

Introductory remarks

The box office success of Xavier Beauvois's *Des hommes et des dieux* (2010)² and Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011) belie the current assumption that we live in an age of dominant materialistic values. It furthermore opposes the notion that transcendence is something of the past, the wishful-thinking and outmoded longing for the religious sensibility that the enlightened generations of today discard to the realm of supernatural fantasy and with which they only feel comfortable in the fictionalized world of films such as Clint Eastwood's *Hereafter* (2010). In this story, transcendence is featured as communion with the dead and the possibility of the afterlife is fashioned in terms of individual intuition and paranormal psychic talent.

Beauvois's and Malick's dealings with transcendence are of a different order and are sustained, in the first case and given the story, by the explicit link to Catholicism and, in the

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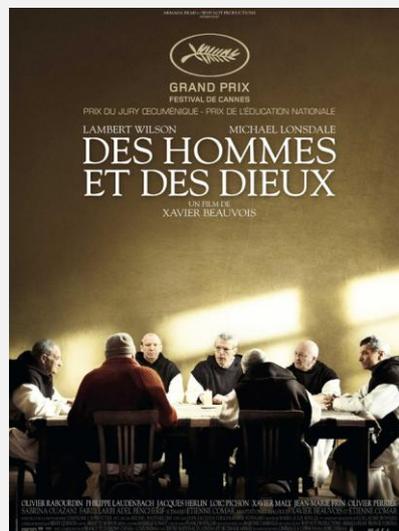
² The title reads *Of Gods and Men* in English. The French original title will be used throughout the text.

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second, by the Mysteries of Creation such as they appear interwoven into ordinary human existence. Both pictures earned public recognition at the Cannes Film Festival, *Des Hommes et des Dieux* being awarded the 2010 *Grand Prix* and *The Tree of Life*, the 2011 *Palme d'Or*.³ Both directors are openly concerned with the fate of men and women, whose commitment to questioning and pursuing the ways of God is anticipated by the biblical quotations which inaugurate the two films: in an interesting convergence, the epigraphs invite the spectator to contemplate the relation of God to His Creation by underscoring the frail and evanescent nature of humanity as respectively announced by Psalm 81: 6-7 and the Book of Job, 38: 4-7

Des hommes et des dieux



Inspired in the tragic abduction of seven French Trappist monks from the monastery of Tibhirine, in 1996, *Des hommes et des dieux* narrates the story of eight monks who chose to live among an impoverished community and practice the life of pious devotion, self-sufficiency and brotherhood as befits the Cistercian Order of True Observance to which they belong. According to the rules of this Monastic Order, Brotherhood entails the choice to lead a life of great simplicity and restraint, preferably among the destitute of the earth in pious reference to

³ Among other distinctions, the French film also received the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury and the 2011 César for best film. In spite of the three nominations for the 2012 Academy Awards, and the 61 wins outside the Academy (namely, the AFI and the ASC Awards) *The Tree of Life* did not win at home.

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Jesus Christ.⁴ The historical circumstance is important for the setting, but Xavier Beauvois will deal with it only as far as it contributes to the central issue of the story he wishes to tell and to this matter I'll return later. In the cinematic strategies of *Des hommes et des dieux*, the French director appears to emulate the simplicity of the Trappist monks: told in a from-the-beginning-to-the-end straight narrative, it formally relies on tracking shot and the efficient economy of a camera that lingers over the scenes from everyday life at the monastery, alternating them with episodes of the peaceful intercourse with the local impoverished Algerian community, or, as the film moves on, with the threats of fundamentalism, military abuse and government helplessness.⁵

Introduced by the breathtaking view of the Atlas mountain range upon which appears a quote from Psalm 81 (6-7), - "Je l'ai dit: vous êtes des Dieux, des fils du Très-Haut, vous tous! Pourtant vous mourrez comme des homes, comme les princes, tous, vous tomberez!"⁶ –, the inaugural sequences show the camera travelling across the mountain and then, in continuous editing, the viewer is presented with a deep-focus shot from extreme foreground to extreme background, showing the monks walking out of their individual cells in absolute silence, as befits the monastic rule, toward an opening at the end of the corridor, the silence only broken by the tolling-over of a bell followed by the psalmody of the assembled monks in their chapel, repeating two lines of the invitatory Psalm 51(50) – "Seigneur ouvre mes lèvres et ma bouche

⁴ The monks were kidnapped and found beheaded. The Armed Islamic Group of Algeria claimed full responsibility for the incident. However, according to documents from the French secret services, this is a very controversial version of the occurrence. It is a possible that the killings were a mistake carried out by the Algerian army during a rescue attempt, but there are other bleaker rumors about the monks' murder. Judicial action by France is in course since 2003.

⁵ Beauvois claims that sobriety, realism and the use of unobtrusive *mise-en-scène* is the key to his approach to a story narrated as film. In his own words: "Avec les bons [films], tu ne vois rien, tout est très discret, les points de montage, les mouvements de camera sont invisibles. Lorsque la mise-en scène saute aux yeux, c'est qu'il y a un soucis" [good films run smoothly, everything is very sober, montage editing, camera movements are invisible. When the *mise-en-scène* is staring us in the face, there is a problem." (My translation)]. Thomas Baurez. "Xavier Beauvois: Réaliser un film comporte une bonne dose d'inconscience" [[archive](#)] *L'Express*, 7 septembre 2010.

http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/cinema/xavier-beauvois-realiser-un-film-comporte-une-bonnedosedinconscience_917574.html#RPWHGR2z1cJEjpFT.99 (accessed on 28/12/2013).

⁶ English translation: "I have said, Ye are gods; all of you are children of the Most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes." *Des hommes et des dieux*. Dir. Xavier Beauvois. Perf. Lambert Wilson, Michael Lonsdale and Olivier Rabourdin. 2010. DVD. Video 1203/2011.

