

## TALKING TO GOD, UNDER TERRENCE MALICK'S *TREE OF LIFE*

João de Mancelos<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* (2011) constitutes an exception in a market flooded with commercial cinematic productions. Its experimental nature is best revealed by non-linear narrative, breathtaking images of the origins of the universe, and a creative approach to an old theme: what is the meaning of life? When middle-aged architect Jack O'Brien sees a tree being planted in front of a building, he meditates upon his childhood and adolescence, in Waco, Texas, during the fifties. Several aspects of his social and family life, such as the relationship with a strict father, representing “nature”, and a gentle mother, symbolizing “grace”; his experiments with sexuality and violence; his father's struggle to overcome failure; his mother's anguish in face of the loss of a child. This journey from innocence to childhood prompts several questions regarding the meaning of life, the relevance of faith and forgiveness. In this paper, I reflect on the central symbol of the movie, the “tree of life”, analyzing its cinematic representation; its symbolic, oneiric and religious meanings; and how it congregates the fragments of the narrative and its protagonists. For that purpose, I resort to mythology, anthropology and religion.

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**E-mail:** mancelos@outlook.com

“Film is language that bypasses the mind and speaks directly to the heart”.

Michelangelo Antonioni

### 1. The meaning of life explained in one hundred and thirty nine minutes

Any movie that is simultaneously booed and applauded by an audience composed of fans and demanding critics interests me. Such was the case of *The Tree of Life*, written and directed by Terrence Malick, when it premiered at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival (Smith 2012, 15). A contradictory reaction usually means that the movie, regardless its quality, presents something new and possibly disturbing.

In an industry flooded by commercial productions, *The Tree of Life* comes as a surprise, innovating both in technical and narrative terms: for instances, unusual camera angles, showing the world from the point of view of

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<sup>1</sup> Universidade da Beira Interior

children; special effects recreating the formation of the universe, planet Earth and life; the non-linear narrative, which constantly alternates between reminiscences of the main character's adolescence and his present life as a disenchanted adult; or the gathering of the living and the dead, wandering on a beach, on the shores of time.

This freshness is not gratuitous nor does it sacrifice the plot; instead, it reveals its philosophy and symbolism, and was carefully crafted along several decades. After a period of procrastination, the shooting of *The Tree of Life* began in 2008. When, in an interview granted to *Empire Magazine*, in 2009, the specialist in visual effects Mike Fink let slip that Malick was working on an ambitious project (O'Hara 2009), nobody could predict the magnitude of his undertaking. Indeed, *The Tree of Life* constitutes one of the most experimental movies in the recent history of North American cinema: it encompasses 13.7 billion years of evolution; deals with the intriguing abstract entity par excellence, God; and approaches an inescapable existential question, both to religious individuals and atheists: what is the meaning of life?

Dealing with such a temporal vastness and complex questions within a time span of one hundred and thirty nine minutes implies enormous challenges, and Malick searched for different technical and narrative solutions. The director resorted to natural symbols in order to represent both the deity and life itself. In their essence, human beings are symbolic animals, as German philosopher Ernst Cassirer argues, in his *Essay on Man: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Culture*:

Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with things themselves, man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium. (Cassirer 2006, 30)

In fact, it is through symbols that humans relate to reality, concrete or abstract, from sexy underwear to God. Since symbols function as mediators, they approach and connect, in our minds, sacred and telluric elements, mysterious and natural realms.

In *The Tree of Life*, the sun emerges as a representation of God; rivers, lakes and oceans correspond to eternity; and the oak that gives name to the movie constitutes a synecdoche and metaphor for life. In this paper, I meditate upon the central symbol of the movie, the tree of life, analyzing its cinematic and symbolic representation, resorting to several areas, in particular to mythology, psychoanalysis and religion.

## **2. The roots of a symbolic tree**

The North American landscape constitutes a constant presence in Malick's cinematography, serving not only as setting, but mainly as a euphoric element, in stark contrast to human perfidy. In movies such as *Badlands* (1973), the planes of South Dakota and the region of Montana hide the forbidden passion of a serial killer, Kit, and his fifteen-year old girlfriend, Holly, on a crime spree; in *Days of Heaven*, the wheat fields of Texas become the setting for Bill and Abby's love and their illegal schemes; in *The New World* (2005), the landscape evokes a prelapsarian place, explored by Captain John Smith and his lover, Pocahontas.

