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A Phenomenological Approach to the Later Films of Terrence Malick

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A Phenomenological Approach to the Later Films of Terrence Malick
by
Timothy J. Keeley, Jr.

A thesis presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Master of Liberal Arts

May 2017
St. Louis, Missouri

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<u>Acknowledgments</u>

Dedicated to my parents, Mary, Adam, Gus, Francis, Ezra, my students, and Andrés González.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Phenomenological Approach to the Later Films of Terrence Malick

by

Timothy J. Keeley, Jr.

Master of Liberal Arts

Washington University in St. Louis, 2017

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The cinematic legacy of Terrence Malick, while not settled because the director still lives and makes films, is already a turbulent one. A reclusive philosophy student, Malick's early output accumulated admiration when Malick disappeared from cinema for twenty years. Like so many great 20th-century artists, including J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon, Malick's absence grew his legend, so his return was welcomed with anticipation and acclaim. As Malick's output becomes more frequent, though, some are growing cold to his work, asserting that it is repetitive and pretentious, and borders on self-parody. Still others charge that Malick was only regarded as a genius because his mythic status remained shrouded in mystery.

However, I argue Malick's career turned with the release of his 2011 film *The Tree of Life*. While a preoccupation with the beauty of nature and the duality of man floods Malick's previous films, each film from 2011 to present[1] has ventured farther away from traditional narrative structure and the audience's expectations of contemporary American cinema and closer

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[1] At the time of this writing, these include *The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2012), and *Knight of Cups* (2014).

to a cinematic memoir that blends aesthetic experimentation with a deep interest in the historically-influential philosophical notions of immanence and transcendence.

While the philosophy of Malick's films is recognizably Christian, as many critics and scholars will note, it runs deeper than that. Malick is concerned with the possibility of the human encounter with the sublime to, as Schopenhauer would describe, awaken self-consciousness. However, while Schopenhauer would have self-consciousness liberating itself from the will, Malick's account of the sublime and human exaltation reaffirms the individual (his will and his intellect, among other things) through self-consciousness that results from a recognition of each individual person as also being a part of the story of humanity. In doing so, Malick's phenomenology more closely resembles Heidegger's "fundamental ontology" and conception of Being as "grounded" in, yet distinct from, *a* being. Understood this way, Malick's choice to eschew traditional characterization in his films supports their philosophical interests.

Likewise, his cinematography and editing patterns evoke the power of cinema to present memory as associated logic and time as free from linearity. My project will also include the study of neurocinematics[2] to explore how Malick's experimental aesthetics both underline his philosophical ideas and create a divisive experience for the audience. Particular attention will be paid to shot composition, elements of mise-en-scène, and editing techniques, specifically the duration of individual shots and the effect of juxtaposing different scenes together, to create an associative meaning only possible through non-narrative cinema.

Finally, I will show how all of this makes for a Romantic humanism, which Harold Bloom would describe as "an attempt to transcend the human without forsaking humanism."

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[2] "Neurocinematics" involves the study of the human brain's response to viewing a film or scene.

Traditionally, transcendence is understood as that which goes beyond the physical level. For Malick, though, transcendence is an essential part of the human's experience of the sublime in the natural, physical world -- in a word, "immanence." Malick, in abstracting the specifics of plot, attempts to compose a cinematic representation of the essence of a human life by creating a highly-formal aesthetic experience which asks the viewer to consider the metaphysical shining through the mundane. Malick should be understood, then, as documenting the American experience through a complex aesthetic representation of being, transcendence, and immanence. In the final analysis, my project will show how Malick's aesthetic experimentation engages the viewer neurologically in ways that both upset the expectations of narrative cinema and establish its own cinematic grammar. The philosophical concerns of Malick's films -- namely, explorations of man's relationship with the divine through an experience with nature, man's spiritual journey from darkness into light, the fluidity of time and memory, and ontology of the soul -- necessitate a distinct style, one which seeks to represent a convergence of transcendence and immanence.

__Introduction__

In both academic and amateur conversation, contemporary film studies focuses heavily on theoretical contours and schools of thought or on fandom and commercial success. Popular film criticism, while growing continually irrelevant to the average reader, aims to persuade its audience to see or to avoid a film, while only occasionally offering an analysis of the film's merits as a work of art. Even the rise of film essays on YouTube provide little more than fan theories or director idolatry. With the popularization of cinema as a massive force of commerce, each film is more a product of mass entertainment and consumer commodity than, for example, contemporary painting or sculpture. As a result, the voice of the amateur critic or analyst has gained rival cultural currency to that of the film of critic or academic, for certain purposes. The elites of the cinematic arts have been pushed into retreat, retrenching in contemporary and late-twentieth century theoretical methodologies. While this turn in cinematic studies has allowed for the growth of the discipline on the university level and yielded many exciting connections with its literary equivalent, the full possibility of cinema studies on its own terms has either not yet been fully realized, or has been prematurely passed over.

This academic and critical retreat can be seen in the tendency of film studies to prioritize, for example, queer studies and othering, feminist critiques of the male gaze, cinematic international cultures and histories, or psychoanalysis over more fundamentally aesthetic interpretations. This is not to say that these schools of thoughts are completely devoid of engagement with cinematic style and technique. Rather, their discussion of style and technique are in service of a larger theoretical point. Andrei Tarkovsky, the Russian filmmaker and film theorist, will insist in his reflections in *Sculpting in Time*, that "the purity of cinema, its inherent

strength, is revealed not in the symbolic aptness of images (however bold these may be) but in the capactiy of these images to express a specific, unique, actual fact."[1] We often begin with a critical conversation or set of ideologies and interpret how the aesthetics of cinema can demonstrate those recurrent themes, a top-down approach. All too seldom do we see a discussion of how the form and nature of the medium itself allow for different concepts to be explored, concepts wholly unique to the cinematic experience itself, a bottom-up approach. As the modernists would tell us, new ideas require new forms of expression. Likewise, new forms of expression unlock the possibility for new ideas.

There is a precedent for such a discussion. Andre Bazin's work in phenomenology and Dudley Andrew's resurrection of that work provide a framework for approaching film studies in this manner. Bazin, in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," implodes the idea that was common in film academia by the 1960s and 1970s that the advent of sound in movies (around 1927) robbed cinema of symbolic and impressionistic meaning. Because sound married to an image offers a more direct articulation of the events on screen and their importance to the story or theme, the viewer was less involved in the creation of meaning in the film as a whole, and the filmmakers became lazier and more obvious, not stepping up to the challenge of finding innovative and expressionistic ways of moving their pictures. However, to Bazin, this innovation marked a new birth of cinema. He writes of filmmaking with sounds, that it is "less a matter of setting silence over against sound than of contrasting certain families of styles with certain basically different concepts of cinematographic expression."[2] Sound and silence provided new possibilities and marked a difference between "those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality."[3] This statement establishes a certain hierarchy of

expression which Bazin does not shy away from. He remains, however, leery of "art for art's sake," reassuring us that "our intention is certainly not to preach the glory of form over content." Rather, "a new subject matter demands new form, and as good a way as any towards understanding what a film is trying to say is to know how it is saying it."[4] Bazin's approach prioritizes an understanding of the form and aesthetics *before* placing a conceptual interpretation on the film as a whole, freeing us from the binds of shoehorning a film into pre-existing categories of analysis.[5] The need to engage first with the method of cinema comes directly from the power of film to impact us immediately, pre-consciously, in ways that written forms for art do not. Bazin asserts that "the image -- its plastic composition and the way it is set in time, before it is founded on a much higher degree of realism has at its disposal more means of manipulating reality and modifying it from within."[6] This observation leads him to posit that "The filmmaker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright. He is, at last, the equal of the novelist."[7] But even this graduation sells short the direct, immediate impact of the moving image and the impression that the combination of image and sound and the juxtaposition of competing images can evoke.

It is for that reason that Andrew resurrects Bazin's rebellion and argues for a reconstitution of phenomenology in film studies. In "The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film Theory" Andrew strongly discredits the ability of psychological and political methods of discourse about cinema to respond to emotion. As such, an account for the power of aesthetics suffers. The aesthetic that is considered through these methodologies remains skeptical of the emotional response, and so does not constitute a complete aesthetic account. As such, Andrew champions phenomenology, which he writes is skeptical of rationality and pure reason for their

total trumping of all experience.[8] Like the understanding of life as a whole, art reveals itself more through experience than structure. Phenomenology attempts to come to grips with immediate experience by embracing contradiction, paradox and mystery. The introductory paragraph to this essay wonders if the phenomenological approach is completely at odds with social and political methods of interpretation, or if there is room for cohabitation.

Andrew wants structuralist approaches to give way to phenomenology (in a dialectical way) as he sees structuralism eroding. Essential to his effort is the distinction between "the zone of pre-formulation in which the psyche confronts a visual text intended for it, and the zone of post-formulation in which the psyche must come to terms with a surplus value unaccounted for by recourse to a science of signification."[9] While an exploration of signification and a study of semiotics can and does reveal deeper meaning to the visual representation that film provides, the risk of a such a study is the implementation of a set number of interpretations. The limit of signs and symbols is that they are preordained to contain a finite number of "correct" meanings; they must indicate or signify something else which has already been determined. Phenomenology, on the other hand, is rooted more deeply in perception than conception, in imagination, and in experience. Andrew notes that "Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Dufrenne, have all attempted to describe perceptual, imaginative and aesthetic experience,"[10] and so begins to draw out a history of phenomenology.

He first notes Gilbert Cohen-Seat's 1945 attempt to describe "filmologie" as "cinema as social eruption controlled by alien technology and creating a universal but impersonal dream."[11] He mentions Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed* as an attempt to describe the cinema as a phenomenon among other phenomena. Phenomenology, he writes, is dominated by the study of

perception, aesthetic perception.[12] We then get Christian Metz's important essays on film as related to memory, cognition, time and space, psycho-physiology, daydreaming, illusion, etc. The perception, though, is an elaboration of a world that moves into human signification.[13] The key to identification is "meditating on the viewer's shifting mode of consciousness in confrontation with various types and organizations of images."[14] Many modes of phenomenology in film focus on an account of the consciousness of the spectator as well as identification in relation to a sequence of images all directed toward some goal or experience[15]. Andrew marks the difference between pre-formulation and post-formulation as between film criticism and hermeneutics. He figures the author as the transcendent creator of worlds which an audience or critic then reconstitutes. He then champions Bazin as a critic whose phenomenological writings erase the distinction between works and instead recognize the energy of the author.[16] He elaborates on the world, Bazin does, before then pinpointing a larger source.

Andrew writes that few American critics "have been able to mimic that speculative aura which struggles to go beyond the mere enumeration of repeated elements and to capture the quality of the experience we live through with an auteur or a genre."[17] Paul Ricoeur, he writes, is also attempting to go beyond the text by enjoying the fruits of the experience of the text, rather than taking a first interpretative step back into the origins of ideology of psychoanalysis. Finally, Andrew asserts that an over-reliance on grammars and structures of films remove us from direct contact with the cinema itself and instead transmigrate our experience to a second logical system. "Phenomenology," he writes, "wants to remain immune to the diseases, antibodies, and critical inoculations which have characterized the feverish world of structuralism for the past 15 years"[18]. "By according limitless value to experience and by granting all life processes an

unquestioned respect, phenomenology seeks to put reason and language at the service of life or at least of human experience."[19] Phenomenology, then, is not necessarily closer to truth, but to cinema and our experience of it because it is grounded in perception, the momentum and narrative, descriptions and interpretations of cinematic worlds, and our emotional involvement in the image.

There are, of course, issues with and limits to Andrew's application of phenomenology in film studies, most prominent of which is its tendency to be too affective, or simply impressionistic. In other words, is phenomenology too reliant on the viewer's subjective experience? Do we run into problems that "it's different for each person" or "your experience cannot be wrong"? If so, then this entire effort falls apart. However, I want to suggest here and argue in this paper that recent developments in neuroscience and brain imaging lay some groundwork for an account of shared aesthetic experiences. "Neurocinematics," as it is called, allows us to discuss how a narrative is arranged and unfolded and how the aesthetics of a frame or the construction of sound and editing engage (or fail to engage) that viewer. Neurocinematics does not provide an exhaustive account of some supposed universal viewer experience, as we will see. After all, an essential component to the experience of the art object is the experience and associations one brings to it; however, the discovery of mirror neurons can clue us in to how movies affect our brains and orchestrate our emotional responses.

Combining several elements of phenomenology as laid out by Bazin, Andrew, and Metz, with recent developments in the still-fetal field of neurocinematics, I will argue for a reconstitution of phenomenology in film studies by analyzing the recent work of American filmmaker Terrence Malick, a divisive, yet mammoth, figure in contemporary film. Malick's

filmography straddles the uncomfortable camps of mainstream distribution and arthouse philosophy pictures. His films, especially those made in the last six years, have become so stubbornly abstract that some suggest Malick be treated more as a philosopher than a filmmaker, while others throw up their hands in frustration over what seems to them to be obtuse experimentalism and anti-narrative self-indulgence. As a result, Malick's films are instantly recognizable and easily parodied, with some critics suggesting he is unknowingly and unintentionally parodying himself. But, I argue, the frustration that naturally occurs from dealing with difficult film, especially film which packages itself to be lush, romantic, and just on the outskirts of the mainstream, fails to realize the exciting and innovating frontiers that Malick's visual tone poems envision and pioneer. At the risk of sounding like a fanboy baying, "you just don't get it!" I hope to explore in this paper that Malick's process, style, aesthetics, and affect constitute a form of cinema which, like the modernist tomes of English literature, require new forms to express their hearts and minds. This is not to call for a complete critical reevaluation of Malick's latest work for the purpose of vindicating his longeurs or resurrecting his reputation. Rather, I hope to lay the groundwork for a reapplication of phenomenology in film studies, combined with exciting innovations in neuroscience, which will allow us to better evaluate films like Malick's for what they are. In doing so, we can free cinema from the confines of schools of theory and the lenses of literary criticism, hopefully seeing film for the immediate, impressionistic, spiritual, and psychological medium that it is.

Endnotes -- Introduction

1. Andrey Tarkovksy, *Sculpting in Time* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) 72.

2. Andre Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of the Cinema" in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011) 315.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. 318.

5. This is the quintessential structuralist gesture -- *how?* not *what?* or *why?*

6. Bazin*,* 324.

7. Ibid.

8. Dudley Andrew. "The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film Studies" in Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods II*.

9. Ibid. 628.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Andrew notes that Metz is often considered an opponent of phenomenology in film. However, Metz focused on narrative and identification: two essential components of phenomenology.

14. Andrew, 629.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid. 630.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid. 632.

19. Ibid.

<u>Chapter 1: The Philosopher-Filmmaker</u>

In order to understand both how Malick's recent films have been mis-evaluated as well as where he pulls influence for the essence of his films, we must first extract hints from select moments of his biography. While I do not wish to suggest a deterministic understanding of authorial intent (thus committing the Intentional Fallacy and upsetting the Wimsatt and Beardsley gods), it is clear to me that Malick's abnormal path to behind the camera informs the oddities that are imprinted on his film, as with most any other artist or philosopher.

Malick's upbringing has the all imprints of introspective Midwestern mind. Born in 1943 in Ottawa, IL, Malick was raised in Waco, TX, until young adulthood. While little is known of the highlighted moments of so many kunstleromans, we know that Malick attended St. Stephen's Episcopal School in Austin, TX, and that he was the oldest of three sons born to Irene and Emil.[1] His younger brother, Larry, was a self-sabotaging musician, whose suicide as a young man likely influenced several essential subplots in Malick's autobiographical films. In 1965, Terry graduated *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa with an A.B. in philosophy from Harvard University. He attended Magdalen College in Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, but left before completing a degree after having a falling out with his mentor and adviser.[2] The focus of Malick's work as a philosophy student in Oxford concerned Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, names which continue to form Malick's creative mind and names which we will revisit to far greater extent later in this essay.

Upon returning the U.S. in 1969, Malick's academic work merged into storytelling. After his translation of Heidegger's *Vom Wessen des Grundes* as *The Essence of Reasons* was published by Northwestern University Press, Malick taught philosophy at Massachusetts Institute

of Technology and worked as a freelance journalist for *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, and *Life*.

Meanwhile, Malick also pursued and completed an MFA from the AFI Conservatory.[3] His thesis

film was a short called "Lanton Mills," a comedy starring himself, Warren Oates, and Harry

Dean Stanton. The film centers on two cowboys who hatch and carry out a plan to rob a bank.

One reviewer remarked that the film was

> Visually, rich in elements that would become Malick's trademarks. Daylight
> assumes a tactile presence — though here it is not the diffuse "magic hour" light
> (i.e., malick-light) of later films, but a bold late afternoon sun that streams through
> leaves, creating shadow and dappled highlight on the characters' faces. The camera
> angles tend to be either wide or wider, even in dialogue scenes. Also familiar from
> Malick's later films is the attention to landscape and nature.... But what makes
> "Lanton Mills" feel completely different from Malick's later work is its
> unrestrained, anarchic comedy. ... Though the jokes play out in an absurdist,
> disconcerting key, they still make us laugh (or at least shake our heads with a
> puzzled smile)[4]

Malick wrote the film score himself and legendary cinematography (though not in 1969) Caleb

Deschanel served as the director of photography.

As is the benefit of attending film school, Malick developed strong relationships with

rising talents in the film industry. Agent Mike Medavoy helped garner script doctoring work for

Malick, leading to screen credits such as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Drive, He Said* (1971), *Pocket

Money* (1972), and *The Gravy Train* (1974). One of his own original screenplays, *Deadhead

Miles* was made into a road comedy in 1973 starring Alan Arkin and featuring appearances by

Ida Lupino and George Raft. Producers at Paramount deemed the film "unreleasable," a label

which has kept the film hidden to this day.[5] Though the Vernon Zimmerman-directed film

remains buried in film history, it's logline about a runaway pursuing revenge on the police can be

heard echoing through Malick's breakout feature *Badlands* (1973).