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publiera ta louange."⁷ Geometric precision and ritualized repetition apply to the depiction of monastery life which, in a faithful reproduction of the Trappist rules, bifurcates along the monks' peaceful routine of Liturgical Hours, individual prayer and other engagements, namely reading and writing, complementarily, showing them busy with ordinary tasks, like cooking, gardening, tilling the earth, tolling the bell or tending to the villagers who cue up at the door of the monastery dispensary.

Interconnectedness between the monastery and the villagers is woven into the daily activities, both peacefully at home up on the mountain plateau, with their co-dwelling marked by a dialogic spiritual dimension which, in the first sequences, is announced in a medium close-up of Father Christian de Chergé, the prior of the monastery, reading at his table, followed by a succession of extreme close-ups over *The Qur'an* and books on St. Francis Assisi and St Jerome. The next sequences depict the monks' attendance to a local religious ceremony in which the Islamite villagers and the Christian monks join in a prayer for the protection of "God the Compassionate, the Caring" whose "messengers are welcome without distinction" and whose mercifulness is invoked in the hope that "no soul be afflicted with troubles beyond its capacity to bear with them." Communion with the villagers also means the insertion in the day-to-day life as the next scenes show the monks at the market, selling their honey, Rabbia, a local villager and daily helper at the monastery, asking Brother Luc, the doctor, for advice about her sentimental problems, or another villager being helped to get her papers in order.

Disruption in this life of shared interests and dialogue across the Christian and Islamic cultures is gradually brought forward; first, when an eighteen year old girl is stabbed for not wearing the *hijab* and news of radical fundamentalism is made the topic of conversation between the village elders and Father Christian; then violence draws closer to the monastery, when a fundamentalist militia kills a group of Croat workers who used to help in building activities of all sorts. The following sequences show the prior's refusal to accept military protection from a corrupted authority on the grounds of privilege that exclude the villagers,

⁷ English translation: "Oh Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise" *The Book of Psalms. The Bible for Students of Literature and Art. Selected with an Introduction*, 274. Hence designated as *The Bible*.

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the questioning of such a refusal by some of the other monks, the decision to take measures of protection and the articulation with a liturgical ceremony. Two successive scenes juxtapose the threat of civil war with the routine work at the monastery: first, the roads barricaded by the military, immediately after, Brother Christopher tilling the earth, the high-angle shot from the monastery into the surrounding landscape returning the viewer to the panoramic view with which he is familiar from previous scenes. The next sequences show the escalation in violence, the authorities' helplessness to cope with it and a first incursion of the militia in the monastery under the cover of the night, when Christmas celebration was being held and the first notes of the hymn "Voici la nuit" were heard.

Darkness and the ruthlessness of the militia under the leadership of Alli Fayattia anticipate the threat of a xenophobic attack against the monastery. Turning out to be a demand for drugs and assistance to the wounded, it nevertheless, exposes the vulnerability of the monks, even if it ends up by fostering reconciliation between Father Christian and Fayattia on their understanding that, in spite of abyssal differences, they were both men of faith. Intriguing as this scene may be, particularly for contemporary audiences who are not aware of the common ground shared by the three monotheist religions, reconciliation is achieved around the birth of Jesus, "The Prince of Peace," in Fayattia's words.⁸ With the departure of the militia, the celebration of Christmas is resumed as well as the hymnal chorus that had been interrupted.⁹ The narrative goes on to show Father Christian praying, the rain falling and,

⁸ For an appraisal of this question see Joaquim Cerqueira Gonçalves, "As religiões nos Roteiros da Paz", 219-226.

⁹ The inspiring Christmas Hymn "Voici la nuit" may be listened to in the site of the parish of Bon-Pasteur de Sherbrooke since April 11, 2011. It is one of the 7 liturgical pieces sang by the actors who had professional advice at the French Abbey of Notre-Dame de Tamié in Savoie. The other pieces sang by them as Tihirine brethren at Notre-Dame de l'Atlas were: "Seigneur oeuvre mes lèvres", "Puisqu'Il est avec nous", "nous ne savons pas ton Mystère", "Cantique de Siméon", "Psaume 142" (Comme une terre assoiffée)", "Ô Père des Lumières". <http://www.Paroissedubonpasteur.over-blog.com/article-video-voici-la-nuit-71481202.html/> (accessed on 28/12/2003).

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finally, a long take of the monks gathered in assembly round the table to vote on whether in the present circumstances they should stay or flee the country.

As I referred above, historical circumstance is not the primary motor of Beauvois. Events are a mere framing to show the dilemmas of a number of monks attempting to come to terms with their religious calling and their professed commitment to live in imitation of Jesus Christ. This is the fundamental issue in *Des hommes et des dieux*, a film about alternative ways of life and in which the cinematic strategies of juxtaposition and continuity editing render the story with great economy. But juxtaposition, even if highlighting a contrast between the Trappist monks and the community at large, more aggravated in the case of the militia and the armed forces or the Algerian authorities, does not necessarily establish irretrievable opposition. "To love one another as Jesus loves us" is a work of mercy and at the heart of the Trappist's credo. The very title of the film introduces a basic duality that will resonate in the pairing up of the community of monks with the community of villagers and, afterwards, with Fayattia's militia. Formal equivalence throughout the film, calls attention to the basic structuring around alternative images and sounds, which pair up, occasionally overlap, and appear to flow as smoothly as a river with its tributaries towards the same sea: absolute silence alternates with liturgical singing and a most efficient soundtrack; the dark interior of the monastery with the luminous landscape of the region; the Liturgy of the Hours with the Islamic religious ceremony; silent toiling within the monastic premises with the bustling of the village market; images of peace with those of unrest and guerrilla warfare, the narrative turning around the central image of the Trappist monks, in their white and black habits, the original picture that caught Beauvois' s interest and set his camera in motion.¹⁰

¹⁰ As admitted by Beauvois himself, the Cistercian habit of the brethren was a source of great inspiration: "Il y avait aussi ce merveilleux habit des frères: un noir et blanc qui permet des choses magnifiques au niveau de la lumière, du cadre et de l' improvisation" [There was also the wonderful habit of the brethren: a black and white that allowed for magnificent things at the levels of the light, framing and improvisation." (My translation)]. Nicole Salez, "Des hommes et des dieux: entretien avec le réalisateur, Xavier Beauvois." *Tout por les femmes*. 9 Septembre 2010 [archive]. <http://www.toutpourlesfemmes.com/conseil/Des-Hommes-et-des-Dieux.entretien.html> (accessed on 08/1/2014).

