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## Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick

### Abstract

This is a book review of Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston, eds., *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*.

### Author Notes

Joel Mayward is currently a PhD candidate at the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts (ITIA) at the University of St Andrews, where he is researching theology, philosophy, and cinema. A pastor-theologian and a freelance film critic, Mayward's film reviews and essays are available [www.cinemayward.com](http://www.cinemayward.com).

Barnett, Christopher B. and Clark J. Elliston, eds., *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

In recent years, Terrence Malick has been working at a prolific rate—he’s made nearly as many films in the past five years as in the previous forty, and shows few signs of slowing down. While all of his cinema has had transcendent qualities, in these latest cinematic works, Malick’s religious biography and theological inquiries have shifted into the foreground. In *A Hidden Life* (2019), Malick focuses his attention on the life of Austrian conscientious objector Franz Jägerstätter, whose deep Christian faith inspired him to resist Nazi ideology in World War II, ultimately costing him his life; he was deemed a martyr and later beatified in the Roman Catholic Church. *A Hidden Life* is structured like a Passion Play, employing musical cues, visual motifs, and direct quotes from Biblical texts and the prayers of Franz and his beloved wife, Fani, to cinematically demonstrate a radical commitment to God in the midst of extreme circumstances. Following *A Hidden Life*, Malick’s upcoming film project, tentatively titled *The Last Planet*, is centered on the life of Jesus Christ as told through “parables” with a “dark genre twist.”<sup>1</sup> Though these new films are ostensibly theological in content, every single one of Malick’s films has an underlying interest in the transcendent-immanent horizon, exploring the question of God through the audio-visual medium as a type of post-secular cinematic theology.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, Christopher Barnett and Clark Elliston’s edited collection with Routledge, *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*, is an appropriate and welcomed scholarly analysis of theological themes within Malick’s poetic oeuvre. Where Malick’s films have been given rigorous attention from film studies and philosophy,<sup>3</sup> distinctly robust theological explorations of Malick have been mainly scattered or informal; Barnett and Elliston’s collection provides a solid foundational resource for where to begin when it comes to theological reflection on Malick’s cinema of wonder.

The book is structured in three parts: (1) a summary of Malick's enigmatic personal background and how it might inform theological analysis, (2) the broad theological themes and issues which characterize Malick's filmography in general, and (3) theological "readings" of each of Malick's films individually, ranging from *Badlands* (1973) to *Knight of Cups* (2015); the book was originally published in 2016 before the release of *Song to Song* (2017) and *A Hidden Life*. In Part One, chapters from James Kendrick and George Pattison provide some helpful biographical material for locating and understanding the enigmatic Malick as a philosophical/theological filmmaker. Where Kendrick's introductory chapter is a basic overview of Malick's biography and filmography, Pattison focuses on the apparent influence of Heidegger on Malick's paradigm, which is then imbued within his films. Despite Heidegger's own disparaging posture towards movies, Malick's oeuvre is often understood as "Heideggerian cinema" in that his films appear to be concerned with the structures of being-in-the-world, as well as a self-reflexive interrogation of the cinematic medium itself. That is, Malick seems interested in poetically and affectively exploring the nature of the "world" in which we find ourselves.

In Part Two, Peter Leithart accurately describes Malick's cinema as an "art of reticence, juxtaposing scenes to one another, and layering scenes with visual and multiple audio tracks in a way that pushes much of the drama to a background hinted at but rarely made explicit. Like Genesis 22, Malick's films refuse to foreground or explain and so demand interpretation. The viewer is invited to complete the filmmaking process" (49). Leithart goes on to dub Malick's style as "interrogative" and "polyphonic" filmmaking which "opens up fictional space to competing voices, and...does not subordinate them to an authoritative narratorial or authorial perspective" (50). Much of Leithart's analysis here is helpful for introducing the reader to Malick's distinctive style (Leithart's small book of reflections on *The Tree of Life* [2011] is similarly interesting<sup>4</sup>), but