Another criminals-hit-the-road film, *Badlands* reunites Malick with Warren Oates, in a supporting role, and provided star-making turns for Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek. Malick also collaborated with production designer Jack Fisk, a creative partnership that continues to this day. While bearing marks of his earlier films, *Badlands* would begin to establish visual and narrative motifs and styles that would become synonymous with their maestro's name. The story of Kit and Holly falling in love and hitting the road, as well as Kit's repeated random acts of violence, especially against law enforcement, continue a trend seen in *Deadhead Miles,* "Lanton Mills," *Pocket Money*, *The Gravy Train*, and even, to some extent, *Dirty Harry*. The aforementioned visual style, preferent to natural lighting, produces a gorgeously romantic backdrop for the film, a backdrop which stands in stark contrast to the ugliness of the human violence being perpetrated in front of it. This theme -- the juxtaposition of the indifferent beauty of nature with man's propensity for evil and destruction -- will remain a fascination of Malick's, a reenacting of Man's rejection of Eden and a remembrance of that first of fratricide and disobedience.

Still, *Badlands* exorcises some of Malick's early interests which will soon fade from his artistic imagination. Like the screenplays that bear his name as a contributor, *Badlands* centers on a James Dean-esque renegade, that rebellious child of the late 1950s and icon of the American counter-culture which independent film through Hollywood's Renaissance would wield to great effect. His casting of Spacek's Holly as a feminine innocence confronted with, but untouched by the guilt of man's existential destruction, will be the first in a line of underdeveloped female characters throughout his filmography. The use of reflective and poetic voice-over, though here confined to just one point-of-view, will lend Malick's films their subjective and spiritual insight. And let's not overlook the ethereal score, like a symphony from heaven, or his blatant disregard

for the authority of man for the sake of something sacred: here the American Romantic hero over

The Man and The Law; later the dictates of narrative and film grammar and vocabulary for songs

of the soul and epiphanies of immanence and transcendence. Unfortunate to some, *Badlands* will

also mark the end of Malick's sense of humor in his films. A darkly comic tone resonates deep

under the pastoral landscapes and murderous inclinations of the main character. The tagline of

the film flippantly states, "In 1959, a lot of people were killing time, Kit and Holly were killing

people." Another: "He was 25 years old. He combed his hair like James Dean. He was very

fastidious. People who littered bothered him. She was 15. She took music lessons and could twirl

a baton. She wasn't very popular at school. For awhile they lived together in a tree house. In

1959, she watched while he killed a lot of people."[6] The bluntness of this summary now sounds

more like The Coen Brothers than what we have come to know from Malick. While likely not

branded by the director himself, these taglines do reveal both an audience awareness and an

impulse to locate *Badlands* within an emerging subgenre of anti-hero runaway lovers, a trope we

will see reiterated in *Bonnie and Clyde, Thelma and Louise*, *The Living End*, *Natural Born*

Killers, and many others. It is worth noting, too, that the concise, blunt statements lend a

Hemingway-esque masculinity to the marketing of the film, an assertion that does not vindicate

Holly, either. After all, "She watched."

So, while *Badlands*, coming on the feet of *Deadhead Miles*, can be read as a reworking of

that film by a frustrated auteur, *Days of Heaven* (1978) begins to shed these early Malick

concerns for some more stereotypically-trademark Malick-isms. The infamous shoot would go

over-schedule and over-budget, deferring from producer oversight and contemporary wisdom as

to how studio pictures should be made. After the critical acclaim received by *Badlands*, Malick

was granted a $3 million budget (a sizeable improvement over the $450,000 price tag on

Badlands)[7] and landed Richard Gere, Brooke Shields, and Sam Shepherd as his stars. Jack Fisk

returned as production designer, and Malick enlisted the help of Nestor Almendros as

cinematographer and Ennio Morricone to compose the score. While still boasting a love story

cast against a romantic American past, *Days of Heaven* gets far more ethereal than *Badlands*. An

eccentricity indeed, *Badlands* feels deeply rooted in American 1970s cinema, while *Days of*

Heaven carries the poetic grace and meandering we have come to associate with the director.

Sure, at the center of the plot, there remains a con job on "The Man," but plot is tertiary to

landscape and atmosphere. Among the more memorable elements of *Days of Heaven* are

Morricone's dream-like score and the gorgeous cinematography which takes extensive (and some

rumors have it, exclusive) use of "magic hour," that hour during sunrise and sunset where

shadows fall large, lighting is balanced and warm, and everything seems to glow like a

Rembrandt painting. Likewise, the narrative voice-over is more direct, clearly emanating from a

character and commenting on the plot that we are seeing, adding voice, tone, and cinematic

footnotes. Running just 94 minutes (the same length as *Badlands*), *Days of Heaven* grasps for the

spiritual ambition of Malick's later work. It's epic scope comes more from its elusiveness and

timelessness than from the grandiose assertion of its own far-reaching ambition. Still, like many

of Malick's later films, *Days of Heaven* seems to be composed more of memorable moments

than standing as one cohesive whole. The iconic wheat field fire and the swarm of locusts stand

as exemplars of my point. The meaning of the title, while not immediately clear, can perhaps be

illuminated by the tagline: "You've got to go through Hell before you get to Heaven."[8] This

Dantean path will be retrod by many a Malick protagonist on his way through existential crisis to salvation.

Then Malick goes into hiding. His twenty-year absence from film creates a myth behind the mystery and allows his two features to grow in esteem and reverence. Seen as a genius ahead of his time, Malick undergoes a self-imposed exile to France before returning to the U.S. and to cinema with his 1998 film *The Thin Red Line*. Like many great artists of the twentieth century -- J.D. Salinger, Stanley Kubrick, Banksy, Thomas Pynchon -- Malick's absence not only grows his legend, but informs his work. The elusive character behind the camera parallels the elusive character at the heart of the films themselves. Upon returning to the U.S., Malick adapts James Jones's WWII novel of the same name with a $52 million budget and cast that includes Sean Penn, Nick Nolte, John Cusack, George Clooney (in what amounts to a cameo), Mirando Otto, Jim Caveziel, Adrien Brody, Elias Koteas, Woody Harrelson, Jared Leto, John C. Reilly, Nic Stahl, Thomas Jane, John Savage, Kirk Acevedo, and Tim Blake Nelson. Perhaps more memorable than this remarkable cast, though, is the names left out of the picture and on the cutting room floor. Viggo Mortensen, Gary Oldman, Martin Sheen, Mickey Rourke, Billy Bob Thornton, Lukas Haas, Jason Patric, and Bill Pullman all shot scenes and recorded, in Thornton's case, hours of voice-over that would never see final cut. Neither would several hours of music composed by Hans Zimmer.[9] Rumors speak of a five-plus-hour first cut, which would be whittled down to a 215-minute cut, and then again trimmed to 170 minutes for theatrical release. Shot over 100 days, Malick's style could generously be described as "spontaneous," and less generously as "unfocused." He would often rewrite portions of the script the night before shooting and divert the camera's attention away from expensive and thoroughly choreographed

action sequences to focus on a parrot nearby. While this improvisational and meandering style will become characteristic of Malick, for some it is his Achilles heel. Adrien Brody attended the premiere of the film under the impression he was the star only to find that his role had been cut to just a few lines. A later collaborator, Christopher Plummer, would become so frustrated with the director's negligence towards actors and preference for nature that he would vow never to work with Malick again.[10]

While *The Thin Red Line* marked the return of Malick to filmmaking, the auteur ex-pat bore little resemblance to the promising writer-director of *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. Upon release, *The Thin Red Line* was met with a tepid critical response and only earned $35 million of its $52 million budget back at the box office.[11] The film was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay for Terrence Malick himself. Neither Malick nor the film's producers would attend the ceremony and the film would go home empty-handed. The similarity in subject matter to Steven Spielberg's far more accessible and immediate *Saving Private Ryan* did not help *The Thin Red Line*'s Oscar hopes, but neither did its singular and unnamable style. After three-and-a-half months of shooting, thirteen months in editing and four months in sound mixing, Malick had an enigmatic war film and increasingly-puzzling technique on his hands. While some gravitated toward the director's spontaneity, others were repulsed by it. Actors Martin Sheen and John Savage reportedly stayed on set another month after their scene were shot just to see Malick work. Production designer Jack Fisk revealed in an interview that Malick "is always very willing, eager to change things. He'd see something in the yard and say, 'Let's put that in the bedroom.' That's one thing I learned from him: spontaneity."[12] Likewise, on Malick's follow-up film *The New World* (2005),

he will begin a long-time collaboration with cinematography Emmanuel Lubezki, a three-time

Oscar winner from Mexico. We will revisit Lubezki later to discuss his style in more detail, but

for now, it is worth noting that he says of Malick,

> Working with Terry has changed my life. I'm a different parent, I'm a
> different husband, and I'm a different friend. I see nature in a different way
> since I started working with Terry. I have much more respect for things that
> I wasn't aware of as much. He is one of the most important teachers in my
> life. And I'm a much better cinematographer in helping directors in a much
> more comprehensive way.[13]

The difference in Lubezki's work before and after collaborating with Malick is clearly evident.

There is a freedom to his camerawork that appears at once precise and spontaneous. This illusion

of spontaneity aids in the overall sense that the films are capturing an unique moment in nature at

the moment it is occurring. Lubezki recalls about working on *The New World*:

> Terry came to me and said, 'I would love to try this, and if we fail, I will
> never use it. I would never put anything in the movie that would humiliate
> you or makes you feel uncomfortable, but let's just try to go to the edge of
> the abyss, because that's where the best images are.' Once he said that and
> allowed me that freedom to fail, I was free of all those rules and regulations
> that were imposed by going to film school and reading all those manuals.[14]

Lubezki's cinematography would be recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and

Sciences with a nomination for Best Cinematography, but Lubezki did not win the award. The

film would lose $18 million of its $30 million budget,[14] a "flop," and would be cut and reissued

in three versions: 135 minutes, 150 minutes, and 172 minutes. *The New World* is often

considered a beautiful misfire, but it hardly dissolved Malick's ability to get a film made.

After another six-year hiatus, Malick would release *The Tree of Life* in 2011 to universal

acclaim. With a budget and gross on par with *The New World*, *The Tree of Life* bombed at the

box office, but picked up three Oscar nominations -- Best Picture, Best Director for Malick, and

Best Cinematography for Lubezki. The film went home empty-handed, and Malick was a no-show again. Upon its release, however, *The Tree of Life* was met with a standing ovation at the Cannes Film Festival and took home the Palme d'Or that year. Often regarded as one of the best films of the decade, the twentieth century, and, often, of all-time, *The Tree of Life* stands as Malick's masterpiece, unequalled in scope, ambition, and emotional impact by any of his work before or since.

Considerable space and thought in this essay will be devoted to *The Tree of Life* as well as to Malick's next two films, *To the Wonder* (2012) and *Knight of Cups* (2015). Suffice it to say for now that after Malick's hiatus between *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line*, there is a marked change in the director's work. While the style and scope of his epic films does not vary much in the past twenty years, the three films that are the focus of this paper have become increasingly abstract and impressionistic. They also continue to gesture toward immanence and transcendence while becoming increasingly intimate and autobiographical. All are shot by Lubezki, designed by Fisk, scored by Alexandre Desplat and Hanan Townsend, and are edited by a team of five editors. They feature some similar actors and are all set in their contemporary time period, with *The Tree of Life* dipping generously into the past. Because of these stylistic similarities and the parallels with Malick's own biography, I find it appropriate to group these three films into a pseudo-trilogy, or perhaps triptych. In addition, while his next film *Voyage of Time* (2015) bears some resemblance to portions of *The Tree of Life*, it is essentially a nature documentary and marks enough of a break from the previous three films to be excluded from this study, although it is still undeniably Malickian. Moreover, Malick's next two films, *Song to Song* (2017), a love triangle in the contemporary Austin music scene, and *Radegund* (2018), a WWII

biography, appear to break with this intimate, autobiographical trend, with the producers of *Song to Song* promising a more traditional narrative, and *Radegund* diving decidedly into the past.

For our purposes now, though, let's define the "Malickian" style based on the director's most recent work. Visually, we can identify a film as "Malickian" when it uses natural lighting, wide-angle lenses, and a floating camera. A Malick film makes extensive use of the golden hue of magic hour and favors shooting against open exteriors and endless horizons. When a Malick film goes inside, the domestic space can isolate a character or become his/her playground. Often these spaces have large glass windows and screens, hardwood floors, lamps, and curtains. The modern, open-floor aesthetic allows for Malick's improvisational staging. A Malick film gravitates toward shadows cast long by the evening sun. It wanders through open fields and gazes up at tall trees. It traces a character's hand as it graces tall grass, their feet as dance and twirl. The physical choreography of a character's movement in relation to another says more than their sparse lines of dialogue can express. Characters express themselves more through these dancer-like, restless motions and whispery, opaque and poetic voice-overs than they do through the traditional give-and-take of dialogue. Malick's characters wander through old ruins, empty buildings, rooftops, deserts, open fields, large staircases, cathedrals, and beaches… so many beaches. The relationship of a character to his/her environment is more important than the continual pursuit of his/her concrete goal. The journey is spiritual and existential, rather than career-centered or based on accomplishment.

Furthermore, the Malick film makes extensive use of classical music, or a score that imitates one. These pieces, often soaring and evocative, conjure a longing for the sublime and gesture toward classic Romanticism. Coupled with the ballet-like blocking of the characters,

Malick's films more closely resemble expressionistic operas than traditional narrative film. His characters are archetypical, as one will whisper in *The Thin Red Line*, "all faces are the same man." As a result, Malickian cinema is less concerned with the development of characters and their pursuit of a concrete goal than in expressing a soul's inner longing for connection with nature, human beings, divine love, the essence of being, transcendence, and the sublime. It is for these reasons that Malick's films require different modes of expression. They must forge their own grammar and vocabulary in order to express that which few others in the medium have so aspired to, with, perhaps the exception of Ozu, Bresson, Bergman, Herzog, Tarkovsky, Carne, and possibly Tarr, Diaz, and Weerasethakul.

Malick, though, is unique among Americans. His closest equivalent is Harmony Korine who occupies more the role of a provocateur or enfant terrible than a philosopher. It is precisely because Malick is peerless, so in a league of his own that he requires special diagnoses and categorization and, I argue, that he is largely kept at bay. While some will charge that Malick is pretentious and gets a free pass because his admires confuse obstuseness for profundity, others like A.O. Scott and Manhola Dargis situate Malick alongside the practitioners of "Slow Cinema," the patron saints of the slow and the boring. This tag, the slow and the boring, was lovingly and defiantly applied by Dargis and Scott to their own tastes in a *New York Times* editorial. Within the cultural conversation about entertainment vs. art cinema, Dargis and Scott claim the need to eat one's cultural vegetables and dare suggest that those who claim to like those vegetables may not be lying.

In refutation of Dan Kois's rebuke of "slow-moving, meditative" and "stately, austere" and "deliberately-paced" films, Dargis and Scott defend the aspirational viewing of difficult

films while reappropriating which films might be considered "boring."[16] For Dargis, *The Hangover Part II* is boring, even though it is widely liked, because it is so "aggressively packaged" into something you must like that it is filled with repetitive gags and similar scenes.[17] It seems so safe and obsessed with the need to be liked, that its stupidity renders it boring, in that Warholian sense. For Warhol, "popism," that is, what everyone is supposed to like that it is repackaged and readministered in barely-inseparable forms, bores the careful viewer because it repeats and reapplies the original meaning so forcefully that it becomes devoid of meaning.

Instead, for Warhol, Dargis and Scott, that which is different and aspirational is exciting and entertaining, even if it is almost aggressively not so. Dargis submits Bela Tarr's *Satantango* as an example, a seven-hour, black-and-white epic, chock full of long static takes. The movie, Dargis writes, "restores a sense of duration, of time and life passing, that most movies try to obscure through continuity editing."[18] So, "faced with duration not distraction, your mind may wander, but there's no need for panic: it will come back. In wandering, there can be revelation as you meditate, trance out, bliss out, luxuriate in your thoughts, think."[19] The immediate counter to Dargis's claim asks why we need to go to the movies for meditation. Isn't that for church or yoga class? The movies should be for entertainment and escapism. That retort gets right to the heart of the disagreement. If movies are just for unplugging, then Tarr's seven-hour snorefest misses the mark. If, however, we approach film as something more challenge, as having the potential to achieve the heights of great novels or paintings, then perhaps Dargis and Scott are on to something. Indeed, cinematographer Rahul Jain says, "let painters talk about paint, and musicians talk about guitars or sound. I think filmmakers need to talk about time as the primary unit of cinema. We need to think about how we experience time in a variety of different ways.

When you're old, time passes so fast. When I was young, it was so slow. I wish filmmakers were thinking more about time."[20] If the fundamental unit of cinema is time, then these outlier filmmakers, these pretentious philosophers, might be stretching the medium to its full potential or daring to use it for what fundamentally defines it as an art. Entertainment, for Dargis, is distraction from the mundane lies that lie before. Whereas that which we normally deem slow and boring are invitations to meditate, to do the slow and painful work of reflecting and thinking.

Scott ups the ante suggesting that "movies may be the only art form whose core audience is widely believed to be actively hostile to ambition, difficult, or anything that seems to demand too much work on their part."[21] We often tend this way because film seems so democratic and populist, a sort of church that welcomes everyone, the aesthete and the Philistine. Scott brings up Richard Schickel's protest against *The Tree of Life* winning the Palme d'Or. Schickel writes that Malick's film is "inept," full of "twaddling pretenses" and that it gets the medium wrong. Film, he argues, is "an essentially worldly medium, playful and romantic, particularly in America, where, on the whole, our best directors have stated whatever serious intentions they may harbor as ignorable asides."[22] As Scott acknowledges, charges of "boring" or "pretentious" are hard to refute because of their subjective nature, but he posits the opposite -- that sincerity is the opposite of pretentiousness and *The Tree of Life* brims with "disarming sincerity." "While it is certainly possible to be puzzled or annoyed by Mr. Malick's philosophical tendencies or unmoved by the images he composes or the story he tells, I don't think there's any pretending involved,"[23] Scott writes. His claim, too, is far too subject to substantiate, but it does adequately get to the core of this culture war at the heart of slow and boring cinema, that's difficulty somehow excludes the democratic masses and so is snobby, elite, and disordered. What else it

reveals is that "serious" is a bad word in this culture conversation and that asking someone to think is suspect. Scott allows room for the popcorn entertainment, but requests a seat at the table for the serious and the ambitious, a seat not just dismissed to the side table of festival-goers and snobs.