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"Grant us oh Lord the grace of bearing our troubles according to our forces, "the Christian equivalent of the Islamic "no soul be afflicted with troubles beyond its capacity to bear with them," is spelt across the faces of each one of the Trappist monks who are confronted with their own doubts and the fear in circumstances that were totally at odds with their choice of leading a monastic life grounded on the pacific principles of brotherhood and solidarity.¹¹ And again, the viewer is invited to follow the travelling camera, and with it, Father Christian's walk among the flock of sheep across the hillside to the margin of the river, the chirping birds, the over-lapping voice-over of his address to God: "we do not know your mystery, your infinite love, you, who searches for the prodigal son and embraces him, you, infinite love, you who cries with the destitute of the earth"¹² The extreme seriousness of this episode is neatly balanced by the comic relief of the next one as the monks' car breaks down, revealing their absolute helplessness in mending it, while a group of village women, passing by, start the engine without much ado. For the span of time in which the monks, and in particular, Father Christophe, are wrestling with their conscience, the sequences revisit the daily events at the monastery backed up by the soundtrack which catches the tolling of the bells, the scraping of agricultural implements and a host of different sounds, like the rain falling or the whispers of the breeze; and, of course, the liturgical psalmody of prayer, while the camera moves forth among the monks daily lives, the government's insistent advice that they leave and the touching villager's demand that they stay."¹³

For approximately an hour and a half, the viewer has been presented with a narrative objectively structured by the artful balance between travelling camera for the exterior scenes and fixed framing for the monastery takes. Even if the whole gamut of human emotion is

¹¹ My sentence is modeled on the Islamic hymn to God the Compassionate the Caring, in which the monks joined on their attendance of the Islamic Religious Ceremony; it is my purpose to call the attention to the basic economy of the film, where a single sentence (and there aren't those many, given the Trappist rule of the silence) or the minute detail in a scene contribute to the intensification of meaning and increase the extraordinary effect of a film unified around a dominant theme of the relation of the self with transcendence.

¹² The voice-over reproduces Father Christian's thoughts, which are presented in my translated-into-English version above.

¹³ As Father Christian's tentatively prepares the villagers for their possible departure, he says: "we are like the birds on a branch. We do not know if we are leaving," the elders immediately reply: "we are the birds, you the branches of the tree." (My translation).

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shown, from brotherly concern, compassion and faith, to humor, indecision and human frailty, these are viewed by an "unsentimental" camera that keeps its distance in relation to the agents of the story presented in a masterful interplay between the shadowed monastic interior and the African brightness of the exterior scenes. The last half-hour of *Des hommes et des dieux*, however, provides a change that directly involves the common viewer who, until then, might have been won by the skills of the director and the inspirational photography of Caroline Champetier, without committing himself to the monastic experience, most probably at odds with his own as an ordinary person.¹⁴

In visual and acoustic terms, there is a prelude to the coming change, when the Tibherine monks, gathered in the chapel, after the Consecration, start singing "Ô Père des Lumières", their voices overlapped by the drowning noise of a military helicopter getting closer and closer. Imminent as the attack appears to be, the helicopter slowly moves away, its noise gradually dying down as the liturgical choir grows in volume, and the singers draw together in a semicircle, their arms meeting over each other shoulders. The multilayered soundtrack doubtlessly intensifies the visual counterpart of the film, with sound getting the upper hand in a scene that, in the opinion of the well-known British film critic Mark Kermode, signals the turning point in the conscience crisis. Typical of Beauvois in *Des hommes et des dieux* is the juxtaposition of a highly dramatic sequence to a comparatively trivial one, in this case, the arrival of Father Bruno from the Moroccan Trappist monastery, with precious gifts for the survival of the brethren, and the ensuing group photograph of this happy reunion, which, for a second, freezes the movement of the film image as in a photographic still.¹⁵ Kermode further believes that the crucial decision of remaining with the afflicted villagers is taken when the

¹⁴ Mark Kermode, the BBC's resident film critic and BAFTA member, after avowing that the film plot would not have caught his interest in normal circumstances, rated *Des hommes et des dieux* as "genuinely exceptional," "extremely moving," ranking it as the second best film of 2010. *BBC Radio 5 live: Kermode and Mayo's Film Review*. 3 December 2010.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00cnj7w> (accessed on 10/01/2014).

¹⁵ This is an instance of underscored film technicalities by the self-referential use of the picture within the picture, which, simultaneously, fulfils the narrative function of a last visual testimonial of the brethren's presence in the region.

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assembled monks draw closely together in the chapel, as if they were a single body.¹⁶ I would add that the succeeding photograph seals the decision, with their communicating smile consecrating of a spiritual undivided bequest.