In the work of Malick, nature constitutes the eternal essence that eludes those who try to grasp it and, occasionally, it provides them with an opportunity for redemption. Debating the significance of landscape in Malick's movies, James Morrison argues:

For many artists, a turn to elemental imagery marks a return to fundamental things, a stripping away of inessentials. For Malick, the essential is as much part of a complex as any other idea. Stripping away only reveals further notions for contemplation, and Malick's images, in one or other dimensions, are nodes of thought. (Morrison and Schur 2003, 111)

Contrarily to what occurs in the movies I mentioned, in *The Tree of Life* nature is represented both collectively, through forests, mountains, rivers, lakes and oceans, as individually, by an impressive tree, standing on the fertile soil of the O'Brien family's garden. It is an oak weighing 65,000 pounds, which, according to a local paper, was transplanted from a property in the outskirts of Smithville (Hagerty 2008, 1A and 2A).

In most of the scenes, this tree is shot from a low angle, which makes it appear even more powerful; and the sunrays, a divine symbol, shine through branches and leaves. This oak encapsulates two dimensions: on one side, it represents life, and on the other side, it is a natural altar or a sacred area, where the O'Briens, particularly the mother and Jack, communicate with God and pose their questions and meditations.

The oak constitutes a symbol of Genesis and of the enduring human, animal and vegetable life (Michaels 2009, 89). In mythic terms, the tree represents the cosmic integration, since its roots hide in the substrata (symbolically, the underworld), the trunk is visible in the world, and the branches open to the sky. According to anthropologist Brian Molineaux, numerous legends portray a tree as a sacred element: in Scandinavian mythology, Yggdrasil, a giant ash tree, unites the cosmos, draws water from the fountains and offers it to the Gods; in the southern regions of Africa, the Herero people believe a tree, Omum-borombonga, originated the first humans and the cattle they depend upon to survive; in the paintings that decorate Egyptian tombs, the tree of life, planting next to the fountain of youth, are common motifs; even in scientific speech, more precisely in *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin represents the human evolution as a tree (Molyneaux 1995, 90-91).

In Malick's movie, the meaning of trees in general and of the oak in particular should be understood in the context of Christianity. In the *Book of Revelation*, life is a tree possessing healing properties:

(...) the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the

great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

Thus, in Christianity, the tree of life represents human innocence before the fall and the love of God, two aspects Malick systematically explores in this movie through images, soundtrack and plot, as I will later demonstrate.

Furthermore, the oak and other trees constitute a recurring element, a motif, essential to connect and unify a radically fragmented narrative in terms of time (there are constant flashbacks); place (from the suburbs of Waco to Houston, from Houston to a utopic recreation of paradise); and points of view (Jack as an adolescent, Jack in adulthood, Mrs. O'Brien, etc.).

It is 1956, in the garden of a suburban house, three brothers, eleven-year old Jack, nine-year old RL and six-year old Steve, their parents and their dog, Shep, play. It is a bucolic scene permeated with domestic joy, almost Edenic. Mrs. O'Brien admires the sun rays through the branches of the oak and, directing herself to God, promises: "I will be true to you, whatever comes". The soundtrack, an excerpt of "Lacrimosa", by Polish movie score composer Zbigniew Presiner, and thirty other pieces from Brahms, Mahler or Bach, reinforces the tree as a symbol of life and of creation. Thus, the oak becomes a natural temple, where characters talk to God, presenting their doubts, problems and hurts, and strengthen their relationship with the Almighty.

As a trial of faith, in the next scene a Western Union mailman delivers a telegram informing her of the death of middle son RL, at nineteen. Mr. O'Brien is informed while he is at the airport, where he works as an engineer. Even though the noisy place starkly contrasts with his quiet home, the scenery is almost identical: the sun sets on the trees, symbolizing simultaneously the end of the day and the epilogue of life.

The scene changes to the present day and to an urban landscape, Houston, where Jack, the eldest son, now works as an architect. Once again, there is a tree, the central motif, being transplanted to the front area of a

building, fiercely competing against the forest of skyscrapers erected by humans. The script reads:

The buildings hem him [Jack] round like the trees of a wild forest. A false nature, a universe of death. A sightless world, roofed over, shut off from things above. A world that would exclude the transcendent, that says: I am, and there is nothing else. A world without love. This is a new death, death of spirit, extinction of the soul. Man has shut himself in. (Malick 2007, 9)

Jack became a wealthy and successful architect, admired by his peers. However, he is also a traumatized person, angry at a world that, according to him, has gone to the dogs. His cynicism constitutes the direct result both from his strenuous relation with his father and the suffering caused by RL's premature death, which the tree, a symbol of lost childhood, evokes.