some of it strains credulity. For instance, Leithart suggests that the utterance of “Jesus! Oh Jesus!” by Woody Harrelson’s character in *The Thin Red Line* (1998) when he blows his butt off with a grenade as clearly identifying Harrelson’s character as a sacrificial Christ figure. Even as Christological imagery is evident in *The Thin Red Line*, particularly in the character of Private Witt, such stretched claims are (as Leithart himself admits) distractingly implausible (60). The subsequent chapters in Part Two from David Calhoun on Malick as a natural theologian and Christopher Barnett on spirituality are a bit stronger in both logic and method, giving adequate attention to theological concepts and cinematic aesthetics. Calhoun examines the dynamic between evidence and interpretation in belief formation, posing a dialogue between Malick and Kierkegaard to offer a model explaining how films “both can and do produce beliefs and how they can articulate and defend in a robust way competing interpretive stances toward the world” (77). Barnett’s chapter on Malick’s use of wind imagery as a sort of cinematic pneumatology is similarly comprehensive and thoughtful, linking individual scenes from films with theological and philosophical concepts.

The nine chapters in Part Three devoted to the individual films range in approach and usefulness; as in any collection, some chapters are stronger than others, and I will primarily highlight the far ends of the spectrum here. On the positive end, Jonathan Brant’s excellent chapter on *Days of Heaven* (1978) uses ethnographic research on audience reception and Rowan Williams’s *The Edge of Words* to focus on the potential benefits of “difficult” theological cinema. Brant’s ability to incorporate empirical research methods with conceptual theological reflection is laudable, and provides hopeful models for how to approach the film-and-theology conversation with such methodological rigor. The chapter from Paul Camacho on the nature of love in *To the Wonder* (2012) in conversation with Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love* pays attention to both form and

content, viewing the film as an “analogue of an orchestral piece” in five movements (235). Indeed, Kierkegaard emerges from the edited collection as a potentially insightful interlocutor—as demonstrated by Barnett and Camacho’s Kierkegaardian readings, Malick’s vision is perhaps more “Kierkegaardian cinema” than “Heideggerian cinema.”<sup>5</sup> The strongest chapter is the final one: M. Gail Hamner’s medium-focused evaluation of *Knight of Cups* is erudite and complex, employing semiotic film theory to explore the affective dimensions of the cinematic experience, i.e., how movies *move* us, and why this matters to theological reflection. Though Hamner argues that *The Tree of Life*, *To the Wonder*, and *Knight of Cups* form a sort of thematic and aesthetic trilogy, with the release of *Song to Song*, I wonder if she would now view *The Tree of Life* as the singular work and *To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups*, and *Song to Song* as the trilogy. Indeed, her argument for a Malickian “daimonaesthetic” is intriguing and well worth considering its application to Malick’s other films (252), particularly *Song to Song*. In any case, Hamner’s contribution is noteworthy, offering insightful contributions for both theologians and film theorists interested in Malick’s cinema.

On the other end of the spectrum, some chapters are not as clear about their method for interpreting cinema, focusing more on theological appropriation of filmic content than giving adequate attention to the distinctions of the cinematic medium or Malick’s *sui generis* style. The two chapters on *The Tree of Life* (arguably Malick’s most theologically-rich film at the time of publication) are examples of this. Though often provocative and personal, Peter Candler’s rambling reflections do not coalesce into a coherent whole, instead meandering from biblical text to theologian to personal observation to movie scene, sometimes all within the same paragraph and with little discernable hermeneutical foundation or thematic link to understand *how* Candler is approaching the film in this way. Perhaps this analysis is, in a way, an attempt to mirror Malick’s