However, the most important concept that arises from this conversation, even if subtlely so, is the tension between entertainment and time. I will argue that "entertainment" like "boring" is a word whose meaning should not be assumed. We tend to use "entertaining"[24] to suggest a quality that keeps our attention and so eliminates the awareness of what we are doing as we are doing it. Thus, it dissolves our experience of time elapsing; it collapses duration. But what gets lost here is in "popcorn" film, the entertaining is something that film does to you, not something that it actively and consciously invites you to do. As a result, an awareness of the experience of time is a symptom of boredom.

Still, the charge that a film is "boring" feels pedestrian and under-cooked. It risks sounding pretentious and pedantic to insist that detracts merely do not understand what the artist is trying to do. Yet, for the purposes of this essay, that premise bears important significance. To ground us in something more than "you don't get it," we can turn to Ellen Winner's book, *Invented Worlds: The Psychology of the Arts* for a defense of authorial intention and a certain degree of expertise when evaluating "difficult" art. Winner points out that many audiences and critics, "all assume that art serves the same need, or set of needs, for all people. And because any given work of art satisfies the same need in all individuals, there should be minimal disagreement about which works are the most satisfying."[25] In truth, we find the contrary with difficult and ambitious art. The evaluation of art's merit should not be a democratic enterprise, as

unpopular as that might be to suggest. While there is value and credence to the box office

success of a particular film, indicating that it at least appealed to large swaths of the audience

population, mere popularity does not determine artistic excellence. But the uttering of the phrase

is call for alarm, as it suggests that some viewers are more adept at recognizing better art than

others, and that such a thing as "better" can even exist, albeit aside from mass appeal. But

Winner will continue to support our argument by writing,

> how familiar a person is with the arts may influence the kind of art that is
> preferred… other studies have shown that people familiar with the arts, such as
> artists and students of art history, have aesthetic preferences that diverge
> consistently from those of people lacking familiarity with the arts. For instance,
> people who are knowledgeable about the arts base their aesthetic judgments on
> goodness of composition, while those without special knowledge of the arts base
> their judgements on degree of realism and type of subject matter.[26]

Because of the democratization of the consumption of film, no one wants to be told that

his/her preference is unsophisticated or his/her expertise and knowledge uninformed.

Indeed, there is a place for the merely entertaining in film, and some films manage to

bridge the gap between broad audience appeal and the favor of those who are familiar

with the arts.[27] Yet, the undeniable truth remains that those films which are deemed

excellent are initially unpopular, and one need not look further than the critical and box

office reception of the films of Orson Welles and David Lynch -- not to mention, Malick

-- to see this difficult truth demonstrated.

Winner will tell us that the general audience appreciates and expects harmony. We

are taught to look for consistency and coherence in our narrative and our symbolic

visuals. There is an unspoken contract between filmmaker and audience that whatever the

viewer is being shown is immediately relevant to decipher the literal and symbolic

meaning of a text. Any obscurity or red herrings are often treated more as failure than as

the mark of an individual stylist. But, as Tarkovsky tells us, even the sometimes sloppy

sentences and long digressions of Tolstoy should be understand as individual marks,

rather than errors that mar his perfection. It is, in fact, these imperfections, these

diversions from the completely safe that should be not only permitted but appreciated as

unique signatures of an artist like Tolstoy.[28] On the same note, A.O. Scott will defend *The*

Tree of Life for its ending and its dinosaur sequence by arguing,

> More than any other active filmmaker, Mr. Malick belongs in the visionary
> company of homegrown romantics like Herman Melville, Walt Whitman,
> Hart Crane, and James Agee. The definitive writing of these authors did
> not sit comfortably or find universal favor in their own time. They can still
> feel ungainly, unfinished, lacking polish and perfection. This is precisely
> what makes them alive and exciting.[29]

Because these diversions seem to tarnish the perfection of a piece or not sit comfortably

with universal favor, the causal audience dismiss them or outright disdains them, but

Winner insists that "A high tolerance of complexity might lead to superior aesthetic

judgment. It might also be that individuals with greater independence of judgment arrive

at superior aesthetic evaluations."[30] For Winner, a sophisticated understanding of an art

form requires "discrimination, intellect, and feeling." Furthermore,

> reading and making sense of a work of art, perceiving subtle differences
> and making fine discriminations, are what give pleasure to the aesthetic
> experience. And the satisfaction granted by gaining an understanding of a
> work of art is independent of whether or not a work is considered pleasing.
> The ability to make relevant discriminations does not unfold
> automatically; rather, it may well hinge on familiarity with the arts, on
> motivation, and perhaps even on cognitive style.[31]

Again, we can see the danger here of anointing bad form as high art, when it lacks an interior

consistency of meaning and expression. But, again, turning to Tarkovsky, we can see that content

and conscience must come before and primary to technique and style (though it becomes

increasingly hard to divorce those from each other). In summary, the difficulty or inaccessibility

of a text to the average should not on its own constitute greatness. Ambition alone is not enough.

But neither should it be dismissed outright as pretension or some failure on the part of the artist,

because we cannot assume, for instance, that Malick's (or Tarkovsky's) goal with their art is the

same as Steven Spielberg's or Christopher Nolan's. My argument for the reevaluation of

Malick's films along a different criteria should be understood less as a vindication of his

indulgences and more as an argument for an understanding of an artist on his own terms. When

one like Malick attempts something different from those cinematic expressions that came before

him, then a different criteria for the success of his expression must be applied.

     My methodology in the following chapters, in addition to making use of

phenomenology as it relates to time and memory, will be heavily rooted in an assertion

that the auteur theory can have some significant bearing on our ability to read inter-

textually across a filmmaker's oeuvre. Briefly, I must take a note from Andrew Sarris's

"Notes on Auteur Theory," to provide the framework for this study. Sarris conceptualizes

the auteur theory as three concentric circles. The broadest circle represents technique; the

middle circle stands for style; and the inner circle contains inner meaning. By

"technique," he refers most to the means by which an artist achieves his aesthetic

purposes. By "style," Sarris imagines the artistic qualities that works by the same artist

share. For a cinema artist, this could refer to cinematography, editing patterns, rhythm,

etc. And finally, by "inner meaning," Sarris means some sort of soul to the film the bears

the director's fingerprint or personality as an artist.[32] Perhaps it is said better by the *Los*

Angeles Times Book Review in its write-up on *Sculpting in Time*: "Content and conscience must come before technique -- for any artist in any art form."[33] So, while ample and considerable time will be afforded in this essay to Malick's style and technique as a way into discussing his "inner meaning," the heart and soul of the argument lies in the content and conscience of Malick's films.

While it is hard to deny the direct correlation between one's enjoyment of a film and the number of times one glances at his/her timepiece, this desire to eradicate the experience of time risks woefully undervaluing what might be the fundamental unit of cinematic expression. What Jain suggested is not new. In the 1970s, Tarkovsky wrote extensively on how he considered filmmaking to be "sculpting in time." If time is precious and fundamental to cinematic expression, then surely it deserve a more careful and considerate treatment than the desire for it to be ignored outright.

1. "Terrence Malick" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terrence_Malick

2. Ibid.

3. *Ibid*.

4. Theresa Schwartzman. Dietmar Schwärzler; Sylvia SzelIt, eds. "Can Terry Malick Tell a Joke?". *Rohstoff Filmmagazin*. Vienna (2): 21–23. Archived from the original on February 7, 2012. Retrieved May 12, 2013.

5. "Terrence Malick"

6. "*Badlands*: Taglines" http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0069762/taglines?ref_=tt_stry_tg

7. Both of these figures were gathered from their respective IMDB pages under "Trivia."

8. "*Days of Heaven*: Taglines" http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077405/?ref_=nv_sr_1

9. Gleaned from the "Trivia" page on the IMDB entry for *The Thin Red Line*.

10. "Plummer - 'I'll Never Work with Him Again'" *The Hollywood Reporter* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw08GQw0hBI

11. "*The Thin Red Line*" IMDB. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120863/

12. *Ibid.*

*13. "*Emmanuel Lubezki: Quotes" http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0523881/bio?ref_=nm_dyk_qt_sm#quotes

14. Ibid.

15. "*The New World*" Wikipedia

16. Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott, "In Defense of the Slow and Boring" *The New York Times*. 3 Jun. 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/movies/films-in-defense-of-slow-and-boring.html

17. *Ibid*.

18. *Ibid*.

19. *Ibid*.

20. Rahul Jain as qtd. in "Sundance Cinematography Winner 'Machines': 'Time Is the Primary Unit of Cinema'" No Film School. 2 Feb. 2017. http://nofilmschool.com/2017/02/machines-rahul-jain-interview

21. Dargis and Scott.

22. Richard Schickel as qtd in Dargis and Scott.

23. Dargis and Scott.

24. The Dictionary definition underscores the need for "pleasure, diversion or amusement," centering the meaning of "entertainment" around an "agreeable occupation for the mind." It is curious, however, that the entry also offers this definition: "a divertingly adventurous, comic, or picaresque novel." The connotation of wandering and novelistic will come in handy later in this study.

25. Ellen Winner, *Invented Worlds: The Psychology of the Arts*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) 66.

26. *Ibid*. 68.

27. George Miller's recent blockbuster *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) is one such example.

28. Tarkovsky 112.

29. A.O. Scott, "Heaven, Texas and the Cosmic Whodunit" *The New York Times*. 26 May 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/27/movies/the-tree-of-life-from-terrence-malick-review.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

30. Winner 70.

31. *Ibid.* 77.

32. Andrew Sarris, "Notes on Auteur Theory."

33. *Los Angeles Times Book Review* as qtd. on Tarkovsky.

Chapter 2: "Sculpting in Time"

Perhaps Tarkovsky is Malick's closest neighbor in terms of the contemplation and expression of time in his films. While Linklater's *Boyhood* bears resemblance to Malick's *The Tree of Life* in content, the spiritual focus, editing patterns, and cinematographic representation drive a bit of a wedge between the two. Tarkovsky, though, will highlight time as the primary unit of cinema, building off of and separating his own ideas and expression from Sergei Eisenstein's essays on and practice of the subject. While not a direct descendent of Tarkovsky, Malick's expression of time and rhythm through editing, but more importantly, through composition, contain enough of a theoretical root in the work of Tarkovsky to bear comparison. It is an added plus that Tarkovsky wrote extensively on the topic in his book *Sculpting in Time*.

In order to understand the importance of time to the cinema, we must first establish, as Tarkovsky does in "Imprinted Time," that "Time is a condition for the existence of our 'I.'"[1] Cinema, like the individual subjective experience is only possibly because of the existence of time. Tarkovsky writes, "once the links are severed between the individual personality and the conditions of existece... the moment of death is also the death of individual time."[2] We find this at the end of Malick's *The Tree of Life* and throughout *Knight of Cups*. In the latter, the chapter of the film entitled "Death" is the only one that brings forth life. At the beginning of the film, we are introduced to Rick (Christian Bale) our pilgrim wanderer as he walks through the boundless desert. This shot -- and the returns to it throughout the film -- call to mind Jack's (Sean Penn) wanderings through the desert in *The Tree of Life.* In *Tree*, this landscape represents the moment after death, passing from the material and natural world into some sort of heaven beyond. But, in

Knight, Ricks begins his journey along the same path where Jack ends his. We could assume that all of *Knight* takes place as a memory recalled at the exact moment of Rick's death. However, a more symbolic reading is appropriate here and affords us a richer understanding of Malick's voyage of time. By beginning where *Tree* ends, Malick reinforces his idea that time, as experienced on earth, does not bind itself to linearity, but still takes root in cause and effect. By the end of the film, Rick passes through similar vistas, but whispers "Look. Remember. Begin." over the soundtrack. This narrative gesture suggests that the entire film, whether experienced in the first time for Rick or through memory, assumes a circular structure, not divorced from cause and effect. And so, each reiteration of an event in Rick's life through the act of remembering and through the phenomenon of memory becomes at once real again and takes on a new and important meaning for the man's whose journey goes from death to life, from absence to meaning. For Tarkovsky, and for Malick, time is not limited to linear time, but also must bear consideration in the relationship between cause and effect. In realizing this connection, man is able to return to his past because the past and the present become linked. In doing so, time becomes essential for memory. Tarkovsky calls memory "a spiritual concept" in that it gives "gives [each person] the opportunity of knowing himself as a moral being."[3] In Rick's Kierkegaardian journey as a "knight of the faith," actions that ground him in the process of becoming rescue him from death, a death that takes form in merely the absence of life, of being an onlooker or a stranger in one's own present experience. Grace builds on nature, as Augustine will tell us. The existential man realizes his being through actions that make him a being in time.

Still, the empty and vast expanses of desert should not be merely seen as some wasteland of damnation, some "ruins-porn," as Peter Bradshaw writing for *The Guardian* would have it.[4]

While emptiness implies an absence of some great presence or some great building before, the absence and the emptiness contains within it a key to the remebrance of the past. For the Romantic, old ruins, old things, find their essence in being a link to a time past, a purpose that surpasses their purposiveness intended in their creation -- their utility. One recalls Shelley's "Ozymandias," which reminds us that even after things are long past, when great men are dead and their memories laid waste, that "nothing beside remains." This rich phrase carries two meanings. First, it is a lament that there is nothing *except* remains, that what was once great and real and alive is now dead and decayed. But it also suggests that there is still nothing *next to* remains. This second reading foresees a darker fate for the great things that have come to pass. And yet, Shelley's pun forces the reader to deal with the paradoxical meaning of "remains," -- something that at once survives duration, yet bears the marks of greatness laid waste. In a similar vein, Tarkovsky draws our attention to "*saba,*" the rustiness and cham of the olden days, the stamp of time. "Saba," he writes, "embodies the link between art and nature."[5]

This link can be suggested and, in some ways, composed, on the editing table where the joining of two images produces a third, larger meaning; however, editing is not solely, or even primarily, responsible for the director's individual technique of sculpting in time. In response to Eisenstein, Tarkovsky writes, "juxtaposing a person with an environment that is boundless, collating him with a countless number of people passing by close to him and far away, relating a person to the whole world: that is the meaning of cinema."[6] Here, we call to mind Malick's and Lubezki's astonishing ability to isolate their subject in a crowded frame. By using a wide-angle lens and still composing close-ups, Malick and Lubezki create a strong emotional connection between audience and subject while still, in the same frame, isolating that in their own

environment. In the closest and most intimate relationship that a shot could give us with a character -- a closeup of his/her face -- the character is still a stronger in his/her own home. In the picture below,[7] we can see Rick's wistful isolation, while the background of the frame is crowded with people. These people are not relegated to visual redundancies, as is often in the case when backgrounds are obscured, but rather underline how detached Rick is from other people who occupy the same space as he does.

Similarly, *Knight of Cups* returns to a shot of Rick driving his convertible down an empty road. A single car on a single highway. These shots, which occur near the beginning and the end of the film, not only visually cue the journey of the pilgrim at the center of the film's narrative, but also demonstrate the capacity for man in the modern world to isolate himself through technology and machinery. Speeding through tunnels or past vast expanses of horizon, Rick, even when he's with one of his many lovers, is oblivious to and cut off from the natural and simulated world around him. He pays the same paltry amount of care to steely metropolis as to

the sublime vista. It is ironic, too, that his car, without windows or roof seperating him from his environment, is still a vehicle for isolation, a product of the industrial dehumanization of the modern man. These shots, too, are a visual reference to Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, which features an extended, nearly seven-minute long shot of a car traversing the winding highways and overpasses of the city. Malick's use of this shot -- called "the phantom ride" by Mark Cousins, among others -- reflects his use of shot in *The Tree of Life* where it serves as an introduction to the modern world and the isolation of Jack within it. In both films, Malick favors the time lapse for these shots, heightening the distortion of time which makes a man's realization of being nearly impossible. Tarkovsky will tell us that, "the distortion of time can be a means of giving it rhythmical expression."[8] With that in mind, Malick's rare use of the time lapse warrants comment, especially against the backdrop of films whose editing pattern is quick, even if its narrative is slow or only seems so.

If film involves sculpting in time, rhythm is the movement of time. While Tarkovsky concedes that "montage cinema" "brings together two concepts and thus engenders a new, third one," he also holds that "the assembly of the shots is responsible for the structure of a film, it does not, as is generally assumed, create its rhythm. The distinctive time running through the shots makes the rythm of the picture; and rhythm is determined not by the length of the edited pieces, but by the pressure of the time that runs through them. Editing cannot determine rhythm."[9] Rather, rhythm is determined by "time-pressure."[10] The time lapse in *Tree* and *Knight* alter the "time-pressure" and so, the rhythm, of these two films, films for which the experience and manipulation of time are paramount.

Another way to discuss Malick's meditations on time is by comparison to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Both Harold Bloom and Georges Poulet give distinct accounts of time in the work of Emerson. In Bloom's *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*, Bloom focuses his own collection of the American canon and each literary giant's relationship reach towards literary greatness through sheer ambition. For each of the authors examined in his volume, Bloom admires the reach for the sublime as an "effort to transcend the human without forsaking humanism."[11] His brief mention of transcendence in its relationship to the sublime calls to mind the differences between Kant's and Schopenhaur's accounts of aesthetic experience, particularly how transcendence relates to the sublime.