The next sequences introduce, for the first time, the travelling camera in an interior scene, starting with the slow motion images of Brother Luc bringing the wine to the table where a symbolic Last Supper takes place. No words are exchanged, just the camera travelling over each one of the faces in successive, repeated close-ups scored to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. No words, only music. And those amazing faces, exchanging a look or a smile between them, occasionally stare back at us, the viewers – Baroque self-portraiture brought into the twenty first century by the talent of Beauvois and Champetier.¹⁷ Theirs is not a mere surface semblance achieved by the expert handling of light and shadow in *chiaroscuro*, but it works at deeper levels of interpellation, in an analogous fashion to the response elicited by a self-portrait such as the genre is written about by Julian Bell: "this device of proposing a *me* signaling my presence within the picture – and thus a *you* outside it whom I address – can cut across the sideways-moving space of the surrounding scene." (6; my italics)

In the case of a film, a similar effect is achieved by the close-up on a face as an "isolated zone of intense and restless consciousness" who engages the viewer, believer or not, in touching reverence for the moral greatness of the lives of Christian de Chergé, Luc Dochier, Christophe Lebreton, Célestin Ringiard, Paul-Favre-Miville, Amédée Noto, Michel Fleury, Bruno Lemarchand, and Jean-Pierre Schumacher. As their repeatedly focused faces speak of faith, courage, brotherly love, and acceptance, one is led to believe that the "pictorial equivalent for

¹⁶ Mark Kermode, *BBC Program*, footnote 13.

¹⁷ In Xavier Beauvois' own words: "Pour que cette séquence fonctionne, j'ai pris le soin d'éviter de faire des gros plans sur les prêtres pendant la première heure et demie de film, afin qu'à ce moment-là, le spectateur soit touché en les voyant si proches." ["To make the most of this scene, I avoided using the close-up on the priests for the first an hour and a half of the film, so that this particular moment, bringing them so close, would move the viewer."] in Thomas Baurez. See footnote 4. Caroline Champetier also admitted that she had got inspiration from the Rembrandt self-portraits, in her own words: "pour comprendre visuellement comment un homme se regarde". [to visually understand how a man looks at himself] In Sylvie Bethmont-Gallerand. "Illuminé par la grâce : le film "Des hommes et des dieux" [archive]. Octobre 2010. <http://www.Paris.catholique.fr/Illumine-par-la-grace-le-film.Des.html> (accessed on 10/01/2014).

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the spirit", which Rembrandt is said to have pursued in the "two-hundred-odd self-images" he created, materializes, even if only for the fraction of time of each close-up, among the Tibhirine monks in that Last Supper before their abduction. (Bell, 9-10) Once again, the musical score by Tchaikovsky stirs up an emotional response, the fulfillment of love after bodily death in *Swan Lake* eliciting the symbolic analogy of the reunion of the individual soul with Jesus Christ's. In their role as mediators of the spirit, each of the monks emulates the model of Christ born-man, whose mission was to announce the Spirit, bringing Him to the "experienced reality of human history." The last extreme close up of Father Christian's upper half of the face is particularly evocative of Rembrandt's search, as if his eyes, said to be the mirrors of the soul, would return to us the Incarnation he had been called to witness *in* and *by* each one of the ecstatic faces of his brethren.¹⁸



The brethren at the table are one of the several strategic repetitions, which does not merely intensify a given meaning since it also fosters narrative progression. The closing sequences of *Des hommes et des dieux* is anticipated by the first incursion of the militia in the monastery, but this time there is no truce, only the violence of a night raid, the abduction of seven monks (two escaped) in their way to each one's cross, the terrorists holding them as hostage, the difficult progression under the falling snow, Father Christian sustaining old, asthmatic Brother Luke, in a macabre resonance of the first sequences, with the monks

¹⁸ Incarnation in the sense of Jesus Christ being born again in the person whose rebirth is actually initiated in the course of this permutation. The Tibhirine monks fulfill their role in imitation of Christ, mediator of the Spirit, to the limit of bequeathing their lives for sake of their faith and for the love of the community of villagers, which are assailed by the plagues of terrorism and civil war. Cf. J. T. Mendonça and Duarte Belo. *Os Rostos de Jesus: uma revelação*, 22.

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gradually disappearing to the last one, not in the silent entrance of the chapel, but in the silent mysteries of the enveloping whiteness. Before they vanish, the viewer is given the solace of listening to the premonitory testament of Christian de Chergé in voice-over, written some years before when he felt that terrorism and civil war might endanger his and the brethren's lives:

S'il m'arrivait un jour - et ça pourrait être aujourd'hui - d'être victime du terrorisme qui semble vouloir englober maintenant tous les étrangers vivant en Algérie, j'aimerais que ma communauté, mon Église, ma famille, se souviennent que ma vie était DONNÉE à Dieu et à ce pays

Qu'ils acceptent que le Maître unique de toute vie ne saurait être étranger à ce départ brutal.

Qu'ils prient pour moi.

comment serais-je trouvé digne d'une telle offrande?

[...]

Dans ce MERCI où tout est dit, désormais, de ma vie, je vous inclus bien sûr, amis d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, et vous, ô amis d'ici, aux côtés de ma mère et de mon père, de mes soeurs et de mes frères et des leurs, centuple accordé comme il était promis! Et toi aussi, l'ami de la dernière minute, qui n' auras pas su ce que tu faisais, oui, pour toi aussi je le veux, ce MERCI, et cet "A-DIEU" envisagé pour toi. Et qu'il nous soit donné de nous retrouver, larrons heureux, en paradis, s'il plaît à Dieu, notre Père à tous deux. Amen! Inch' Allah.¹⁹

19 The document has been written on two different occasions, December 1, 1993 and January 1, 1994. "If ever it happens to me – and it could be today – to be a victim of the terrorism that appears to want to besiege all foreigners dwelling nowadays in Algeria, it would make me happy to know that my community, my Church, my family, bear in mind that my life was DONATED to God and to this country./May they accept that the only Lord of all life would not be a stranger to this brutal departure./May they pray for me: how have I been found worthy of such a bequest?[...] In this THANK YOU in which everything is said, henceforth, of my life, of course I include you all, friends of yesterday and of today, and you, oh my friends here, side to side to my mother and father, my sisters and my brothers and theirs, a hundredfold granted as it was promised! And also you, my friend of the last