own meandering and elliptical approach. Likewise, Joshua Nunziato's numerous sweeping interpretive claims often lack adequate substantiation. For instance, stating that the film is "radically Christological—a fact that most of its viewers seem not to have fully recognized" (220) raises questions: Which viewers? Whose recognition? Numerous reviews and articles have observed the obvious Christian themes within *The Tree of Life*.<sup>6</sup> And what does a "radically Christological" film specifically entail? As Nunziato unpacks his interpretation of the character of R.L. as a mediating sacrificial Christ figure, he states that Mrs. O'Brien is "quite obviously" a Marian figure (220). Obvious to who? And what characteristics make her distinctly "Marian" beyond the role of motherhood? Could she not also equally be viewed as an "Eve" figure or even the biblical personification of Wisdom? We are left to wonder what the rest of the film's elements and characters might mean in this allegorization view, particularly in light of the film's opening reference to Job 38 or its cosmic vision of the creation, death, and apparent resurrection of the universe beyond the immediate scope of the O'Brien family's experiences (e.g., Should we view Mr. O'Brien as a "Joseph" figure? Who or what does Jack O'Brien then represent? How are the dinosaur scenes included within this "radically Christological" interpretation?). Perhaps I am being too critical here, as nearly any single-chapter consideration of *The Tree of Life* cannot be comprehensive, but as *The Tree of Life* contains so much potential for sparking diligent and innovative theological and philosophical reflection, my high expectations for these particular chapters weren't met.

Moreover, the majority (if not the entirety) of the given theology comes from Western Christian perspectives, both in terms of the book's individual authors and the theological resources considered. The book could have explicitly included more Eastern Christian understandings of Malick's work, as well as non-Christian theological viewpoints. For instance, in light of *The Tree*

*of Life* explicitly opening with a framing quote from the Book of Job, how might a Jewish view of Job and theodicy generate new insights for viewing Malick's film, and vice versa? Or what about an indigenous Native American consideration of the spirituality depicted in *The New World*? The collection would have been strengthened by such frames of reference. Beyond theological perspectives, consideration of Malick's distinctive style would have also benefited from greater engagement with film theory and film studies. The introduction briefly mentions Siegfried Kracauer and Leo Braudy, locating Malick as a "realist" and "open" filmmaker, respectively (xii); individual chapters (Brant and Hamner) bring audience reception and audio-visual formal considerations into view. But this is primarily a work by and for Christian theologians interested in analyzing the theological content latent within Malick's films, and thus does not necessarily draw from nor add to the field of film studies.

Despite these minor misgivings, Barnett and Elliston's fine collection is a thoughtful and well-structured contribution to the Christian film-and-theology conversation, as well as to scholarship on Malick. Indeed, the book may serve as a catalytic first word for an ongoing discussion, as we have certainly not exhausted the rich theological treasures which can be found in Malick's filmography. I can envision assigning specific chapters in undergraduate or graduate courses on Christian theology or a "Theology and Film" class. As a whole, the edited collection gives good reasons for viewing Malick as a "theological filmmaker," or, perhaps more appropriately, a *cinematic theologian*.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Barfield, "'The Last Planet' First Look: Terrence Malick's Upcoming Film Described As Biblical Story With A 'Dark Genre Twist,'" *The Playlist*, December 6, 2019, <https://theplaylist.net/terrence-malick-last-planet-first-look-20191206/>.

<sup>2</sup> On Malick as a post-secular filmmaker, see John Caruana and Mark Cauchi, eds. *Immanent Frames: Postsecular Cinema between Malick and von Trier* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), esp. chapters 1–4.



<sup>3</sup> See Hannah Patterson, ed. *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Wallflower Press, 2007); Thomas Dean Tucker and Stuart Kendall, eds. *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); James Batcho, *Terrence Malick's Unseeing Cinema: Memory, Time and Audibility* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and Robert Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Shining Glory: Theological Reflections on Terrence Malick's The Tree of Life* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See also Robert Sinnerbrink's chapter on Malick's "weightless" trilogy in conjunction with Kierkegaard's existentialist/religious writings in Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick*, 161–206.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Brett McCracken, "'The Tree of Life' Review," *Christianity Today*, May 27, 2011, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/mayweb-only/treeoflife.html>; and Peter Bradshaw, "The Tree of Life – Review," *The Guardian*, July 7, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/jul/07/the-tree-of-life-review>.