The key to Kant's ideas about nature and aesthetic experience can be found in his emphasis on purposiveness. For Kant, because of the a priori and empirical laws of nature which can be discerned by the human observer, we can recognize natural as the result of some intelligent design. Because the purposiveness of nature is intelligible to the human observer without any direct experience necessary, then, Kant argues, we can understand nature as being designed to be understood by us. However, our understanding of nature, then, does not result from actual theoretical knowledge, but only from our hypothesis about its purposiveness. Likewise, aesthetic judgments about beauty and the sublime involve a purposiveness that suggests the beauty of nature is "hospitable to our ends."[12] Our end, though, is not actually correctly deem what is beautiful to be beautiful, but rather to stimulate and engage our imagination and understanding in a sort of "free play" from which we derive aesthetic pleasure. As a result, "beauty is not a property of objects, but a relation between their form and the way our cognitive faculties work."[13] Similarly, beautiful art stimulates this aesthetic pleasure, but

is most successful when it seems unintentional. Natural beauty is different because it is effortless; it knows not how to stimulate our aesthetic faculties, and so it would seem to be unintentional, and thus, more aesthetically pleasing to our understanding and imagination.

Now, because we are "self-organizing" beings,[14] Kant will continue to grapple with our need to erect aesthetic categories. We must understand the parts in relation to the whole based on how the object fulfills the purpose for which it is created. This, then, leads Kant to speculate about God's intention of creating the universe. What was God's end in mind? Our intuitive intellect and our organizing impulse, which constructs concepts, begs for a teleological concept for all things. Kant will conclude that the end for nature is human beings because we can morally use nature in order to derive our own happiness from understanding and imagination. And so, our aesthetic judgments lead to the highest good.

Schopenhauer, like Kant, will attempt to resituate aesthetic judgment within the realm of the subjective, arguing that beauty in nature can best be observed through its effects on the subject. The biggest difference between Schopenhauer and Kant, however, is that Kant believes we should start with aesthetic judgment while Schopenhauer prioritizes the authority of aesthetic experience, "before the subject attempts to formulate judgments about the experience."[15] For the artist, this aesthetic experience, which can only truly be understood through intuition, can be communicated through artistic expression. But for the non-artist, we must form our intuition into concepts and thus lose something through the translation to abstraction.

So, we are left with a somewhat-superficial war between objective criteria for the experience of nature v. the primacy of the individual subjective experience. The core of this

difference is epistemological. For Kantians, the categories and concepts of beauty adhere to almost Platonic Ideals, while for the Schopenhauer School, the subjectivity of experience channels knowledge into our human intuition. For our sake, we will side with Schopenhauer because his methodology walks more closely with phenomenology, while Kant's strict adherence to Platonic Ideals reflects structuralism too closely for our efforts here. Briefly, Schopenhauer's aesthetic categories include "The Beautiful," "The Stimulating," and "The Sublime." "The Beautiful" arises from natural objects transitioning to a "will-less, tranquil" state. Their experience on the subject is immediate and almost effortless. "The Stimulating" resists contemplation by stirring the appetite positively or negatively. This could include a well-cooked meal, a still-life painting, or pornography. Finally, "The Sublime" contain objects so vast and intimidating that they consume the human's attempts and capacities for contemplating or understanding them. Among examples he provides are the starry night sky and a long desert landscape, objects which are impossible to contemplate.[16] While Schopenhauer does allow for some art objects to be sublime, he favors the natural realm for such an experience, because the more total the threat of diminishing the human individual, the more powerful the experience of the sublime. The subject must turn away from the hostility of these objects and, in doing so, experiences a state of elevation. This requires a resignation of our ability to understand and imagine. The resignation, the turning away, untethers ourselves from our will and thrusts us into will-less contemplation. As opposed to the experience of "The Beautiful," which is characterized by a pleasurable loss of consciousness, the experience of "The Sublime" involves a somewhat painful experience of two moments of self-consciousness. The experience of "The Sublime" allows one to feel

"exaltation" in the liberation of the consciousness from the will.[17] It is also worth noting that in Schopenhauer's hierarchy of fine arts, poetry ranks second-from-the-top because of its ability to transform abstract Ideals and communicate them through language. Music sits atop the pyramid because it bypasses translation altogether and reproduces the experience of the Ideal which it would hope to communicate. It avoids conceptualization and so can communicate the Ideals in their purest form.

For Emerson, Bloom writes, the sublime is self-contradictory. Timothy Weiskel will posit, "The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human -- God or the gods, the daemon or Nature -- is matter for greater disagreement. What, if anything, defines the range of the human is scarcely less sure."[18] And so, in Bloom's estimation, the experience of the sublime requires a belief in God and Nature, the God-Man, and the Adam of the New World. Through this formulation, our experience with the sublime of nature can be most clearly understood and expressed. Adam's dilemma, being at once rendered powerless in awe of natural beauty and motivated to assert the dominion of his rationality over it, echoes in the dilemma of the artist when attempting to represent or express the sublime. As a result, "simplistically, the sublime in literature has been associated with peak experiences that render a secular version of a theophany: a sense of something interfused that transforms a natural moment, landscape, action or countenance."[19] Experiences of the sublime, for Bloom, are appearances of the divine to the human, events which transforms a moment or allows the human to see it again with new eyes.

By focusing on American authors in his book, Bloom emphasizes his belief that America favors more drastic sublimities than Europe (we will see what Poulet has to say about that in a

short bit). In the tradition of American literature, Bloom sees a trend in which "poems, novels, stories, plays matter only if we matter. They give us the blessing of more life, whether or not they initiate a time beyond boundaries."[20] The stories that matter reaffirm the human by transcending him by searching for moments of theophany, while never losing sight of the human at the core of it. "High literature," he writes, "endeavors to augment that span… that proliferation of consciousness by which we go on living and finding our own sense of being."[21] In a paradoxical way, losing our sense of humanness through an expression of our perceived dominion over nature, by reason, only reaffirms the transcendence of man beyond nature and Immanence, the divine presence which encompasses and is made manifest in the material world.

In Emerson, Bloom reads a limitlessness to his poetry. This poetry requires a love "inexplicable in regard to origins," and one which, "opens fresh vistas."[22] These fresh vistas can be a whole New World or a world seen through new, transformed eyes. Indeed, as Walter Pater will assert, romantic poetry, like Emerson's, adds strangeness to beauty,[23] but a strangeness, Owen Barfield suggests, that must be rooted in meaning.

But, the sublime in Emerson does not emerge from some passive gazing or being overtaken with a sense of wonder and awe at Immanence. Instead,

> it is not correlative with wonder; for wonder is our reaction to things which we are conscious of not quite understanding, or at any rate of understanding less than we had thought. The element of strangeness in beauty has the contrary effect. It arises from contact with a different kind of *consciousness* from our own, different, yet not so remote that we cannot partly share it, as indeed, in such a connection, the mere word 'contact' implies. Strangeness, in fact, arouses wonder when we do not understand; aesthetic imagination when we do.[24]

In Bloom's quote, the sublime in nature causes wonder within the human subject that experiences this theophany. Wonder does not require a conscious action or an intellectual

interpretation, no meditation or context for what is being seen. Therefore, wonder cannot alone constitute an experience with the sublime because, as he establishes earlier, such an experience must come from that seminal paradox of humbling before Immanence and the assertion of our rationality over nature. Strangeness without meaning, style without substance, then eludes a conscious understanding, and so, we cannot take part in it; there is no connection or "contact." This is, I believe, where Bloom's fixation with literary ambition is essential to his understanding of the sublime. Merely being taken over by the Immanence present in a sublime moment or aesthetic experience constitutes a passive viewing experience. Literary ambition, on the other hand, attempts to understand by way of the aesthetic imagination, even if such an attempt is obviously futile.

Likewise, French philosopher Georges Poulet will have a great bit to say about Emerson and aesthetic experience, tying it more directly to concerns about time in his book *Studies of Human Time*. Time, for Poulet, consists of parts, of lived moments, not the traditional understanding of continuity, which he deems false and which must be done away with. However, "when we have destroyed the false continuity of time, we have still not attained the instant; we only distinguish the true discontinuity of the temporal life."[25] In order to grasp the instant, we must strive for a spiritual unity, a human transcendence, as Poulet sees in the work of Emerson. "Spiritual unity," he writes, "is not in the least temporal. It is a relationship between the lived moment and the universal totality. It is an immediate and total representation of the universe that is formed in the mind every moment."[26] Poulet's fascinating and difficult claim about spiritual unity accounts for both an experience that obviously must transcend the material, temporal world, and one that attempts to unite said world with the spiritual. While we seem, as humans, to

be only situated in one particular moment in time, prayer, poetry, or expressions of high art, allow us to apprehend the absolute, during which, Poulet argues, we exist, and only truly in these ambitions. His account of humans coming into being through time insists on a theory of creation which continues to unfold, is not just one event or moment fixed in time, and requires, as the existentialists will hold, actions in order to truly *be*. During these moments of existing (which, it cannot be overstated, must not be read as merely being absently, but in moments in which he apprehend the absolute), during "each moment in which we exist," we find "also the moment in which, beyond the intuition of our existence and that of nature, we have the intuition of the divine immensity: 'If you are sure of your truth, you ascend now into eternity."[27] So the great goal and achievement of Emerson's work, for Poulet, is the apprehension of those moments which require our assertion of the dominion of our rationality over Nature (as Bloom would have it), and then a further step to and beyond the truth we hold of our existence, a truth which cannot be grasped by reason, but only through the assertion of it and its failure to fully grasp the sublime. Our Romantic intuition, then, of both our existence and the existence of Nature grants us the knowledge of divine immensity (not what it is, but that it is) and makes us aware of Immanence. We now can transcend into eternity, which we finally come to understand, is truly an everlasting Now.

In order to fully grasp and unpack how Poulet finishes Bloom's account of ambition paving the path to human transcendence through the assertion of our existence by way of poetry and prayer, we must spend some time understanding what Poulet means by "human time." Jumping back a bit, Poulet begins his introduction to *Studies in Human Time* with this account of the Christian of the Middle Ages: "[He] did not have first to discover himself existing in time…

To feel that he existed was to feel himself *to be*: neither changing nor becoming… it was simply to feel he was and that he endured… There was no real distinction for him between existence and duration. [He] could never cease to be what he really was."[28] For Poulet, duration is the continuation of existence, and so existence is not a momentary thing, but one which persists through duration. The Christian of the Middle Ages, then, recognized no distinction between being and existing. It would not make sense to think of being as an action and existence as some sort of passive enduring. Instead, for the Christian of the Middle Ages, existence and everything was possessed of "an intrinsic continuity," by which "they were being created every moment… the Creator caused them to be and to endure."[29] Creation was not a one-time event, but a continua, renewing process, and thus creation and preservation are an indivisible action.

Still, "the being of the creature tended always toward nothingness," but his existence required the creature to have "an aptitude for preservation."[30] As Bloom noted earlier in man's striving to grasp the sublime, our Adamic Fall places us on downward spiral towards annihilation, towards nothingness, and yet, to be, to exist, to persevere, meant "to tend Godward" and to "never to cease to possess one's aptitude for receiving one's existence from God."[31] But, as our experience, and the experience of every man makes known through intuition, our understanding of change introduces a continuity to time and thus divides temporality into moments of change, one cause to another effect. For the Middle Ages Christian, "to change was to pass from potentiality to actuality… nothing about [this transition] was necessarily temporal… Everything should have happened simultaneously and at once."[32] While this is nearly impossible to fathom as the Modern Man, we must notice that Poulet's formation establishes time in being, not being in time by merging together "the permanent continuity of substantial form; and the

successive continuity of change."[33] Change is not something that happens, but something that is happening, and so it is inseparable from being. Being is not stagnant; existence is not endurance. Rather, being and existing require an understanding of time that does not move along a one-way continuum, but that is always Now.

In other words, for the Middle Age Christian, time "was not a mode of duration absolutely different from permanence… [but] guided toward completion."[34] This movement toward an end imagines a finality of movement that "transcended its materiality." The body of the Middle Age Christian "felt a continuous orientation toward a spiritual perfection."[35] Indeed, for Locke, succession of his thoughts could give him the idea of time. Actions, then, brought man "close to [his] point of perfection," and "[his] own completion in time, tended to release itself from time." Among the many prominent forms of artistic expression during the Middle Ages, architecture rested upon two principles: "The continuous creation which established the permanence of the creature and of his substantial activity; and the divine concourse which allowed him to realize himself in time."[36] In the Middle Ages, it was architecture. For the Romantic, it will be prayer and poetry.

Poulet further argues that after the Middle Ages Christian, "the character of human duration changed profoundly."[37] Man no longer considered God to be an otherworldly cause which created, and preserved His creatures and continued their existences by his own effort and will. Instead, God was seen as "the indwelling power that from within tirelessly sustained and prolonged the universal motion by which things and beings accomplished their temporal destiny."[38] God was no longer thought of creating permanence, but rather as an Immanent force

which sustains the universe "only in its becoming."[39] This process is "guided by a cyclical development, a force everywhere the same and perpetually diversified" aka "daemons."[40]

As a result, Poulet says, Man gained a "joy of being in time" because temporality no longer served as a reminder of our impending mortality. Rather, it provided us with a "theatre and a field of action"[41] through which man could explore divinity and attain a personal immortality despite his own mortality. In other words, this new understanding of a God which does not sustain permanence fortified the importance of Man's own effort to create his own becoming and establish his own permanence through prayer and poetry. Such grand artistic efforts sought the divine immanence in nature and in man which has seemed to separate itself from its origin. Thus, "the once-immanent creative activity had become transcendent." It's goal, to "maintain the creature in its existence."[42]

However, for Luther and Calvin, original sin had robbed Man from the right of participating in the creative act, and no effort at his own preservation through artistic expression could change that. No effort to assert his existence through the creative act could reestablish Man from his fallen state into a state of being with true nature and true duration. But, for the redeemed, duration is eternal, and in the particular moment of redemption, the act of creation (or creative effort) is "joined to an eternal moment."[43] In other words, creative expression on behalf of the fallen man revises Descartes famous assertion of his own existence. Instead of *cogito ergo sum*, *credo ergo sum*. Through an act of faith, and this can be a creative one, the fallen man can attempt to redeem himself from the finality of mortality and reestablish his connection with the divine. For the Romantic, "human consciousness finds itself reduced to Existence without duration. It is always of the present moment,"[44] and that is a moment of pure intuition, not a

rationalist *cogito*. For the Romantic, "Existence and duration are no longer identical. To exist

does not necessarily mean to endure. It is necessary to pass from one to the other, and this

passage is no less difficult to conceive than the relationship of the spirit to the body or the

transmission of motion in the universe."[45]

Through Poulet's charting of the Middle Ages Christian to his Fall to his attempt at

redemption as a Romantic Man, we can see the typical arc of a Malickian protagonist, as most

clearly expressed recently through his Rick (Christian Bale) in *Knight of Cups*. Near the

beginning of Malick's odyssey through modern L.A., a voice-over by Ben Kingsley recites this

passage from *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan.

> Once the soul was perfect and had wings and could soar into heaven as only
> creatures can. But the soul lost its wings and fell to earth, there it took an earthly
> body, and now while it lives in this body no outward sign of wings can be seen,
> yet the roots of its wings are still there and the nature of these is to try to raise the
> earthbound soul into heaven. When you see a beautiful woman or a man, the soul
> remembers the beauty it used to know in heaven and the wings begin to sprout
> and makes the soul want to fly but it cannot yet, the man is still too weak, so the
> man keeps staring at the sky like a young bird. He has lost all interest in the world
> around him.[46]

A Christian allegory from 1678, Bunyan's novel depicts the journey of the Christian man through

the temptation of the secular world to salvation in heaven with Christ. Its characters are each

archetypical, taking names like "Christian," "Talkative," "Faithful," "Help," etc.[47] The form and

narrative of *Knight of Cups* borrows heavily from Bunyan's tale, using it as a sort of blueprint

and casting the above quote as a sort of epigram for the film. Malick also borrows from

Augustine's *Confessions* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* in his construction of *Knight of Cups*. It is

essential to note, however, that Malick, unafraid of placing his films in decades past, unfolds

Knight of Cups in the present, updating those classic narratives of spiritual and existential

journeys for a contemporary art form.

Indeed, Malick's embrace of the modern goes further than his use of present-day as a

setting for his most recent films. An auteur whose visual style is indistinguishable from the

contributions of Lubezki, Malick frequently employs the use of very low-grade, consumer-level

HD cameras and GoPros throughout *Knight of Cups*. Lubezki's wide-angle shots, wide

compositions, wandering camera, and use of natural light still dominate a majority of the film,

but standing in stark contrast to Malick's choice to employ these consumer-grade cameras for

certain scenes, warrants mentioning.

But not everyone shares my enthusiasm for Malick's spiritual digressions and aesthetic

experiments. Patterson wrote, "Malick has been drifting away from me for a while now…

[*Knight* is] everything Malick's detractors loathe: pictorially incontinent or annoyingly gorgeous,

throttled by voiceover, and quite the 118-minute slog,"[48] while admitting,

> the pleasures are myriad. Chivo working at a fever pitch of pictorial ecstasy in his
> outings with Malick. There are the architectural cliches freshly revitalised -- the
> exterior elevators at the Bonaventure Hotel and the hilltop glass box of the Stahl
> House -- but there are also lesser-known pleasures, such as the tunnel from the
> I-10 freeway onto the Pacific Coast Highway, which can feel like an ascent into
> heaven, just as the movie uses it.[49]

Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* commented, "There are moments of visual brilliance

here, moments of reverence and even grandeur. But his style is stagnating into mannerism,

cliche, and self-parody."[50] Bradshaw appreciated the application of "transcendent visual

language to evoke heartland America" in Malick's *To the Wonder*, but found these same

techniques to be now "tiresome" in L.A., constituting what he calls, "pedantic", and the "least

interesting spiritual crisis in history."[51] What Bradshaw misses here is the suggestion of inter-

textuality between Malick's films. Malick wants you to recall the gorgeous shots with the camera gazing heavenward up the enormous truck of a giant and ancient tree in search of some sublime and transcendent beauty. That same camera move, that same gaze now desperately searches for meaning in the steel-and-glass plated skyscrapers. Green is replaced with silver, nature with modern architecture. Several shots inside Rick's speeding car watch a horizon and an empty L.A. street flash by in a blur. A similar time-lapse of traffic coursing through a lifeless city was used in *The Tree of Life* to suggest the spiritual alienation of Jack (Sean Penn) in that film. If Malick's visual cues, style, and grammar seem tired, fine, but the viewer's recognition that he/she has seen some of it before is essential to his effort.