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The Tree of Life



Less explicitly associated with a particular religious denomination in its foregrounding of the interconnectedness between Creation and a suburban American family, *The Tree of Life* provoked considerable stir among the host of Terrence Malick's admirers when it won the 2011 *Palme d' Or*. A rough résumé of the story locates the action in Waco, Texas, in the 1950's, the town where Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien are living and raising their three children. A reviewer pointed out that the details of time, place and family, although supporting a parallel with the director's own life, has an archetypal cultural resonance, which locates the story in the small-town America of the fifties. At the center of the film is Jack, the eldest son of the O' Briens, a middle-aged architect who lives amid the "gleaming skyscrapers and clean ultramodern surfaces" of a typical contemporary metropolis, and whose remembrances weave the story we are invited to watch.²⁰ But this film soon becomes a tale of wonder, dealing with a wider span than the narrator's flashback into the events of his youth, as it turns out to be a self-scrutinizing exercise in which the present is suspended in favor of the past, on and off intersecting and converging in a final vision of the so-called Shores of Eternity.

minute, who will not have known what you were doing, yes, I also wish to offer this THANK YOU, and this "A-DIEU" in which I be-hold you. And that it may be granted that we meet again, two happy rascals, in paradise, if it pleases God, our Father to both of us. Amen! Inch' Allah." (My Translation). For the complete version see <http://www.la-croix.com/religion/Approfondir/Documents/Le-Testament-du-P.-Christian-de-Cherge-F> (published in 03/09/2010; accessed on 27/12/2013)

²⁰ A. O. Scott, "Heaven, Texas and the CosmicWhodunit" *New York Times's Critic's Pick*, May 26, 2011. <http://films.nytimes.com/2011/05/27/films/the-tree-of-life-from-terrence-malick-review.html> (accessed on 14/01/2014).

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Characteristically Malick makes use of the hushed voice-over to give a first hint of the nature of Jack's quest and associates it to two inaugural words, "Brother", "mother", which are followed by the question "where are you?" A first hint of the interconnectedness between different times and places is the parallel created with the Word of God addressing Job in the inaugural epigraph: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?", the change in verb tense pointing to the parallel between past and present stories. The invocation of brother and mother in the contemporary story is, by consensual opinion, linked to the flickering flame-like shape that transliterates the Word as inscribed in the epigraph into the iconic visual image of the divinity, addressed by Jack as "You" in his attempt to sort out the foundations of his own life.²¹ Inscribed in those foundations and, in a sense, the driving motif behind Jack's labyrinthic journey into the past is the untimely death of his brother Robert [R. L.], when he was nineteen years old.

Coming after Job's epigraph is a succession of images with no affinity to the account of a story based on linear narrative that invites the viewer into a multitude of sensorial experiences as image flows into image allowing him to wonder at the flicking and ever changing flame-like shape; to listen to the voice-over whispering "they took me to Your door"; to see and hear the little girl who becomes the mother later choosing the way of grace over that of nature with John Tavener's *Funeral Canticle* as background music – "I'll be true to You whatever comes" –; to look at sunflowers stretching into the horizon; to momentarily linger over the image of the little girl hugging her father, holding a dog, gazing at a herd of cows; to watch the O'Brien family together – the mother, the father, the three boys, the swing set, children climbing a ladder and rope to a large tree; to hear the *Canticle* fading into

²¹ Interestingly and in tune with contemporary sensibilities, some reviewers appear to shy away, in evasive references, when tackling the question of God. Among others, A. O. Scott speaks of the "creator" as "the elusive deity whose presence in the world is both the film's overt subject and the source of its deepest, most anxious mysteries" and mentions the director's "idiosyncratic Christianity". See previous footnote; and interdisciplinary artist Miranda Laud in her excellent analysis of the film comments parenthetically that "despite the Christian texts for some of Malick's musical choices, it seems he implies a universal creator that is outside of any one denomination, beyond definition." "Music and Image in Malick's *The Tree of Life*". *NatureStage*. July 15, 2011. <http://www.naturestage.org/2011/07/music-and-image-in-malicks-the-tree-of-life/> (accessed on 14/01/2014).

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ominous silence, and jump forward to another house, see the postman delivering the fatidic letter, the mother crumbling to the floor with a cry; to follow another cut into a plane on an airfield and the father on the phone, framed in close-up; to hear the roaring engines, to see the crouching father, to hear Lupica's "Cosmic Beam Take 5", and have a glimpse of R. L.; to follow another cut in the tolling of bells and catch a glimpse of the sunset; to listen to the mother's hushed, grieving voice – "my son ... I only want to die to be with him" – against the background music of Mahler's *Symphony N^o 1*; to look at R. L.'s empty room, the camera momentarily lingering over the guitar; to commiserate with the O' Briens' neighbors after the burial ceremony, and hear the mother's mother attempt at consolation – "Time heals nothing stays the same...the Lord gives and takes away"–; to follow with the eyes R. L.'s ladder upon the tree; to listen to the distressed father – "never told him...I was sorry...poor boy"– and again follow his aimless drift among the tall trees; to wonder at the flame-like shape; to listen to middle-aged Jack – "how did You come to me, under which shape, which disguise?"– and see him at home with the wife, to hear sounds of tap water and of high heeled shoes walking the floors, climbing stairs; to wonder at another glimpse of the flame-like shape, followed by the image of the child Jack with R. L. – "true, good ... dead at 19"; to follow the middle-aged elder brother going up the building in the elevator into present time; to flash forward into a glimpse of the forthcoming Shores of Eternity; to flash backward to boyhood games by the river; and forward again to the present time in Jack's atelier; to watch him addressing his father on the phone, asking for forgiveness and after a pause hearing his meditative "I think about him everyday" –; to listen to the whispered words – "how did I lose You?" – interspersed by a glimpse of the cascading water and the revolving clouds, "forgot You?"– newly interspersed by images of a desert landscape changing into images of the Shores of Eternity; to follow the bridge into Jack's youth while hearing the voice-over – "find me"–, to see once again images of mother and brother, the father, the huge garden tree; to watch the choreography of black specks in the skies, cloud-like birds flowing into nowhere, the mother below, among the trees with the sky above; to newly wonder at the flame-like shape and listen to the mother's pleading voice – "Lord"....why? ...where were You?"; to see the dark clouds above the waters, the flame-like shape become a red circling eye, gradually fading into a whiter shade of pale; to

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listen again to the mother's prayer-like voice – did You know? Who are we to You?" – ; to watch images of a black galaxy and light blue; to follow the halting voice – "answer me"–; to see the illuminated fissure, the circling irregular shapes, the clouds anticipating the 18 minute long sequence of the Creation of the World according to Terrence Malick and scored to "Lacrimosa 2" from Zbigniew Preisner's *Requiem For My Friend*, composed in honor of the great Polish director, Kryztoff Kieslowski.

