on film, “Malick replicates the fundamental human representation of the world as involving a wonder for being” (91).

2 Davies 2009a.

3 Davies 2009b.

4 See Batcho 2018 for a Deleuzian interpretation, which would also be anti-theology.

Whereas these two chapters come from part II of the book (“Terrence Malick as Theological Auteur”), the next two come from Part III (“The Films of Terrence Malick: Theological Readings”). In “The Unique Difficulty of DAYS OF HEAVEN”, Jonathan Brant combines an empirical methodology, in which 500 non-professional reviews were taken into account, with professional readers’ criticism. The viewers’ frustration with watching a Malick film is expressed best by this online review quoted by Brant: “It’s a blah story but it’s fucking beautiful” (146). One of the terms that comes up for many of the non-professional viewers was the recognition of the “difficulty” of watching a Malick film, since it expects the viewer to perform the act of interpretation. The key to Brant’s reading of Malick is Rowan Williams’s book on Dostoyevsky, arguing that “open, complex narratives are more Christian than closed, tidy fables” (147). Brant focuses on how the difficulty in Malick’s method provides us with a God’s eye view into the lives and experiences of the characters in DAYS OF HEAVEN. Brant’s using Williams reminds viewers who are critical of the film that, “The Spirit is at work in any constructive puzzlement” (150). Furthermore, his use of empirical data to evaluate DAYS OF HEAVEN calls to mind how unsettling finding an easy superficial solution can be for us and that even though the film offers “no neat theological explanation of the events it portrays”, it may “in its very difficulty [...] hint at its object more in the moment of frustration, alienation, and distance than in satisfaction, resolution, and clarity” (154).

In Clark J. Elliston’s contribution, “Reaching Toward the Light: Loving the (New) World”, he explores worlds colliding. Elliston says that Malick is doing neither metaphysics nor history, so what genre is THE NEW WORLD? While Elliston does not use this term and may even disagree with it, his exploration seems to revolve around Rousseau’s concept of the “noble savage”. The English colonists come to the new world of Virginia, and Pocahontas comes to the new world of England. Elliston’s claim, however, is that the spiritual world is rather the new world and that Pocahontas represents a christological figure, with redemption the theological strand that runs through the film. Utilizing the term “worldliness”, he suggests there are two options: escape from the world or an Augustinian attitude in which “friendship with the world, despite its hostility, should be attempted” (192). Drawing on Bonhoeffer and Weil, Elliston adds to this the fact that “kenotic giving” requires a love of the world and that Pocahontas fully exists between these worlds, “far from making her a mystic set apart from worldly realities,” (193) and that her “distinctiveness” and “otherness [...] does not earn her respect or acclaim” (194–195). Most interestingly, her openness to the world is explored by Elliston in terms of what Weil calls “attention”. Every image of the film reveals this vulnerability or receptiveness: “as a Native American princess wedded to an English tobacco farmer, she is unto herself a new world”, especially if “she was raped during her capture” (196) and

this is an emblem of the treatment of Native Americans by a colonizing power. Elliston sees Malick as more of a theologian than a philosopher and argues that the female protagonist of this film embodies that perspective: “Human love stands at the center of *THE NEW WORLD*, but the figure of Pocahontas is the narrative lens which refracts that love. She loves the world (and the people in it) and even in rejection reaches toward the light present within it. Consequently, she emerges as a Christological figure – a figure who in suffering invites others into the light” (199).

While each essay in this book deserves treatment, two points of criticism are in order. First, there is certainly description of both the aesthetics and the beauty of film in this book, but the book as a whole neglects to focus on the particularly *filmic* ways in which theology can be done.⁵ The editors point in their preface to how they are framing this book in terms of “Malick as a theological *auteur*” (the title of part II), but insofar as the book does not deepen that meaning in visual or technical terms (like camera movement), Bazin’s critique of *auteur* theory still stands. Much more could be done in deepening this point of what makes Malick a theological *auteur* and to convince a viewer of this. Film is not the same as text or even music. There are certainly hints, such as Barnett’s examination of wind (104–105) or Candler’s discussion of Smetana’s symphonic poems *Má vlast* and Zbigniew Preisner’s “*Lacrimosa*” (211), but more could be said.

The second criticism furthers the point of the first one. In Paul Martens contribution, he mentions in a footnote the “contest” between Simon Critchley’s thesis of “film as philosophy” and Robert Sinnerbrink’s Heideggerian Cinema⁶ (170). This contest points to an underlying claim about whether Malick is theological or not, without rather pointing out that the films are theological. This is a crucial distinction, undervalued throughout the book. Reading the biographical Malick into the films, as Part I of this book does (“An Introduction to Terrence Malick – Scholar, Filmmaker”), does not make him a theologian (or a philosopher). This relation to the film as philosophy thesis, whether Heideggerian or Deleuzian or Kierkegaardian, or to a new *film as theology* thesis as this book seems to support should have been a claim all of the authors of this volume struggle with instead of taking it for granted.

Strangely enough, while writing this review, one of the authors went on a pilgrimage to the Black Forest in Germany to see Heidegger’s hut in Todtnauberg, where he wrote *Being and Time*. The frames of the landscape mirrored in some ways that of the beginning of *KNIGHT OF CUPS*. I stepped into unknown territory, where an author had lived and composed a work. After days of cloudy and foggy travails, the sun shone at the moment we were on the right path. At the

5 As do, for example, Hamner 2014 and Rothman 2016.

6 Critchley 2009; Sinnerbrink 2006; see also Furstenau/MacAvoy 2007.

beginning of *KNIGHT OF CUPS*, however, Malick has silently changed Bunyan's actual words from "their dangerous journey" to "his dangerous journey". This book is an exploration of each author's own dangerous journey, in all of its polyvocality, through the mire of Malick's theology if it is to be interpreted as such. As in *Pilgrim's Progress*, here too we find pitfalls and over-allegorizing, just as I experienced wrong turns and misinterpretation in the Black Forest, whether of maps, the German language, or the awful weather, while finding my way to Heidegger's hut. But one thing is for certain: it is not a lone journey.

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