In a brilliant essay for *Curator Magazine*, Trevor Logan notes extensives the Kierkegaardian influences[52] on Malick's recent work, namely in the quest of spiritual redemption in the secular world. He astutely observes that *Knight of Cups* was marketed as "a quest," and so all of the wandering through the vacant city streets and the climbing through the barren desert serve as visual metaphors for the arduous climb out of damnation and into salvation. One of Logan's better finds is this line from Augustine: "Think of the burden of Christ as being like the burden of wings for birds. As long as a bird is burdened by wings, it can fly. Without wings, it is trapped on earth. The wings carrying us to Christ are the commandments to love God above all and our neighbor as ourself. To the extent that you use these wings, you will lift up your heart."[53] For Augustine, love is necessary to grow the wings and to fly toward the infinite, attempting the ascendence from the tethers of the human condition to the transcendent through the creative act, the precise process by which Poulet promised man could escape duration and discover being.

Now, Logan will also shine an important light on repetition[54] in Malick's films. Logan

writes, "To make the movement of repetition is synonymous with the movement of faith."[55] He

expects this to serve as an explanation of what he calls "double-takes"[56] in both *To the Wonder*

and *Knight of Cups*, but this quick claim goes underdeveloped. Logan relies on Plato's

explanation of our flight from the cave to demonstrate that repetition begins with recollection, or

that, Wittgenstein writes, "what is incomprehensible is that nothing, and yet everything, has

changed,"[57] or as Proust would say, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new

landscapes but in seeing with new eyes."[58] In recollection, in the act of memory, we become

conscious of our lost world, of a past that has passed, of a paradise lost. But, repetition, and thus,

faith, regains the transformed old world and heals the soul of anxiety and alienation. Logan will

tell us that it is Malick's quest to "get us to fall in love with repetition," or as Kierkegaard writes,

"the love of repetition is in truth the only happy love" because it "connects the temporal with the

eternal."[60] We again hear echoes of Poulet's description of the journey of man from the Middle

Ages into the Romantic Era.

But not all viewers had the same deeply philosophical experience. Bradshaw finds the

characters narratively disposable, but beautiful, and notes that the robbery scene is observed in

the same "woozy, dreamy, flashback pace as the rest of the movie and is thus hardly noticed."[61]

His viewing never slipped into the sense of rhythm that Malick establishes. Ultimately, he

concludes that "the mythological and spiritual resonance of everything that we see is entirely

unearned."[62] Interestingly enough, Bradshaw does take time to remark that Malick's continual

return to shots of the desert -- a visual motif present and relevant in *The Tree of Life* -- can be

chalked up to "ruins-porn."[63]

Richard Brody, on the other hand, defends Malick as one of the few contemporary filmmakers who remains honest about his experience. He calls *Knight of Cups*, "a confessional, the Dantesque midlife-crisis drama, the religious quest, the romantic struggle, the sexual reverie, the family melodrama," and remarks that "perhaps no film in the history of cinema follows the movement of memory as faithfully, as passionately, or as profoundly."[64] In defense of the film's picaresque, wandering structure, Brody explains that the "Protagonist's life, like most people's lives, involves intertwined strands of activity that don't just overlap but are inseparable from each other."[65] The film, we writes, is intimate in focus, but epic in scope. Brody is correct to identify how the film's reliance on memory punctuates its "ecstatic power of its images and sounds."[66] He finds it confessional, intimate, almost private in its semi-autobiographical vein.

Beginning with a voice-over about a story in search of a treasure, the rest of the film unfolds in a series of episodes, incidents, impressions, and experiences, sometimes repetitive, sometimes referential, sometimes elliptical in nature. Where some see a structural mess, Brody sees a "vision of the modern world, the world of inescapable images and of their dubious demiurges."[67] Rather than decrying the film's anti-narrative thrust, Brody celebrates that

> One of the movie's majestic paradoxes that his desire to make himself whole involves not an artificial synthesis from the start but the acceptance of fragments -- of incidents, experience, episodes, impressions -- from which their own unifying principle will arise. *Knight of Cups* is Rick's act of remembering, and it follows the strange double logic of memory -- the triggering efforts of willful thought and the free-flowing associations of the unconscious mind.[68]

Indeed, as Brody and others have identified, the title is a reference a Tarot card, which serves as the organizing logic of the story. It is a "metaphor to fleeting moments, to visions and sounds that bring pieces of Rick's latter-day life rushing ahead with an irrepressible energy."[69] Told in eight

parts separated by a title card, *Knight of Cups* contains episodes which bear the titles "The Moon," "The Hanged Man," "The Hermit," "Judgment," "The Tower," "The High Priestess," "Death," and "Freedom," each an allusion to a specific Tarot card. However, one must wonder what Malick hopes to achieve or suggest by melding a Christian allegory with Tarot cards to form the structure of his modern-day, and semi-autobiographical spiritual journey, one that ends in progress rather than despair. Rather than a lazy organizational technique, this fusion of multiple spiritual epistemologies through which the viewer can help to construct meaning. Malick seems to suggest that any spiritual mode of understanding is better than none at all, and amidst the excess and emptiness of the hedonism on display, Rick and the viewer are joined in the journey of "spontaneous inner creation at the core of the film."[70]

Like the juxtaposition of Tarot cards and Christian spirituality, the visual representation of objects in the film oscillates between "The Beautiful," "The Stimulating," and "The Sublime." We are given settings that vary from the limitless luxury of a Versailles-like L.A. mansion to the natural paradise of the beach and ocean to finally an uninhabited wasteland, a cracked desert that resembles a fiery inferno in the darkness on the edge of town. We find this the placement of "The Stimulating" next to "The Beautiful" and "The Sublime" in Malick's visual grammar -- the aforementioned low-res, consumer-grade footage set next to the work of a modern cinematographic legend -- as well as in his casting. Like nearly all of his films, *Knight of Cups* features a litany of impossibly-beautiful people. Sure, it's L.A., and everyone looks like that, but the exterior beauty of the characters pressed against the vacuousness of their words, their character, and their interior lives reveals a deep spiritual chasm. In *To The Wonder*, Malick will make a similar move, casting Ben Affleck, Olga Kurylenko, Javier Bardem, and Rachel

McAdams and placing them often alongside very earthy-looking locals. The juxtaposition mirrors the juxtaposition of the basic, pastoral quality of the Midwestern settings next to the episodes in France. Many characters do not even warrant names, or simply borrow the first names of the men and women who play them. For the first time in a Malick film, recognizable faces people the background as extras, faces at once recognizable and hardly distinguishable from the party crowd. There is a sexual pleasure tied to the visual pleasure, one which the viewer must feel in order to experience the confessional spiritual journey and redemption that Rick goes through. But pleasure can be temporary if it is not rooted in joy. For Malick, much of the realization, the spiritual awakening that goes into a character's redemption comes from the joy of seeing with new eyes. For a deeper exploration of this representation of subjectivity and the experience with The Sublime as it relates to time, we must turn over to our exploration of memory in Malick's films.

1. Tarkovsky 57.

2. *Ibid*.

3. *Ibid*. 57-58.

4. Peter Bradshaw, "*Knight of Cups* Review: Malick's Back! With the Least Interesting Spiritual Crisis in History" *The Guardian*. 8 Feb. 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/feb/08/knight-of-cups-review-film-terrence-malick-christian-bale

5. Tarkovsky 59.

6. *Ibid*. 66.

7. https://i.ytimg.com/vi/bC-3rnv_b3o/maxresdefault.jpg

8. Tarkovsky 121.

9. *Ibid*. 117.

10. *Ibid*.

11. Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*. (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015) 30.

12. This quote and all summary of Kant on aesthetics and the sublime come from The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on "Immanuel Kant," which can be found at https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/. 20 May 2010. ed. 25 Jan. 2016.

13. *Ibid*.

14. *Ibid*.

15. This quote and all summary of Schopenhauer on aesthetics and the sublime come from The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on "Schopenhauer's Aesthetics," which can be found at https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schopenhauer-aesthetics/. 9 May 2012.

16. *Ibid*.

17. *Ibid*.

18. Timothy Weiskel as qtd. in Bloom.

19. Bloom 5-6.

20. *Ibid.* 7.

21. *Ibid*. 19.

22. *Ibid*. 493.

23. *Ibid*. 495.

24. *Ibid*.

25.George Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956) 323.

26. *Ibid.* 324.

27. *Ibid.* 326.

28. *Ibid.* 3.

29. *Ibid.* 4.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.* 5.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.* 6.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.* 8.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.* 9.

41. *Ibid.* 10.

42. *Ibid.* 11.

43. *Ibid.* 11-12.

44. *Ibid.* 13.

45. *Ibid.* 14.

46. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* as qtd. in *Knight of Cups* dir. Terrence Malick, 2015.

47. "*The Pilgrim's Progress*" Wikipedia.

48. John Patterson, "Terrence Malick: Has the Legendary Visionary Finally Lost the Plot?" *The Guardian*. 2 May 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/global/2016/may/02/knight-of-cups-has-terrence-malick-lost-the-plot

49. *Ibid*.

50. Bradshaw.

51. *Ibid*.

52. Roping in much of Kierkegaard is slightly outside of the purview of this essay, but suffice it to say that Logan's treatment, ambitious as it is, over-stretches a bit. For example, he reads Rick's need to be liberated from female influences as a direct reference to female temptation in *Either/Or* and *Confessions*. I see it as a reference to Fellini's *8 ½*, another film about a creatively-stagnant filmmaker who navigates an existential crisis among the ruins and excesses of a metropolitan city. Still, his insights on Malick's use of Augustine, Plato's *Phaedras*, and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and *Either/Or* say more about the thematic and stylistic aspirations of Malick's recent work perhaps my own essay does in more space.

53. Trevor Logan, "Kierkegaard in L.A.: Terrence Malick's *Knight of Cups*" *Curator Magazine*. 14 Mar. 2016. http://www.curatormagazine.com/trevor-logan/kierkegaard-in-l-a-terrence-malicks-knight-of-cups/

54. He notes that the Danish word, "gjentagelsen," means "to take again."

55. Logan.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*

58. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time.*

59. We can read here the embrace of the Sisyphus task as well as Camus's revelation that one must imagine Sisyphus happy. Though, for Kierkegaard and for Malick, this is not some prescription to escape a patently-absurd world, but rather a way out of hell and into the light, to fulfill the purposive teleology of nature.

60. Logan.

61. Bradshaw.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*

64. Richard Brody, "Terrence Malick's *Knight of Cups* Challenges Hollywood to Do Better." *The New Yorker.* 7 March 2016. http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/terrence-malicks-knight-of-cups-challenges-hollywood-to-do-better

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Ibid.*

Chapter 3: Memory as Intra-textual

As Tarkovsky as stated, memory is inseparable from time, and so to discuss time without transitioning immediately to memory in a discussion of a phenomenological approach to Malick's films would be a gross disservice and an oversight. Indeed, as Brody writes,

> The crucial question of the modern novel is memory -- specifically, the tension between fiction and nonfiction, between the sharp-edged exclusivity of the contours of a finely crafted story and the loose-ended and associatively meandering and indeterminate formlessness of experience as captured (or trapped) in memory. That's why the grand landmarks of literary modernity -- such as those of Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Bellow, Hemingway, Faulkner, Duras, and the Roths -- are simultaneously struggles with the irrepressible profusion of memory and the hotly forged imperatives of style and idealizing abstractions of form.

Hardly the first to employ extensive use of flashbacks or a prominent focus on memory, Malick's technique regarding the act of remembering and the experience of involuntary memory separates him from his contemporaries and requires an exploration of the link between time and memory as expressed in Tarkovsky -- as an element of a director's personality -- and in Bergson -- as an essential part of the creative act.[1] But, for the purposes of this discussion, let's begin with Proust's conceptions of voluntary vs. involuntary memory.[2] In short, voluntary memory refers to the conscious act of remembering, that brain operation we perform when someone asks, "Hey, remember when...?" or when we choose to look back on a particularly traumatic or joyous time. Involuntary memory seizes us. It is evoked frequently by our sensory experience of the natural world and forges associations between objects and events in time that we might otherwise not form consciously. Involuntary memory dictated the structure of Proust's longeuers in *A la reserche du temps perdu* and has remained the subject for many artists since. For Malick, both voluntary and involuntary memory inform his narrative structure. Characters can, through voice-

over, trigger shifts in narrative inside their own films, or become seized by involuntary memory through their own sensory experience of the natural world, in which case, the narrator of the film bestows this involuntary memory upon them.

Furthermore, Malick's evocative and impressionistic imagery conjures involuntary memory for the viewer, too, in two substantial ways. First, his almost archetypical images force the viewer to recall similar seminal moments in his/her own life, the rich reservoir of imagery from which Malick pulls and pulls again erects an inter- and intra-textuality within his own films, further expanding their power as creative actions. Still, the evocation of memory in cinema cannot be separated from our experience of time, at least as it relates to Malick, who constructs an associative memory within his subject through the use of editing and rhythm. Let's turn back to Tarkovsky for our theoretical framework: "How does time make itself felt in a shot? It becomes tangible when you sense something significant, truthful, going on beyond the events on the screen; when you realize, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction, but as a pointer to something stretching out beyond the frame and to infinity."[3] In Tarkovsky's formation, time is not felt merely through duration, but in relationship to what is seen in the frame and what is gestured to outside of it. So, Malick's association of prayers or objects or sounds as triggers for memory can gesture outside of the frame, outside of the scene itself, and transcend the linear timeline of the film. Still, we are bound, or confined, by the inescapable reality that "binding and immutable conditions of cinema is that actions on the screen have to develop sequentially, regardless of the fact of being conceived as simultaneous or retrospective or what have you."[4] However, while actions must progress sequentially and invoke

some sense of cause and effect, the editing and rhythm of these sequences can be reordered to power effect suggesting that memory is our ever-present past.

If, for Poulet, creation for the Romantic lies in intuition, then is memory creative? Through intuition, the Romantic is "unable to perceive anything else."[5] Instead, he is forced into "total dependence on a creation continually reiterated" through the creative act which hopes to give birth to "the unity of the soul."[6] Through the creative act, the Romantic man can experience the joy that accompanies the actual existence of being what one truly is. Through joy, man can experience the lived sensation which is the consciousness of being. This experience of being, as Pascal would describe, is "neither fixed state nor wholeness… Thus the soul attached to God constantly feels its dependence and knows that the righteousness which is given it never subsists by itself but is created within it by God from moment to moment."[7]

Poulet rehearses Le Roy who suggests that "in order to be happy we have either constantly to change our sensory environment or to carry to excess sensations of the same type."[8] This suggests an anxiety brought about by consciousness, a certain restlessness which could give rise to the ambitious grasp towards the transcendent and the sublime, one that must be expressed either through prayer or through art. The result resembles a reservoir of affect which is always in danger of being "destroyed by their very enjoyment but at the same time exacerbated by memory"[9] which, in a sense, grants them infinity. The desire for the expression of excess comes from the joy of the intensity of the moment of feeling. However, excess uncovers the awareness of this feeling of joy, which can immediately pull the human subject out of the experience and into a conscious interpretation of it, a crippling awareness. Poulet suggests that "each new moment of awareness reveals two distinct features: not only the new sensation which is the

kernel of the moment, but also the ensemble of sensations already lived, whose resonances prolong themselves within it and surround it with their nebula."[10] But he goes silent on the vividness of this ensemble of sensations. In other words, do memories already lived suffice? In the Christian sense, memory or remembering involves the experience of time as *kairos*, something happening in a fixed moment in the past which continues to happen throughout the rest of our existence. For the Catholic, each remembrance of the Last Supper during the celebration of Mass both calls to mind the past sacrifice of Christ and makes it present in *this* moment. Here lies the phenomenon of memory: "By remembering, man escapes the purely momentary; by remembering, he escapes the nothingness that lies in wait for him between moments of existence."[11] But, at the same time, by remembering, he takes part in the recreative act of a past moment which has the power to do away with the morality of temporality and gives way to permanent perseverance from God.

Affective memory, Poulet will insist "is no less authentic an existence than the existence of the moment. It is as if to exist meant to live two lives at the same time: the life lived day by day; and the life lived before and beyond the day or the moment: a life which lengthens into duration."[12] However, as previously mentioned, consciousness suppresses feelings of duration by calling to mind our own temporality, our own mortality. The acknowledgment of the looming abyss points to permanence. In Poulet's words, "What kills us is having to support the weight of the future in the void of present."[13] However, I wonder if the way to fill this void, to bridge this infinite gulf is to give in to the re-happening of the event recalled in our memory. Do feelings about a particular moment change in memory? If so, then by reliving a memory in the act of

remembrance we do recreate a different moment, an almost alternative timeline. This might hold the clue to bridging human time and cosmic time.

This bridging of time is essential to Malick's work, but in order to fully understand how Malick's editing and rhythm evoke creative memory, we must distinguish between what I will call "associative editing" and what is traditionally understood as "montage editing." Tarkovsky writes, "the principles of 'montage cinema' do not alllow the film to continue beyond the edges of the screen: they do not allow the audince to bring personal experiences to bear on what is in front of them on film. 'Montage cinema' presents the audeince with puzzles and riddles, makes them decipher symbols, take pleasure in allegories, appealing all the time to their intellectual experience." [14] For Tarkovsky, montage editing is too structuralist, too fixed. The solution to the puzzle is already determined, and so, while the two images placed together can create the third meaning, what exactly that third meaning is is not free to subjective interpretation or imagination, two keys to our phenomenological understanding of Malick's films. How, then, does associative editing work?