There is no conventional sequence in this rough enumeration of images that flow into images against the background of sound and music and the scattered whispering voices of the protagonists. There is, on the other hand, exponential reliance on ellipse and jump-cut, techniques which invite the viewer to follow the director's clues and to fulfill his role as a player in Malick's film, the O'Briens story becoming a doorway into other stories, most relevantly Job's, which revisits the original biblical tale of origins. Malick's sequence of creation provides on such an account a frame that also endows the family whose citizenship is of a given place and time – Waco, Texas in the fifties – with universal significance based on a spiritual kinship that transcends the here and now of their merely material existence. And if the viewer is familiar with the literary account of the creation of the world in *Genesis*,²² he will marvel at the close parallels achieved by Terrence Malick's filmic version of the "darkness over the surface of the deep", "the formless and empty earth", "the spirit of God hovering over the waters"; the "emergence of light", "the separation from the darkness, "the evening" and "the morning" of "the first day". (*Genesis*: 1-5). As image flows into image, so will the film render "the vault between the waters to separate water from water" and its gradual expansion in "the sky"; the gathering of "the water under the sky to one place", and the "dry ground" of "earth" to the other, distinct from "the seas"; the land-produced vegetation, and "the lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night", "two great lights-the greater light to govern the day, the lesser light to govern the night."(*Genesis*: 6-17) Finally, "the water teemed with living creatures and birds [flying] above the earth across the vault of the sky". (*Genesis* 20-21)

²² *Genesis. The Bible*, 5-54.

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Written at a later period and the first of the Bible's sapiential texts, *The Book of Job*²³ chosen by Malick as a the portico to the O'Briens' story sheds new light on the question of Creation and the place of man in it, adopting a dominant interrogative mode and using dialogue instead of narration permeated by the univocal, authoritarian voice. God is, nevertheless, as much in full command of Creation as he is in Genesis – "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the line upon it?" (*Job*: 38:4-6) – , but the focus of the book is on Job's personal history; on his need to deal with his own life in connection with his belief in God, who, in his view, did him injustice. In fact, it becomes a paradigm for subsequent metaphysical speculations about the nature and agency of the individual human being who abides by faith and grace and, even so, is afflicted with loss and suffering. The parallel with the O'Brien's is evident. The religious upbringing of the mother led her to trust that if the way of grace were chosen over that of nature, nothing bad would happen to her. The continuities between these two stories go, however, beyond thematic analogy and are emphasized by the repetition of images that in each of them bears the mark of their time either at literary or visual levels. *Job* deals with the words and the interpretation of men, which, in opposition to the divine perfection, exhibit the limits of human knowledge and wisdom. But their progress in knowledge is also spelt in the text by the diversification of species – "the great creatures of the sea" (*Genesis* 21) differentiating as the "behemoth" and the "leviathan" (*Job* 40:15; 41:1), a similar process of bio-diversification occurring at all levels of natural life and witnessing to the different historical periods in which both texts were written.

The Creation of the World according to Terrence Malick is also a product of his time and experience as a film director. Beginning with Creation and going through the Big Bang, precellular life, the Mesozoic age, family life in the fifties, up to our days and a vision of the end of time, Malick makes use of scientific and technological progress to recreate a

²³ *The Book of Job. The Bible*, 237-258. Henceforth abridged to *Job*

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cinematographic idiom capable of encompassing the span of life and visionary experience.²⁴ He has been described by his close associates as someone who believes in paradisaical innocence, loves bird-watching and has a Romantic fondness for the natural world, but his films are also a kind of laboratory where he experiments and uses groundbreaking techniques by means of which he is able to present his own metaphysical vision of life. The connections between his choice of images and his philosophical themes owe, in *The Tree of Life*, a good deal to the artful montage of special-effects sequences and nature shots, showing his talent to revisit transcendence in the light of renewed sensibility and contemporary knowledge.²⁵

Emmanuel Lubezki, the cinematographer that has collaborated with Malick since *The New World*, claims that he has, above all, striven for a documentary-style spontaneity, which, in this film, owes much to his preference for handheld mobility and avoidance of traditional camera setups. Spontaneity suits, indeed, the story of the O'Briens and their three boys, Jack, Robert and Steve, in as much as the flux of images intersecting and connecting different times realistically reproduces middle-aged Jack's stream of consciousness, dangling between the character's present dilemmas and the contradictory emotions of a youngster growing into adulthood. His journey into the self, the flashback to the conflicts and changing moods of a typical family of the fifties may mislead the viewer into the assumption that he is watching a melodrama, in which the almost ethereal mother plays the angelic role as the guardian of grace, and the authoritarian, strict father embodies the opposite state of nature and the less sympathetic materialistic way of life connoted with the American capitalist system. The younger brother, Steve, is given no voice throughout the film, while Jack, on his own admittance, takes after the father and R. L. after the mother. "Brother," "mother" are the words that set the film flowing, but as the camera zooms between present and past, there are several occasions in which the boundaries between grace and nature fade, the opposition originating with an advice from the nuns who were entrusted with the mother's schooling.