However, Jack faces tragedy with bitter doubts that he confesses to God, in soliloquies, next to the old oak. These questions were first raised in childhood, when he saw the death of a little boy, drowned in the communal pool: “[God,] you let a boy die. You let anything happen. Why should I be good if you aren't?” (Malick 2011, 10). Later, traumatized by the death of RL, he asks again, “How did I lose you, wandered, forgot you?” (Malick 2011, 10). Such meditations do not question or deny the existence of God, but His mysterious ways. For instances, Jack asks: “Who are you that took him? You smash what is most dear — send flies to wounds you might have healed. Who can hinder you?” (Malick 2011, 10).

Similarly, his mother walks among the trees and, in an introspective conversation with God, wonders, “Was I false to you” (Malick 2011, 3); “Who are we to you? Answer me. We cry to you. Hear us” or “Lord, why? Where were you?” (Malick 2011, 3). These words echo, intertextually, a step from the Book of Job, which appears at the beginning of the movie: “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?” (Job 38: 4, 7).

Mrs. O'Brien wrestles with the exact same questions and issues that, for several centuries, disturbed Christians: how can there be Evil, if God is the supreme being? How can God allow the suffering of those who have faith? The entire movie consists in this spiritual journey, a search for enlightenment or solace, near God or the nature that represents His creation.

In one of the most visually striking scenes of *The Tree of Life*, Jack meets his dead brother, his parents and other individuals who played a significant role in his life, on an imaginary beach, representing paradise or eternity. Reinforcing the tree as a symbol of life and creation, Jack states: "You spoke to me through her. You spoke to me through the sky, the trees. Before I knew I loved you, believed in you" (Malick 2011, 5). The woman he is referring to is Mrs. O'Brien, his mother. To understand the meaning of this epiphany, it is important to recall the lesson that, at the beginning of movie, the nuns teach Mrs. O'Brien and that, now, Jack also learns:

There are two ways through life: the way of Nature, and the way of Grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. And love is smiling through all things. (Malick 2011, 1)

In the end of the movie, both the reconciliation with his father, an authoritarian patriarch, after several years of conflict, and the acceptance of God's mysterious ways allow Jack to, finally, mourn.

### **3. The Joy of playing against the rules**

Malick's art and technique reveal a director who is not afraid to take risks and to bet on an allegorical and experimental style, sometimes subverting rules. As Chris Wisniewski so perfectly summarizes:

Those rambling philosophical voiceovers; the placid images of nature, offering quiet contrast to the evil deeds of men; the stunning cinematography, often achieved with natural light; the striking use of music — here is a filmmaker with a clear sensibility and aesthetic who makes narrative films that are neither literary nor theatrical, in the sense of foregrounding dialogue, event, or character, but are instead principally cinematic, movies that suggest narrative, emotion and idea through image and sound. (Wisniewski)

*The Tree of Life* is a rather ambitious movie, and it is true that, sometimes, when abstract becomes emptiness, and apparently profound thoughts turn out to be mumbo-jumbo, Malick succumbs under the weight of grandiosity. However, even when he fails, he proves that cinema also aspires to be poetry.

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**João de Mancelos** was born in Coimbra in 1968. He holds a BA in Portuguese and English Studies (University of Aveiro, 1992), an MA in Anglo-American Studies (University of Coimbra, 1996), a PhD in American Literature (Portuguese Catholic University, 2003), and he has recently finished his Postdoctoral Project, in Literary Studies. From 1992 to 2012, he taught American Literature, Literary Theory and Creative Writing at the Portuguese Catholic University, in Viseu. Currently, he is teaching Screenwriting at Universidade da Beira Interior, in Covilhã. He published several books of poetry and short stories, three scientific books (*O Marulhar de Versos Antigos: A Intertextualidade em Eugénio de Andrade*, *Introdução à Escrita Criativa* and *Manual de Escrita Criativa*), and numerous essays. His areas of interest include Film Studies, Creative Writing, and American Literature.