First, Malick's use of associative editing establishes its foundations in his voice-over narration. In *The Tree of Life*, Jack's prayers above are answered by the narrative. For example, when reflecting on her son's death, Mrs. O'Brien asks "Where were you? Did you know?" God's response is to shift the narrative from present-day back to a twenty-minute montage of the creation of the universe, the first breaths of life on earth, and the first sin. This narrative gesture completes the epigram on the title card at the beginning of the film, a quote from the Book of Job, which reads: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"[15] Opening a film this way prepares

the viewer for a modern-day Job allegory, which *The Tree of Life* is not. However, it establishes

the narrative direction of the film as prayer-and-answer. The character's voice-overs are

frequently questions directed to God, unanswered only by the narrative. Their journeys, their

joys, and their frustrations are spiritual. Young Jack's questions, "Where were you? You let a boy

die," and "Why should I be good when you aren't?" are echoed in his mother's pleas for

theodicy and in his grown-up self's inability to understand the meaninglessness of his brother's

apparent suicide. More than any other of his films, *The Tree of Life* is Malick's dialogue with

God. It opens with Jack -- who we can assume is Malick's semi-autobiographical stand-in --

whispering "Brother. Mother. It was they who led me to your door." Near the end, he says,

"Brother. Guide us to the end of time." Mrs. O'Brien's journey is similar to Jack's, questioning

God's reasons and finally resolving, in a life after death, that she "gave him to you."

But aside from informing the narrative of *The Tree of Life*, associative editing works a lot

like Proust's involuntary memory. After the much-criticized "creation of the world" sequence,

Malick brings creation to a very personal, individual, intimate scope. The creation of the world is

shown culminating in the birth of Jack. Like his utterance in *The Thin Red Line*, the merging of

the cosmic and the intimate suggests we are all faces of the same man. Malick visualizes birth as

children dressed in white, being handed candles before swimming out of an under-water house

and emerging from their mother's womb in a bleached-white hospital. This image, of people

suspended in water, swimming up, will recur in *Knight of Cups*, be will be reappropriated as a

sort of Babel-esque search for transcendental meaning. But, perhaps, this difference is not as vast

as it first seems. Perhaps, in *Knight* the search for meaning consists of a series of rebirths, a

creative action which never ceases and always repeats.

After the birth sequence, we are treated to a montage of familiar moments and events, visuals which evoke the shared experience that most of the average viewer can relate to. We see Jack's first steps; Jack learn the alphabet; strange relatives that step in and out of our lives; our first trangressions; the birth of a younger sibling and the Oedipal jealousy it engenders; Jack's first steps; lessons from our mothers; playing with the neighbor kids; Halloween; grandma; our first lesson about God; the first time we see illness (a man having a seizure) that bears no context for us but trauma; the first time we see physical deformity, which draws our impolite gaze; our first crushes; etc. This sequence, set to gorgeous classical music, bears little plot relevance. The goal, the telos, is not clear, but it flows through us like a scrapbook, snapshots of memorable moments devoid of obvious purpose and context. This, perhaps, is the power of Malick's editing style. His flashbacks do not always provide essential information for whatever it is he assumes constitutes plot in his films. Rather, the rationale for his flashbacks, his memories, are emotional and spiritual. They contain meaning which insists on itself, but is not altogether rationally clear.

The difference between these two types of memory -- the one motivated by narrative and the one that appears as a series of flashbacks from the main character's experience -- can be categorized by Bergson's containers, imagining vs. repeating.[17] By uniting both in *The Tree of Life*, Malick makes the Poulet-ian move of uniting the immanent man with transcendence through the act of creation and so through the transcendence from linear time. In other words, prayer, like poetry, through the act of doing, imagines the past and makes it present, linking the individual human subject across time. Memory can be invoked through imagining or repeating. When an event, a line, a gesture, is repeated, it can spur the creative imagination to recollect things passed, and so recreate them in the present. This action is essential for Poulet's,

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Kirkegaard's, and Malick's effort for man to transcend his condition. In doing so, he realizes that the end is the beginning -- as revealed in the cyclical stylings of the narrative in *The Tree of Life* and *Knight of Cups* -- and that the journey is the destination, that the pilgrim is always arriving. As Poulet will have it, this journey is different from endurance because it is not stagnant but requires the realization that all time is Now.

Likewise, the narrative structure of *To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups* disrupts convention for the sake of performing the inner meaning of Malick's ideas about the intersection of time and memory. Both films dispose of the traditional three-act structure that has become commonplace for film and which trains and forms the expectation of the viewing audience. Succinctly, this structure introduces the audience to a protagonist -- the main character whose journey it is throughout the film to achieve his/her goal -- and the antagonist -- the character whose role it is to foil and obstruct the goal of the protagonist. About 10-12 minutes into a two-hour film, the "inciting incident" occurs, which Paul Auster calls, "the mistake that sets the story in motion." Around 28-32 minutes, the plot turns to form and resolve some "B-story." The "midpoint," or the "point-of-no-return" must be a point of high drama, while the end of the second act (around 90 minutes into a two-hour film) puts our protagonist in his/her most vulnerable and dire position. Finally, a rousing climax resolves the primary conflict at the very end of the film. At this point in the paper, it should go without saying that Malick has long since abandoned this structure. Indeed, his first film, *Badlands,* follows the vague sketches of this structure, and I would suppose that is not an insignicant factor in why many Malick-detractors find that to be his last tolerable film. Additionally, others have found his films to be unwatchable, a mess, meandering, etc., in no small part due to their unconventional narrative structure. Akin to

aesthetic expectations, when our narrative expectations are met, we experience a feeling of pleasure. Traditions of stories with similar narrative structure have conditioned the audience to expect the pacing of a film and other major pieces to be in place. When they are reordered and substituted for other structures and styles, the audience can experience an unpleasurable upsetting of its expectations and so be turned off to the film in front of them, even more, deem it a failure at its own enterprise. But here again, I believe holding Malick's narrative structure up to the stencil of other dramatic films merely because they both can be classified within the same medium, is not only a disservice to, but a misunderstanding of the inner meaning of the film. The style and technique must support then content and conscience at the center of cinematic expression.

Roger Ebert, in his final filed film review before his death, will ask this question. "Why must a film explain everything?" he asks, "Why must every motivation be spelled out? Aren't many films fundamentally the same film, with only the specifics changed? Aren't many of them telling the same story?"[18] In a soft condemnation of the critical dismissal of *To the Wonder*, Ebert continues, "There will be many who find *To the Wonder* elusive and too effervescent. They'll be dissatisfied by a film that would rather evoke than supply. I understand that, and I think Terrence Malick does, too. But here he has attempted to reach more deeply than that: to reach beneath the surface, and find the soul in need."[19] What Ebert asks here is what Malick asks of his audience: to adjust its expectations and aesthetic judgment. For a film to seek to evoke rather than supply is to fulfill Tarkovsky's goal when he rejects montage cinema. Malick, like Tarkovsky, asks the audience to bring its personal experiences into the film, and both filmmakers invite the audience, by constructing narratives, aesthetics, and rhythm that reach beyond the limits of the frame, to

become a symbol that reaches beyond itself, accepting a multitide of interpretations, and becoming itself an instance of what it represents, rather than merely being a sign with one fixed significance.

Malick's techniques and styles that support this ambitous goal include his free-wheeling, seemingly-improvised cinematography, his heavy use of voice-over, the dominance of classical music on his soundtrack, and, what Ebert will call, his "repertory of fundamental images he draws upon."[20] These images include vast expanses of landscape across a horizon, a setting sun, shadows cast a magic hour, hands gracing tall grass, women in gowns twirling, lovers making play with their hands, children inside running over furniture, the camera gaze up a giant tree, the tide coming in on the shore, the people who walk it barefoot, a wanderer ascending a daunting staircase, people lying down and rolling, dogs, women objectified, etc. The critic might be right to call these images repetitive, to say Malick makes and remakes the same film, because this is part of the point. Bradshaw decries that Malick's imagery and technique, as beautiful as they both may be, are tired by the time *Knight of Cups* is released. But he misses important variations in their presentation and the point of repetition.

Repetition, whether through the reservoir of images Malick draws from in his films, or in their circular narrative structure creates relationships between and among his films, placing them in conversation, gestures toward the evocative, almost archetypical power of his images, and highlights the existential idea that man becomes through repetition. In *Knight of Cups*, Rick shares episodes with at least six different women, hard to distinguish after a casual first watch, and each of them tells him nearly the same thing -- "love and do what you like," "you don't want love; you want a love experience," "grab a hold of life, take chances," "in love with the world, in

love with love," etc. One character even reminds him "don't go back to being dead," as though life itself is a cosmic cycle of death and rebirth, of stagnation and becoming. In addition, we see repeating images of planes or helicopters in the sky. Like the shots of birds and bats soaring in *The Tree of Life*, these images represent the character's internal desire for escape and for transcendence, to regrow the wings of an angel and to soar back into heaven. But, by recalling the images of birds and bats and transforming them into mechanized vehicles for flight, Malick wants us to carry the soul's yearning into the modern world, where our spiritual expressions, too, are rooted in a technological imagination. Memories are shot on low-grade digital cameras, and the shots of whirring traffic find life Rick's passage through busy L.A., surrounded by people, yet never connecting to one. The expression of Malick's themes in the modern-world setting underline the isolating and vapid desolation of simulated reality. Among the many settings Rick wanders is a film set, a vacant, faux city, which, in many ways L.A., itself, is.

Characters are fraught with isolation by their archectural surroundings. In *Knight of Cups*, Rick ascends on an elevator twice, but, of course, like the Tower of Babel, an elevator his its limits and cannot soar into the heavens. We see a similar representation of transcending through ascending, and the necessary, later descending in *The Tree of Life*, again mitigated by the glass and steel elevator. As Jack travels up a giant skyscraper which now takes the places of the undisturbed trees we saw earlier, the camera gazes up at these buildings, too. But instead of finding a Romantic sense of self as he does in the natural world, the steel skyscrapers isolate Jack. When he ascends the building, presumably for some meeting, he sits and gazes at the floor in recollection, the volume of the other characters' voices fades out, and we see the figures of bodies through frosted glass, like shadows on a cave wall. But, it is in the ascendent place, so

close to heaven, but not quite there, that Jack can transcend the stagnation of his moment and

create the past in the present through the act of imaginative memory. At the end of the film, this

knowledge gained through remembering allows Jack to return to the isolation and alienation of

the modern world and continue his spiritual search for meaning among the steel topiary, a

journey that is continued in *Knight of Cups*.

To a less prominent, but equally important effect, modern architecture isolates Neil (Ben

Affleck) and Marina (Olga Kurylenko) in *To the Wonder*. In one of the more brilliant and

impressionistic shots in the film, Neil and Marina, in the aftermath of a brutal marital quarrel, are

unable to connect, separated by storeys in their home.[21]

Their blocking and body language suggest a non-verbal communication, and the set design

provides a path for Neil to find Marina, but the layout of the house visualizes the separation of

these two as a result of their domestic arrangement, a separation which will soon cross

continents. They could be ghosts wandering the same house separated by time. This set design

stands in stark contrast to earlier sequences in the film which are set outside rear old ruins.[22] Neil and Marina fall in love against the backdrop of the vast, sublime expanses of landscape Malick loves, the same sort of landscapes that drew together Kit and Holly in *Badlands*, Bill and Abby in *Days of Heaven*, John Smith and Pocahantas in *The New World*. Nature provides the setting of love for the Romantic by situating them among the "*saba*,"[23] the merging of art and nature. It is this merging that makes it possible for man to realize his being through memory.

During *The Tree of Life,* the setting provides visual cues for the audience's memory, as well. Jack's home as an adult bears a striking resemblance to his home as a child, his Eden, the paradise that he loses near the end of the film. Scott says this setting belongs "both to history and to memory,"[24] creating a link between the two by which history is constituted by memory and forms memory at the same time. Not only does this connection suggest to the viewer that Jack, even as an adult, has a Rosebud-like connection to his childhood home, but also asks us to read Jack as an adult, as a homemaker, as similar to his father. For a film whose narrative suggests that the story of each person repeats almost archetypically throughout time, that we are all faces of the same man, then Malick's use of father's and son's provides the possibility for redemption for the previous generation. It is not incarnation, but each son is a creative remembrance of the

father, and indeed, the mother.[25] In his Oedipal rebellion as an adolescent, Jack tells his father, "You'd like to kill me," and "It's your house. You can kick me out whenever you want to." Mr. O'Brien's failure of a father and an entrepreneur make it possible for him to expect too much and to place pressure on his son, an influence that we see Jack cannot escape.

Rick struggles to emerge from the same long shadow cast by The Father in *Knight of Cups*. Many have suggested that *Knight of Cups* continues the semi-autobiographical narrative from *The Tree of Life*. Both white male protagonists embark on a spiritual journey to find a means of transcending the ordinary world. Both have brothers who kill themselves. Both have overbearing fathers. But *Knight of Cups* offers a resolution to the father-son relationship, or a least a recontextualization of it, that *Tree* does not. Rick's disassociation from his father is caused by and fuels his contempt for him. Brian Dennehy's performance as Rick's father capitalizes on the moments of explosive anger we saw in Pitt's. But Dennehy's father is tired, a bit more empty, further along near the end of his rope. In his eyes we see more miles, more feeling of regret, more rage to unleash the world. When we see him working alone in an empty office and then wandering across an empty stage, we cannot help by draw the inter-textual reference to *Death of a Salesman*, in which Dennehy so memorably portrayed Willy Loman in 1999. The Father's rage at the cosmos is Lear-esque, or Ahab-ian in his stark confrontation of God, the Sublime, the Leviathan. As Rick helps his father up stairs, his father notices "the light's gone out of your eyes. Grab a hold of life! Grab it and hold it. Take chances, my son." His warnings to his son, that Rick not follow down the same road of meaninglessness and regret, the feeling that he could have been something great (a sentiment echoed in Pitt's Mr. O'Brien), culminate in the wisdom that "The light in the eyes of others, they guid you on your way." Rick is told, at the end of the

film, to "wake up" and "turn." This is a spiritual enlightenment, a Pauline conversion, and the reward is the pearl mentioned in a story at the beginning of the film. Rick's salvation means salvation for his father, who asks him to "redeem my life; justify it." A continuation and development of a similar theme and relationship in *The Tree of Life*, this revelation from father to son shows the interconnectedness of the human experience and human beings across generations. *Knight*, like *Tree*, is, "rooted in an idiosyncratic Christianity and also in the Romantic literary tradition, the loss of innocence is not a singular event in history but rather an axiom of human experience, repeated in every generation and in the consciousness of every individual. The miraculous paradox is that this universal pattern repeats itself in circumstances that are always unique."[26]

As a collective Man, as a human species, though, Ballanche will suggest we possess a "general memory which, in one state of consciousness, takes in the life of all humanity."[27] Through general memory, "each being undergoes all the cosmogonic successions… All that has affected human destinies in the future and in the past, echoed within him."[28] This echoes the work of Jung on the collective subconscious and dissolves the seemingly-obvious distinctions between human minds housed in separate craniums. Ballanche again: "There exists then a magnetic chain of universal human destiny, and a continuous chain which sometimes in certain privileged moments is 'wholly reflected in the indivisible light of the present.' In a simultaneity analogous to that of the divine thought, this is the inverse experience of the infinite motion of duration."[29] In Malick's words from *The Thin Red Line*, we are all faces of the same man. This definition of general memory will help us later in our discussion of empathy and its roots in the

cortex. If art, then, can be an attempt to glance into the past of collective memory or into the future of cosmic time, then

> each glance cast into the depths of space becomes a glance cast into the depths of time, and all beings endlessly achieve their becoming. The human being discovers himself in the depths of memory and he no longer discovers himself there intermittently, fragmentarily, after a blind groping within the gulf of the mind, but simply in allowing himself, in a moment of pure relaxation, to be pervaded by an indelible and total memory that is always on the very verge of consciousness.[30]

The suggestion here is that the experience of time through the duration of existence and the understanding of the creative act as an attempt to participate in our becoming, which is indistinguishable from present moments of being provides for an account of one human life, one united experience shared through general memory and through the ambitious grasp toward the sublime. Each attempt to understand our existence and our being in time through the creative act is an attempt to intuit our becoming, a state not fully realized until our fulfillment. Malick visualizes this moment in the final sequence of *The Tree of Life* in which all the characters reconvene on the heavenly shores. Each character, though, remains untouched from when we have seen them, untouched by duration. As Bergson will put it, "to intuit their becoming is to intuit their essence." And so, "becoming no longer signifies being changed by changing."[31] The sacred act of creation does not exist in time, but gives birth to it. "Time can always be freely created from the present moment forward,"[32] Bergson writes. Likewise, "duration is something more than history or a system of laws; it is a free creation."[33]

So, finally, creation by God or creation by the mind are rather indistinguishable for the Romantic because art is a creative action and the creation of action and of the self. Action is creation, the transformation of air into breath and of breath back into air. Malick's *The Tree of Life* begins and ends with a breath played over nothingness, present at the beginning of creation

and the start of his film, and there at the end of what we can only understand to be the duration of continual time, an end present at the beginning and yet never fully coming to fruition. It is only throgh the creative act of memory that man can fully intuit himself.

Through cyclical and circular narrative structures, Malick is able to invoke memory both through mechanism and through conscious act for the audience, both voluntarily and involuntarily for his characters. In addition, his toolbox of repeated images and themes both link these three films together into a conceptual trilogy and fortify his idea that the story of human experience can be depicted almost archetypically and so, possibly, render the consciousness of each individual, character and audience. Malick not only pulls from a rich literary and philosophical history in order to consider memory, but, as we will see in the next chapter, uses aesthetic appeals to engage his viewers in different ways in hopes of forming and new film grammar and a new cinematic means of expression.

Endnotes: Chapter 3

1. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. (Kent: Solis Press, 2014) 39.

2. Bergson will offer a similar formulation with motor mechanisms and independent recollections, but his account is less consistent with my phenomenological effort than Proust's description.

3. Tarkovsky 117.

4. *Ibid.* 70, 118.

5. Poulet 22.

6. *Ibid.* 15.

7. Bousset as qtd in Poulet.

8. Le Roy as qtd in Poulet 21-22.

9. *Ibid*.

10. Poulet 23.

11. *Ibid*. 24.

12. *Ibid.* 25.

13. *Ibid.* 29.

14. Tarkovsky 118.

15. Job 38: 4, 7.

16. This is perhaps, where Malick's effort fails for most viewers. While this writer finds Malick's visual evocation of some of the formative and lasting moments in one's life to be consistent and meaningful for his own experience, I am aware that this is not the case for all viewers, especially those whom I have spoken with who are not white, Christian, Midwestern men. However, for the sake of this study, I must assume that the power of these images suggest, at the very least, some archetypical shared experience, even if it fails to cover the experience of all viewers.