²⁴ For a good and detailed exploration of Malick's technique and reference to his closest collaborators see Manohla Dargis, *et al*, "Pursuing Imperfection in Malick's Eden." *The New York Times*. 19 August 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/22/movies/the-tree-of-life-premieres-at-cannes.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed on 16/01/2014)

²⁵ On this subject and on Malick's fondness for the philosophy of Heidegger, see Susana Viegas "Os filmes de Terrence Malick", 302-3.

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It is difficult not to sever grace from nature when we limit the father to a prototype, forgetting that he, after all, is the one who introduces children to the grace of music – Brahms *Symphony N^o 4*, Bach *Fugue in dm BWV 565* on the organ – , insists on being addressed as "sir" but is concerned with the affection his boys feel for him, searches solace in nature when stricken by the son's death, is tenderly loved by the mother equated to grace, and, in the close sequences scored to the "Agnus Dei" from Berlioz's *Requiem*, takes intrinsic part in the envisioned reconciliation. I endorse film critic Roger Ebert's point of view when he refers to this character not only as the typical father of the fifties but also as the father who wants the best for his children²⁶. Nature from a narrow point of view may be associated with evolutionary theory and economics thereby securing the link to the Darwinian sequence in which the powerful dominating dinosaur threatens the little one lying on the ground, soundtrack superimposing on the music the stomping feet of the menacing creature. But, immediately afterwards, the viewer sees and hears a fetus heart beating fast (a dinosaur's? a child's?) and listens to the mother's voice-over "light of my life ... I search for you ... my hope... my child" –, a whispered prayer-like lament which resonates with the poem that inspired Górecki's first movement in *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*.²⁷ Another jump-cut leads the viewer into an almost reverberation of the voice-over, this time, middle-aged Jack is apparently finding an answer for his earlier wondering about the mystery that governs life – "You spoke to me through the sky, the trees...You spoke to me before I knew..."– ; the pause is mediated by the image of the flowing river, and then a further prayer-like whisper – "when did You first touch my heart?"

²⁶ Film critic Roger Ebert has perceptively written about the *Tree of Life* referring to the complex character of by describing one of the scenes as follows: "In the face of Hunter McCracken, who plays Jack as a boy, we see the face of Sean Penn, who plays him as a man. We see fierceness and pain. We see that he hates his father and loves him. When his father has a talk with him and says, "I was a little hard on you sometimes," he says, "It's your house. You can do what you want to." And we realize how those are not words of anger but actually words of forgiveness." Someday he will be the father. It will not be so easy." "A Prayer beneath the Tree of Life". Roger Ebert's Journal. May 17, 2011. <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/a-prayer-beneath-the-tree-of-life> (accessed on 16/01/2014)

²⁷ Górecki's composition in three movements flashes back and forward in time, the first being inspired in a mid fifteenth-century lament focused on the sorrows of motherhood. As in this scene from *The Tree of Life*, the address starts with the words "my son" and ends with "my cherished hope."

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Nature as river, forest, the skies, shapes also as wonder and biblical mystery. Mother, too, is associated with natural elements, the sunflowers, the birds, the clouds, the trees, her ethereal figure the consistent embodiment of grace throughout the film. *The Tree of Life* does not deviate one millimeter from Malick's characteristic framing of character in nature or the contemplation of natural phenomena by the human eye or the surrogate camera. Nature is granted grace by the images of sunlight streaming through the windows, lacing curtains, splashing on lawns, refracting upon garden hoses; the rustling of the tree leaves in the breeze; revolving water mounting to the clouds in the skies. It seems to me that there is a truly Emersonian ring in this director's devotion to Nature, although more often than not he has been associated to Heidegger for his unflinching expression of the "poetic visions" of reality in the form of intuition and philosophical thought. Emerson, however, started it all when he claimed that everything is Nature and the natural world should be interpreted as a reflection of a higher spiritual order upon the visible material world of perception.

Malick's distancing from earlier techniques, when he privileged contemplative duration and long-take sequences, in favor of images flowing one into another also suits the director's expressed intention to give a universal twist to the story, uprooting it from the domestic scene of a given time and a given place – the tensions, conflicts, frustrations but also the tenderness of family life – and choosing instead to associate it to the continuities of Creation and would-be reconciliation in a vision of the afterlife. Fragmentary as the flux of images may appear on a first screening of the film – and how could it be otherwise given the scope of the project? –, Terrence Malick succeeds, nevertheless, in creating a deep sense of cohesion by using several devices. Most obviously, at the level of the repeated imagery, when we first see the lying smaller dinosaur in the primeval forest of redwood trees and, then, watch the mother wandering through the same forest, gazing up towards the sun. Or when we realize that the stretch of the river where the dinosaurs appear is the same stretch where the three brothers play, symbolic of the ever-flowing river of life running under the clouds that recurrently glide along the skies. Or, finally, when we gaze upon images of Creation and of the Shores of Eternity, which flash-like intersect with the voyage of Jack as contemporary wayfarer in quest of his own self.

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Cohesion is, however, highlighted by the background music which links scenes at different temporal points of the universe and, further, provides a bridge that integrates "a vast sonic flash back into the flow of the present."²⁸ The original score by Alexandre Desplat exemplarily illustrates this point by accommodating classic and contemporary pieces in a seamless composition which accompanies the flux of images, both concurring in a multi-layered depth of meaning. This is, for instance, the case with the sequences scored to Smetana's *My Country – Vlatva (The Moldau)*, in which the flowing river and the dancing camera unite to catch the rhythms of family life, a tinge of melancholia contrasting with the energy of the three boys playing on the lawn, running along the river's edge, having fun in the fields or slowing down for a night's rest anticipated by the lulling stories of Mother – "tell us a story from before we can remember", asks R. L. And indeed *The Tree of Life*, true to the symbolic nature of its title, reaches far beyond the O'Briens' story, far beyond the time they could remember, served by the perfect blend of music and image – "pure syncretism" in Hillman's words –, music no longer at the exclusive service of mood suggestion or atmosphere conveyance, but contributing to the building of meaning as much as its visual counterpart. It is also the case with Couperin's *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*, the Baroque harpsichord which we hear twice in the film as a frame to motherhood and the intimate relationship with the tree sons. In Miranda Laud's opinion, this musical baroque piece is central to the meaning of the film, the barricades overcome and become the bridge across which frail human nature walks into intimations of immortality.²⁹