17. Bergson 39.

18. Roger Ebert, "*To the Wonder*" rogerebert.com. 6 April 2013.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. http://images2.static-bluray.com/reviews/8485_1.jpg

22. http://www.middbeat.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/To-the-Wonder-Malick-1.jpg

23. See earlier note on "*saba*" in Chapter 2.

24. Scott.

25. God, the giver of life, is female in Malick's films.

26. Scott.

27. Ballanche as qtd. in Poulet 30.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. Poulet 31.

31. Bergson 39.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Poulet 35.

Chapter 4: Brain Matter

One of the biggest criticisms perennially lodged against aesthetic theories or art criticism in general is the gotcha question, "But isn't this all subjective?" or "Isn't it a matter of opinion?" To some degree, yes. I do not mean to suggest in any part of this paper that I believe one can constitute some sort of Rosetta Stone for determining the most desirable aesthetic qualities of visual art and narrative. However, this question about subjectivity and opinion attempts to deflate the entire conversation by merely acknowledging the existence of some ambiguity. Fortunately for us, there is some accounting -- some common ground, so to speak -- for aesthetic taste and how and what many viewers of visual art (or, indeed, natural scenes) recognize in common as beautiful or aesthetically-pleasing.

The first approach I will examine in sketching some account for aesthetic preference comes from the field of cognitive neuroscience. In "The Science of Art: A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience," V.S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein propose a three-pronged theory of art, taking into account the "mechanisms" that produce aesthetic experience.[1] Next, they propose eight laws of artistic experience in order to ground theories of aesthetic experience in the neuroscience that makes such an experience biologically possible. While Ramachandran and Hirstein play with and prod the platitude that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," they do not dismiss it outright.[2] But, instead of allowing that statement the same dismissive power as the questions about subjectivity and opinion, Ramachandran and Hirstein take it to be a true premise and turn it on its head by suggesting that if beauty is in the eye of the beholder (or the mind), then surely all of those with eyes beholding the same visual must share some common

experience of beauty and biological and emotional reaction to it.[3] In order to get there, they first lay out their three-part criteria for a valid theory if it. It must take into account 1. The logic of art, whether there are universal rules or principles; 2. Evolutionary rationale; and 3. What is the brain circuitry involved? All three of their earlier criteria (to which they refer to the third leg as "neurophysiology") must be present and work together or else suffer a tangible shortcoming. Ramachandran and Hirstein further assert that their eight laws of aesthetic experience "optimally titillate the visual areas of the brain" and are used intentionally or unintentionally by artists. The most important part of their argument, perhaps, is that "art is most appealing if it produces heightened activity in a single dimension (e.g. through the peak shift principle or through grouping) rather than redundant activation of multiple modules," meaning, innovative or new art aesthetics can have the opportunity to engage the viewer on a neurological level in ways that mere repetition or familiarity cannot.[4]

Early on, they stake the claim that the purpose of art "surely, is not merely to depict or represent reality -- for that can be accomplished very easily with a camera -- but to enhance, transcend, or indeed even to distort reality."[5] This, of course, becomes complicated when you are dealing with an art form like film, whose primary medium is the camera and whose magic relies on some sort of simulation of reality, no matter how opaque or fantastic. Film as an art form, then, must strive for something greater than representation, while still being rooted in something recognizable enough to the audience as to elicit from them an emotional response, stemming from neurological stimulation. "Rasa," they write, can be translated as "the very essence of" and can be utilized to elicit a particular emotional response in the audience.[6] Art, then must not just capture the essence of something, but "amplify it in order to activate the same neural

mechanisms that would be activated by the original object."[7] They note that Zeki (1998) described the coincidence that an artist's role of abstracting the essential features of an image and discarding the redundant information is essentially identical to what the visual areas themselves have evolved to do.[8] The artist, the camera, is the eye of the beholder, telling what to pay attention to and how to pay attention to it through careful composition and the orchestration of mise-en-scene.

In order for Ramachandran and Hirstein to do any work at all, they must establish their premise that there might "be some sort of universal rule or deep structure underlying all artistic experience."[9] For my purposes, this should help contextualize the problem of looking at film studies through phenomenology. If one could unite the two, then theoretically, we could do away with the stalemate that results from the short-sighted preoccupation with subjectivity in an aesthetic experience, at least insofar as it applies to my evaluation of Malick's films. Let's take a look at four of their eight laws which are most applicable to our study.

First, Ramachandran and Hirstein discuss the "peak shift effect," which holds that the greater exaggeration of the qualities of a visual object that make it distinct from others, the greater the reaction to that visual object as a representation of its "rasa." For example, if a rat can notice a difference between a square and a rectangle by being introduced to a rectangle (in this instance) that bears a side-to-side ratio of 3:2, while a square is of course 1:1, then that same rat will experience a stronger brain stimulus in response to a rectangle with a side-to-side ratio of 4:1. The more rectangular the rectangle is, the more it is distinguished in its essence from a square, the stronger the recognition response. The principle of "peak shift" plays an integral role in Ramachandran's and Hirstein's argument because they believe it "holds the key for

understanding the evocativeness of much of visual art."[10] This could be stated, in other words as "all art is caricature," though, as they note, that is not entirely true. It does, however, explain how the amplification of, for example, a caricature of Richard Nixon, in drawing out and exaggerating the distinct features of his face -- long nose, pointy chin -- the caricature can look more "Nixon-like" than how many remember the actual man. In highlighting the distinguishing features of a visual stimulus, a visual representation can demarcate the "rasa" of a real object, even if that visual representation is far from being a mirror image. They explain, "artists may be producing heightened activity in the form areas that is not obvious to the conscious mind"[11] by exciting visual neurons that represent particular memories rather than reality. They also discuss the "mnemonic component of aesthetic perception, including, the autobiographical memory of the artist, and of her viewer, as well as the viewer's more general 'cognitive stock' brought to his encounter with the work. This general cognitive stock includes the viewer's memory[12] of his encounters with the painting's etiological forebearers, including those works that the artist himself was aware of."[13] Movements in art can be understood as a peak shift and homages can be understood as loving caricatures. In the work of Malick, these homages might be interpreted or repurposed as inter- and intra-textual visual references, the repetitions discussed in Chapter 3.

The second important law from Ramachandran and Hirstein has to do with composition. Succinctly, viewers experience "rewarding sensations associated with feature binding," or "grouping."[14] The grouping is a function of aesthetic experience, and this pleasing feeling is likely, in my opinion, what helps montage in Malick work. Composition is grouping.[15] In a visual medium like film, so reliant on shot composition as grouping together similar, or at time dissimilar objects, a certain pattern of associations can occur. The consistency or disruption of

these associations can please or disorient the viewer, asking him/her to refine his/her understanding of the visual grammar previously established in the film. Thus, a filmmaker, through grouping and composition, can suggest associations within one frame and even between several different frames or scenes through the construction of and complex development of compositions and visual associations.

Within a composition, a particular element of the mise-en-scène can be favored over another, asking the viewer to grant primacy of that character or object over the others. Doing so isolates one component of the frame over from the others. While this might seem antithetical to the importance of grouping as discussed above, this "law" of Ramachandran's and Hirstein's highlights the importance of grouping. Instead of isolating one particular component, say, in a close-up or extreme close-up, extracting the surrounding elements of a scene from the frame in order to suggest or highlight its importance, isolating that object or character from others *within* the frame does the double duty of emphasizing its place atop the hierarchy of significance in that frame, all the while maintaining its relationship, or grouping, with other objects and characters within that same frame. Directing our attention through staging or the manipulation of focus allows isolation *and* grouping to occur simultaneously in the same visual image.

Still, as Ramachandran and Hirstein suggest, there remains a need to "isolate a single visual modality before you amplify the signal in that modality."[16] They suggest that a sketch is more effective as "art" than a photograph because it isolates your attention to notice the enhancements.[17] The rest is extra redundant information -- "more is less." In removing the redundant information or obscuring it, the visual artist reduces the visual information in order to direct our attention to those features which bear the "rasa" of the real object represented.

Likewise, in their fourth law, extraction of features prior to grouping and discarding the redundant information creates contrast. This extraction bears a heavy influence on the allocation of our attention.

But, grouping can occur because of motion as well. In motion, contrast occurs between dissimilar features that occur in close proximity.[18] However, a too-perfectly-framed composition, one which is perfectly symmetrical or geometrical to the point of obvious manipulation plays awkwardly to the viewer. Ramachandran and Hirstein refer to this as the Bayesian logic of perception, by which, "your visual system abhors interpretations which rely on an unique vantage point and favors a generic one."[19] To apply this to an overall interpretation of a piece of art would be a bit of stretch, but it offers a nice defense for difficult art. In other words, "it is as though an object discovered after a struggle is more pleasing than one that is instantly obvious... the struggle itself is reinforcing, so you do not give up looking."[20] If this is so for visual composition, could it not also hold true for characterization or narrative structure? Indeed, metaphors are pleasing because they allow us to recognize and isolate crucial aspects while ignoring basic ones. But metaphors can be effective even before we are conscious of them.[21] Seeing similarities beyond where differences are easily accessible, below the surface level helps set up a "new perceptual category" which is evolutionarily beneficial and leads to limbic activation.[22]

Now, as for the nuts-and-bolts "science" of Ramachandran's and Hirstein's study, their data relies on accessing the SCR (skin conductance response), which allows us to measure the "unconscious mental process" because it exists without the bias of interpretation or censorship of the mind.[23] It is a preconscious reading of our reaction to visual stimuli, unfettered by the

distraction of conscious interpretation. "The size of the SCR is a direct measure of the amount of limbic (emotional) activation produced by an image."[24] Ramachandran and Hirstein suppose that measuring SCR would produce a bigger limbic reading for a person's reaction to a caricature of Nixon than a real photo because of isolation and peak effect. However, I am uncomfortable with their discarding of the manipulations of photorealistic images. A photorealistic image will often score lower on the isolation of single visual modalities because they contain so much redundant information; however, when applied to film we must always keep in mind that everything in the photoreal image is manipulated. Likewise, how much of SCR has to do with recognition of a base reality vs. memory of that same object. Even if SCR measures a pre-conscious response, does it not still rely on the subjectivity of our memory, which is itself biased by previous interpretations of visual stimuli that we have encountered before. This could, in effect, distort what our brain deems to be redundant information and what it remembers as essential features. Our memory is biased and seems to extract its own caricatures of reality. If we do not have memory of that exact base object or event, how is this reading effected?

As useful as it is towards grounding our evaluation of phenomenology in film studies in something concrete and scientific rather than subjectivity, Ramachandran's and Hirstein's study in "The Science of Art," is not the final word, nor the most comprehensively empirical, on the matter. Uri Hasson and his colleagues were instrumental in bridging the earlier work in neuroscience by people like Ramachandran to its application in film particularly. In their work "Neurocinematics: The Neuroscience of Film," Hasson and his colleagues first coin the term "neurocinematics" to discuss the application of the study of mirror neurons to the aesthetic of film.[25] In short, mirror neurons are brain neurons that fire the same way in an animal when that

animal performs an action as it does when it observes another animal performing that same action. Mirror neurons have been discovered in the premotor cortex, the supplementary motor area, the primary somatosensory cortex, and the inferior parietal cortex.[26] Humans learn through imitation from even the infant stage, and through adulthood, all of us have experience the subconscious mirroring of another's body language in conversation, the acquisition of certain mannerisms of another through imitation, or the contagiousness of a sneeze. Some neuroscientists have suggested that the discovery and study of mirror neurons can provide a neurological basis help explain how humans are able to empathize with others, and others believe that mirror neurons not only shed light on the "theory of mind," but also suggest that our skin is the only true marker of what distinguishes one human being from another. For our purposes, however, the combination of neuroscience with cinema determines that some films exert control over brain activity and eye movements.[27] However, the extent of this differed with a movie's content, editing, and directing style. Hassan's study wants to bring together cognitive neuroscience and film studies.

Hasson and company begin by admitting that some films "have the potency to 'control' viewers' neural responses. By 'control' [they] simply mean that the sequence of neural states evoked by the movie is reliable and predictable, without placing any aesthetic or ethical judgment as to whether the means to such control are desirable."[28] Given that controlling brain states is related to controlling mental states (apparently this is obvious?), then a viewer's perception, emotion, thoughts and attitudes can likewise be controlled. The tighter the grip on the viewer's mind, the more consistency in viewer brain response.

Their first experiment involved five people watching *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*

for the first 30 min. Activity across the high order cortex and visual cortex were remarkably

similar (45% of the cortex).[29] Likewise, the same film exerted similar control over the viewers'

brains by directing their eye movements to specific areas of the frame.[30] As expected, a

structured movie is more controlling of the attention of our eyes than an unstructured movie, and

the same goes for frames.

Their results, the correlation in inter-subject correlation analysis (ISC), had nothing to do

with content, but rather with the structure of the style. To prove this, they presented viewers with

a 10-minute, un-interrupted shot of Washington Square Park in NYC. It was fixed and unmoving.

This "evoked far less ISC in viewers than Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*."[31]

Hasson and company make a distinction between a structured and unstructured shot, through

which Malick's use of improvisational, wondering compositions, while beautiful, could be

considered relatively unstructured when placed next to the work of Leone or Hitchcock, for

example. "These findings suggest that a mere mechanical reproduction of reality, with no

directorial intention or intervention, is not sufficient by itself for controlling viewer's brain

activity."[32] Another experiment which involved scrambling the sequence of Charlie Chaplin short

films showed little effect on the "responses in sensory brain areas (which process the

instantaneous information within single shots)."[33] Processing montage, then, seems to play by

different rules, and a more complicated editing structure, like the one touted by Tarkovsky and

practiced by Malick, would throw a whole wrench into the system.

Hasson and company posit that "if a filmmaker fails to direct viewers' gaze, then each

viewer will attend to and process different information at each moment in time, which will

subsequently increase the variability across viewers in the interpretation of the scene that may, in turn, lead to increased variability in the interpretation of subsequent scenes." This is how a scene-to-scene control is relevant to keeping our attention. However, for my purpose, this fracturing of experience should have interesting implications of the phenomenon of the film itself. As we have seen, the outright disregard and purposeful violation of the rules of narrative and balanced composition, as well as associative vs. montage editing, have created a vast gulf between Malick admirers and detractors.

Later in their study, Hasson and company found that playing the films backwards in their experiments showed a correlation between the variability of the viewers' inability to understand the film -- plot, character motivation, etc. -- and the high variability of activity in brain responses. One must wonder: is all of this conditioned?; likewise, is "control" the point? What are the implications of a film whose director's intent is *not* to exercise this control over our attention and viewing? Citing Bazin, Hasson correctly notes that "the more controlled the aesthetic is, the further these films manipulate the viewer with an unequivocal message.[35] Does the control or lack thereof engage the viewer by allowing them to participate in the act of making the film, or does it merely make us bored? Too strict a degree of control can lead to oversimplified film or propaganda, whereas, as less structured, more difficult, slow or boring film, might, as Dargis and Scott argued, allow the audience to participate in the making of the film.

At the end of their essay, though, Hasson and company ensure that we do not get too reductive in our conclusions about the role highly-structured films play in the manipulation and control of our attention and emotions by saying that high engagement does not necessarily imply

the same interpretation. As Rachel Nuwer rightfully notes, Hassan's conclusions seem to hold more interest for the field of neuroscience, as they suggest just how similar our brains are in their makeup.[36] But what can these conclusions contribute to the theory of aesthetics or the study of film art?

Ira Konigsberg takes a stab at connecting neuroscience with film studies in his essay "Film Studies and the New Science," published in *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*. Konigsberg begins by establishing this premise: "Viewing a film is not identical to the perception we perform in the world outside the theater -- the images are an illusion, and the viewing experience is far more controlled."[37] Academy Award-winning film editor Walter Murch will challenge Konigsberg's premise in his classic book *In the Blink of an Eye*, in which he argues we are trained for watching the movies through our practice in day-to-day visual perception.[38] Still, we allow movies certain visual lapses, like a cut from one locale to another, in a way that we would not allow in our day-to-day lives. If you see the interior of your home, close your eyes to blink, and open them to find the Antarctic, you would anxiously scramble for some explanation. When we blink, cutting the continuous stream of visual information taken in by our optical sense, we expect visual scene we had just perceived to be relatively undisturbed, while, in a film, we afford the cinematic event greater liberties.

On the topic of motion, Konigsberg notes that our brain is ready for motion, and thus, our attention is drawn to motion. "We find difficulty," he writes, "in staying unfocused in general or focused on a static object for a period of time."[39] He offers this account of attention: "Our eyes seek out some focal point, something or some things to attend to in the midst of the image's change. At that instant, countless neurons in our visual cortex are firing in response to all the

elements of the scene before us… turn[ing] on our attention. In a short time, our attention (and

the firing of these neurons) weakens -- unless there is some change or motion of the object itself

-- and our attention quickly moves to another salient element."[40] As mentioned previously, a

director and cinematographer possess a great many tools to ease the burden of seeking out a focal

point on our own. Take, for example, this very fundamental technique:

In what is referred to as "The Rule of Thirds," basic photography (and, by extension,

cinematography) divides the frame into nine equal rectangular spaces by drawing two lines

across the screen vertically and horizontally, dividing the frame into thirds. It looks something

like this: [41]
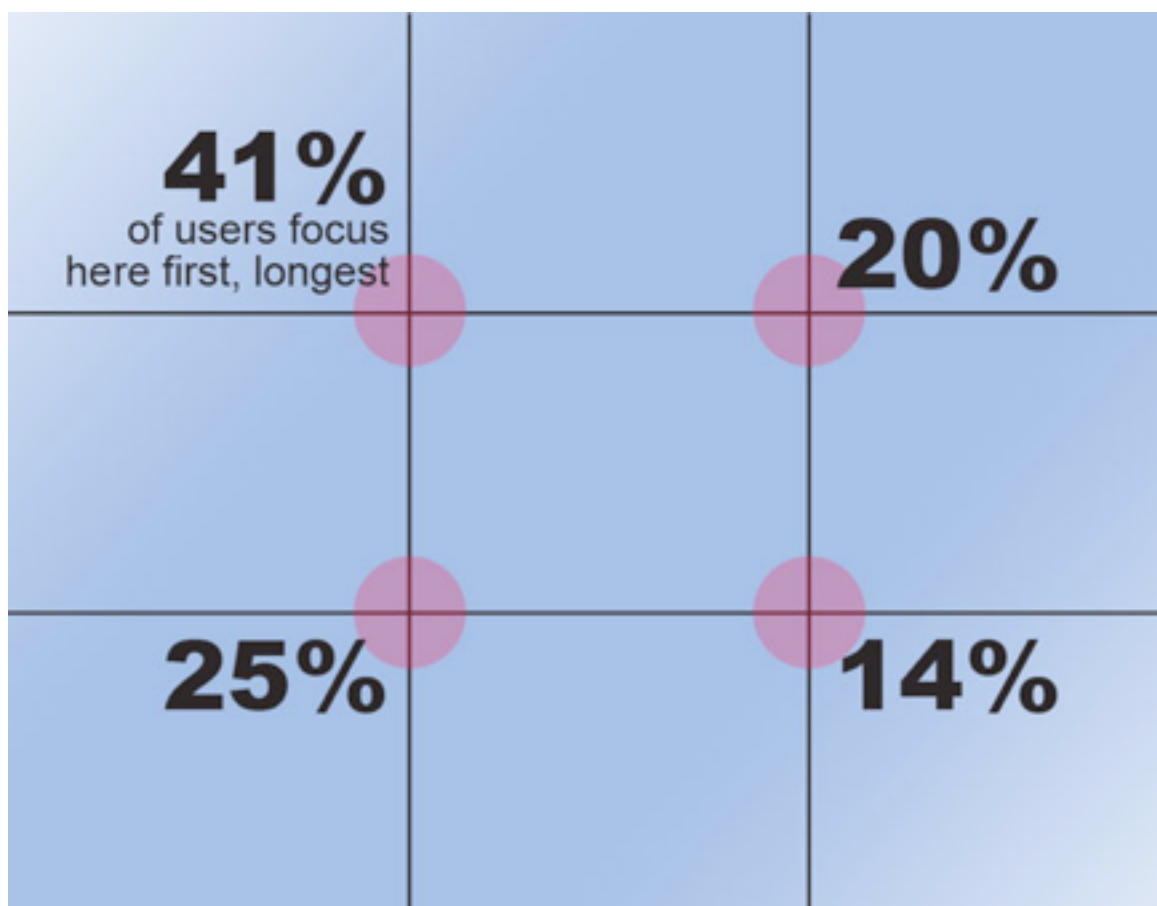
The red circles on the graphic mark the four main "focal points" in the frame, or, the four points which viewers first devote the greatest slice of their attention. As noted on the figure, the upper left-hand focal point is favored as the primary focal point, likely because, in the West,[42] we read from left-to-right, top-to-bottom. As a result, the lower, right-hand focal point of the screen draws the least frequent and shortest direction of attention from the viewer. Directors and cinematographers can harness this principle to establish a hierarchy between objects in the same frame composition. Likewise, by cutting two images together and placing the second object in the same spot as an object in the first shot, the director and editor can suggest a relationship between objects in separate frames, creating a relationship that breaks the walls of the image, that goes beyond the mere collision of montage cinema which results in a third, fixed meaning.

David Bordwell has written briefly on how our gaze and attention can be directed to different points during a static image in order to construct a narrative. On his blog "Observations on Film Art," Bordwell establishes the difference between top-down and bottom-up stimulus seeing. He provides the example of seeing an object out your periphery bearing down on you as you cross the street. You are likely to react by fleeing without actively processing that it is a car that is not stopping, nevermind the details of the car. This is bottom-up looking and seeing. However, if you are looking for your own parked car, you might look for distinguishing features about it -- the make, the model, a worn-out Obama/Biden sticker -- in order to identify which car is yours. This is top-down.[43]

He then applies these schema to a famous painting by Ilya Repin, *They Did Not Expect Him* (or, *The Unexpected Visitor,* 1884). "The dramatic image," he writes, "depicts a hollow-eyed man, gaunt and wrapped in a patchy coat, striding into a comfortable, middle-class parlour."[44]

Then, applying the work of Russian psychologist Alfred Yarbus, Bordwell recreates the viewing

patterns of Yarbus's subjects. An approximation of their focal points looks like this:

However, when Yarbus asked his subjects to approximate the material circumstances of the

family, the attention pattern shifted to this:

Bordwell notes that "a different trajectory emerges" [45] as the subjects begin to collect information about the family by studying their clothes, possessions, and surroundings. So, even though color, composition, eyelines, focal points, and other tools direct the attention of the viewer and being to form the basis of interpretation, narrative also heavily influences the attention of the audience. Indeed, when asked to study the characters for their age, the viewing pattern looked like this:

And when asked to make assertions about the characters based on their costumes, they looked in this direction:

So, the dictates of narrative have an equally compelling power when it comes to directing the attention and gaze of the viewer. As story becomes a task, a different pattern of viewing can image through different stages of seeing the same static image.[46]

Now, Bordwell applies this study to film, specifically Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*, a film known for its slow pace and deliberate, often static, compositions. The study of viewers' attention during a static scene about one-fourth of the way through the film shows an affinity in the viewers' look towards faces, hands, and movement. Eleven adults were scanned using an infrared camera to track their fixations as this shot unfolds:[47]

(Perhaps not accidentally, Eli Sunday, played by Paul Dano, is an unexpected visitor into the office of Daniel Plainview and Fletcher Hamilton, portrayed by Daniel Day-Lewis and Ciaran

Hinds, respectively). There is very little camera movement in the shot, just a slow, almost imperceptible push in. Upon first fixation, the focus point of eight of the viewers (three were blinking), looked like this:

(The larger circles represent a greater time fixated on that area).[48] What we see is a preference to hands and faces, especially those in movement and those Eli, who is the unexpected guest.

Bordwell's study also reveals the speed at which a general fixation lasts. On average, a viewer only holds their gaze for approximately ⅓ of a second.[48] Psychological researcher Tim Smith, working with Bordwell, provides a heatseeking overlay on the entire scene. What he finds is that attention shifts from hands and faces depending on the dictates of the narrative. In other words, in lieu of editing to direct our attention, our gaze begins to settle in focused points on characters' faces as they talk, fingers as they point, and then to another characters' face when a response is directed to them. Smith even points out a shift in gaze during a non-verbal communication. When Fletcher Hamilton asks Paul about the saltiness of the water near his farm, Paul responds that the water is generally salty. Hamilton slightly shifts his glance from Paul, who is responding, to Daniel, who listens quietly. However, the viewers' attention shifts from Hamilton to Plainview, noting this silent communication bears weight on the decision

Daniel is making. This prioritizes the silent communication between Hamilton and Plainview, while reducing the continued response of Eli into the background, or into redundancy.

Smith concludes that this staging technique, using a long, nearly static shot, and focusing the characters in proximity to the center of the frame, very tightly controls the viewers' attention while not appearing to be as manipulative as, say, several quick shots between each character's hands or faces as they communicate. He writes,

> By minimising background distractions and staging the scene in a clear sequential manner using basic principles of visual attention, P. T. Anderson has created a scene which commands viewer attention as precisely as a rapidly edited sequence of close-up shots. The benefit of using a single long shot is the illusion of volition. Viewers think they are free to look where they want but, due to the subtle influence of the director and actors, where *they* want to look is also where the *director* wants them to look. A single static long shot also creates a sense of space, clear relationship between the characters, and a calm, slow pace which is critical for the rest of the film.[50]

Bordwell's work on the allocation of attention has also given rise to the website "Cinemetrics," which approximates the average shot length (ASL) during any given movie. His study has not only demonstrated that the ASL of contemporary movies is far shorter than the ASL of silent films or films made during the Golden Age of Hollywood, but also allows for auteurist studies of style and technique in regards to shot composition and editing pattern. Though differing accounts can be found on Bordwell's "Cinemetrics," a trend seems to emerge suggesting that Malick's films have, on average, decreased from a 6-second shot average to a 3.5-second shot average.

But we must return from this essential digression to place Bordwell's and Smith's study in conversation with Konigsberg's ideas about the pleasures of film spectatorship. Konigsberg contends that "part of the pleasure of viewing a film is having our attention guided in an immediate and controlled manner, having the camera do the looking for us -- following the

objects of definition, one after the other, we impose on them some kind of relationship, and ultimately, some kind of narrative."[51] However, as Bordwell and Smith have shown, this manipulation of our attention produces more pleasure when it functions discreetly than overtly-manipulatively. Still, Konigsberg notes that "the medial prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that is most responsible for the sense of self. This sense of self disappears and this portion of the brain shuts down when "we are engaged in activity outside ourselves."[53] He cites Goldberg who notes that during a highly demanding sensory task, we have the feeling of "losing the self" and "disengaging from self-related reflective processes."[54] So, when a narrative places a heavier burden of interpretation and attention on the viewer, he/she would likely experience a greater loss of the sense of self. This argument would seem to suggest that a film like *There Will Be Blood*, while long, austere, and slow, contains the possibility of engaging the viewer more deeply in the process of attention and interpretation of its visual language, narrative construction, and cinematic semiotics, than a film which perceivably movies faster, but more deliberately manipulates our attention through quicker editing and tighter shots, forcing our attention to essential focal points and narrative beats, rather than allowing us to discover them ourselves.

Konigsberg then responds to Ramachandran's work on mirror neurons, summarizing that the stimulation of our own mirror neurons while perceiving an action of another animal is, in fact, beneficial to our evolution because it paves the way for the possibility of empathy, even through a screen. He writes, "In neuroscience the distinction between reacting to someone else and being the other person undergoing an experience is sometimes obscure."[55] He refers to the phenomenon of mirror neurons as an "emotional contagion," as sort-of emotional memory in which one feels and does not feel something at the same time.[56] To underscore the point that

empathy can occur via mirror neurons even through photoreal images or through the silver screen, Konigsberg reminds us of Robert Zajonc's "mere exposure effect"[57] wherein we are more affected by an object we have seen before than an object that we have not. Likewise, Quiroga and company carried this further to apply to celebrity faces, suggesting that "the degree of familiarization" of a celebrity face enhances the emotion we are perceiving as a result of "long-term memory and not immediate perception."[58] This phenomenon could also attribute strength to Malick's collection of A-list casts as a means for involving the viewer emotionally. So, even in a concentrated and manipulated stimuli like a movie, the potential for empathy arising from the activation of mirror neurons can be enhanced as a result of "mere exposure effect," memory, and "the degree of familiarization."

In summary, the emergence of neurocinematics as a discipline, that is the merging of neuroscience and film studies, provides us with a basis with which to account for collective viewing experiences, the potential for empathy while viewing a film, and allocation of attention and loss of self. Combining the work of Ramachandran and Hirstein, Bordwell and Smith, and Konigsberg, we can determine which compositions are aesthetically-pleasing within a frame, how a viewer's gaze can be manipulated and directed through more than just a carefully executed mise-en-scene, but through the implementation of narrative meaning, and, possibly, how the evocation of images and memory between images, shots, and even inter- and intra-texually can give rise to new engagement with a visual stimulus in film and possibly even splinter the collective viewing experience into a multitude of interpretations. Most importantly, though, the neurocinematics discussed in this chapter assert strongly that the work of watching a film, even the difficult, the slow, the boring, does not dissolve the power of entertainment to lose oneself,

but actually enhances it by engaging certain cortices of the brain which account for attention, momentary consciousness, and the sense of self.

Endnotes: Chapter 4

1. Ramachandran, V.S., and William Hirstein. "The Science of Art: A Neurological Theory of
    Aesthetic Experience." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. 6 (6-7): 1999.

2. Ibid.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.* 15.

5. *Ibid.* 16.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Ibid. 17.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.* 16.

10. *Ibid.* 18.

11. *Ibid.* 20.

12. Or, as Jonathan Culler might call it, "literary competence."

13. Ramachandran and Hirstein 21.

14. *Ibid.* 22.

15. *Ibid*. 24.

16. *Ibid*.

17. *Ibid*.

18. *Ibid.* 27.

19. *Ibid.* 30.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Ibid. 31.

22. *Ibid.* 32.

23. *Ibid*.

24. *Ibid*.

25. Hasson, Uri and Ohad Landesman, Barbara Knappmeyer, Ignacio Vallines, Nava Rubin, and David J. Heeger. "Neurocinematics: The Neuroscience of Film." 2008.

26. *Ibid*.

27. *Ibid.* 1.

28. *Ibid.* 2.

29. *Ibid.* 5.

30. *Ibid*.

31. *Ibid*. 7.

32. *Ibid*. 8.

33. *Ibid.* 12.

34. Ibid. 13.

35. Ibid. 17.

*36.*Rachel Nuwer, "This Is Your Brain on Movies: Neuroscientists Weigh in on the Brain Science of Cinema" *Where to Watch*. 3 Jan. 2013.

37. Ira Konigsberg. "Film Studies and the New Science," *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 1.1. 5.

38. Walter Murch. *In the Blink of an Eye*.

39. Konigsberg 5.

40. Ibid. 12.

41. https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/97/62/06/976206491933951dae2948cf0800c7b5.jpg

42. Though, of course, this is not consistent with non-Western language users. A study of a non-Westerner's allocation of attention in regards to focal points would be welcome in this conversation.

43. David Bordwell, "The Eye's Mind," *Observations on Film Art*. 6 Feb. 2011. http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2011/02/14/watching-you-watch-there-will-be-blood/

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. All images borrowed from Bordwell's blog.

47. Tim Smith, "Watching You Watch *There Will Be Blood*," *Observations on Film Art*. 14 Feb. 2011. http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2011/02/14/watching-you-watch-there-will-be-blood/

48. All images borrowed from Smith's article.

49. *Ibid*.

50. *Ibid*.

51. Konigsberg 13.

52. *Ibid*. 15.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.* 17.

56. *Ibid*.

57. *Ibid*.

58. *Ibid*. 18.

__Conclusion__

Terrence Malick is unlike few directors before him and remains distinct from his contemporaries. Favoring nearly non-narrative, almost experimental films, his works feel more like tone poems than the traditional narrative films we have come to expect. However, in a medium that has so much unexplored potential, Malick's films are a welcome change of pace and are consummate works of art that need only be understood for what they aspire to be in order to be appreciated. Rather than holding them up to the typical standards of cinematic entertainments -- character development, a focused plot, "entertainment," -- Malick's films should be viewed and understood as philosophical explorations of the soul in need.

Veering into the semi-autobiographical, Malick's films pull from a rich history of cinematic, literary, and philosophical traditions to make visual stories that are at once intimate and epic, that attempt to tell the archetypical story of humanity in different individual incarnations. His films, as A.O. Scott writes, are "rooted in human nature but ascend to the infinite mystery." Indeed, the screenplay to Malick's *The Tree of Life* carries this note at the beginning "The 'I' who speaks in this story is not the author. Rather, he hopes that you might see yourself in this 'I' and understand this story as your own."

While Malick's goal of mirroring the individual subjective experience of his audience and attempting to explore this story fails for many filmgoers, it requires patience and a lens attuned to a different way of making films. A reviewer once commented on the film *La Quatro Volte*, that if you let it, it will absorb you in its waves. This is the key to understanding the phenomenological expressions of Malick's *The Tree of Life, To the Wonder,* and *Knight of Cups*.

Pulling from Emerson, Poulet, and Tarkovsky, Malick's expression of time through the rhythm of his editing and the place of repeated, archetypical images next to one another offers an alternative to straightforward narrative structure and provides a route for his characters to break the ties that hold him them to duration in their human experience and to become a part of cosmic time through the creative act of memory. By evoking involuntary, or associative, memory in his films, Malick further complicates this experience of time in an effort to create an Eternal Now.

When we understand Malick's style and technique and attempt to apply recent work in the field of neurocinematics to his work, we can at least begin to understand why these atypical uses of film grammar are so evocative to some and so disturbing to others. Like Proust, Malick and his cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, "provide and create a new way of cinematic seeing -- because Malick himself creates a new mode of directing." Loose, improvisational, and mostly focused on capturing The Sublime in each moment, Malick's mode of directing appears less staged and more spontaneous, performing in its making what his films attempt to achieve in regards to time and creation.

As a result, Malick's pilgrims are constantly wandering along a well-worn path toward spiritual redemption and self-actualization in the now. In order to express such deeply philosophical and transcendental themes, Malick, like the great modernist authors whose primary thematic concern was time, must forge new ways of expression because the ones at their disposal do not suffice. Even the final line of Malick's script for *The Tree of Life* promises "Time has reappeared; resumed its sway," but this cannot be fully understood without those final moments of his film.

And so, rather than maligning his work for its narrow appeal or for failing to live up to tired forms of cinematic expression, we can begin to reevaluated the recent work of Terrence Malick by resurrecting a phenomenological approach to film studies. This approach gets back to the power of the immediate subjective experience, without robbing film studies of academic exploration entirely. Instead, freeing it from strict structuralist and formalist approaches can allow for and encourage new forms of expression in cinema and attempt to help the medium reach its expressionistic potential. The contemporary American filmmaker Harmony Korine decries, "After 100 years, films should be getting really complicated. The novel has been reborn about 400 times, but it's like cinema is stuck in the birth canal." Malick stands at an unique moment in film history, garnering critical and cultural acclaim early on and occupying a Salinger, Pynchon-esque mythical status in film circles. And so, he seems like a prime candidate to be the midwife for cinema's rebirth. His audience just needs to find him. Because film is such an expensive art, the paltry returns on the box office for Malick's films doom the director's ability to keep making the films he wants to make, free from studio interference or the tarnish of negative reviews. However, at some point, that good will from angel investors must run out. Until then, Malick will continue to cement himself as a cinematic Emerson, seeking at once to glorify the human while transcending him, and being fascinated by time, the Romantic spiritual journey of man, and the possibility for an encounter with The Sublime.

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