Over two centuries separate François Couperin and Bedrich Smetana; over one, Smetana and the host of concurring contemporary composers, among them, Sir John Tavener, Zbigniew Preisner, Henryk Górecki or Francesco Lupica, who are cited in *The Tree of Life*. As the film is scored to Baroque, Classical, Romantic and Contemporary music, it enforces the feeling

²⁸ In "Malick's Music of the Spheres: *The Tree of Life*", Roger Hillman offers, perhaps, the best analysis of the musical score together with commentaries on this director's previous films. December 2012. <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2012/12/malick%25E2%2580%2599s-music-of-the-spheres-%25E2%2> (accessed on 17/01/2014).

²⁹ For Miranda Laud, the universal quality of the film is in good measure achieved by the combination of "cinematography, out-of-time sequences, whispered and sometimes inaudible prayers and music," this combination reinforcing "a mystical reaching for transcendence and cosmic understanding of human suffering and mortality." "Music and Image in Malick's *The Tree of Life*", see footnote 20.

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that the repeated patterns along the different periods, bridge the span across the times. Music itself makes such a span extremely visible and Alexandre Desplat definitely uses the repetitive pattern as a tool to achieve meaning and cohesion along the musical score. Several references in the film remind us of this sonorous effect by the use of repetition and variation, namely Brahms's *Symphony N^o 4* (second movement), which interrupts a family dinner conversation, and Bach's *Fugue in D minor*, played on the organ by the Father, both pieces using those stylistic devices. Repetition and variation are indeed fundamental strategies throughout the filmic account that interconnects middle-aged Jack's quest of the self with the birth of the universe and the evolution of life on earth. The quest is, further, given a titanic ring by the echo of *Mahler's Symphony N^o. 1* (first movement), which, as mentioned before, has been chosen as background music to the fatidic news of R. L.'s death, the driving force behind the elder brother's voyage into the past.

With the progression of the film, the premature departure of R. L. and the spiritual demand of middle-aged Jack are endowed with universal significance and gradually stripped off particularities, as we realize that we may be watching our own story on the screen. The compulsion to come to terms with death is ingrained in our existence even for those who, like Héctor Berlioz, profess to be atheists. In his *Requiem*, also known as *Grand Messe des Morts*, Berlioz follows traditional patterns and themes, inviting into his composition a large combination of orchestral and choral elements, which endow the piece with grandeur. Almost two centuries later, Malick would set the sequences of his *Shores of Eternity*, to the "Agnus Dei", the closing movement of prayer for the intercession of Jesus on behalf of the departed ones. It is also the movement in which melodies from the previous ones are recapitulated and brought to fulfillment as it is the case with the supplication for "eternal rest", introduced earlier in "Domine Jesu Christe", also present in *The Tree of Life*.³⁰ Recapitulation as a structural device admirably suits a story going over the past to make sense of the present and in

³⁰ The "Agnus Dei" connoted, from the very beginning, with Christ, the Lamb of God (Cf. John, 1: 29; Mathew, 9: 27) through whose intercession humankind fulfils the designs of the Creator, such connotation being valid either in the ecclesiastical ceremony or the ensuing orchestrated concert.

which death is featured as part of the natural process of ever-flowing life, not as a final stage, but as the intermediate doorway to fully achieved spirituality.

Berlioz's *Requiem* furthermore operates dialogic intensification with pieces glossing the same theme, namely Tavener's inaugural *Funeral Canticle* and Preisner's "Lacrimosa 2." As background music to the inaugural scenes, the *Canticle* induces contemplative lyricism, which is brought to dramatic height in Preisner's score. The identification between "Lacrimosa" and the pleading voice-over is absolute in the sequences of Creation. A mother weeps for her dead son and demands of God – Who are we to You? –, the question conveying affliction and incomprehension for the mysteries of created life. A similar convergence, although of a different nature, occurs in the vision of the Shores of Eternity, when spiritual life allows for peace and reconciliation at the sound of the plea for eternal rest. These are merely two instances that illustrate the force of cohesion in *The Tree of Life* by the interaction of all its constitutive elements, image, music, and soundtrack. Mystery, however, is also intensified by the very cohesion achieved. It takes shape in the sonorities of the musical score, heightened, interrupted, or getting along with the soundtrack and the noises of the world – the water through the hose, the grating garden implements, the explosive Big Bang, the roaring cascades, the chirping birds, – the occasional dialogue, the barely hushed- in voice-over, and the unsettling noise of the empty silence in a multi-layered architecture of sound and image. Even the images from the natural world, the Utah salt flats or the California redwood trees at a low-angle shot do not clash with the surreal world in which a boy emerging from a water house (Jack) or a floating mother are accepted as "real" as the mysterious flame - like shape throughout a film that in its reach inside for the roots of the "Tree of life", and in its reach outside for its branches fosters the symbolic union of the earth in which we dwell with the transcendental heights to which we are transported by watching films like *The Tree of Life* and *Des hommes et des dieux*.

Final remarks

Both films bring the viewer closer to transcendence; the formal means by which such an effect is achieved being, however, very different in each case. But is there any particular

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way to reach out for what lies beyond experience lived in materialistic ways? Xavier Beauvois and Terrence Malick appear to have little in common when we put aside their talent as directors, and mainly consider the formal orientations of their practices, the almost academic *mise-en-scène* of the former against the highly experimental format of the latter. In the sphere of public identity, they, again, appear to be as different as they could be, particularly when we bear in mind that the French director professes to be a non-believer, and the American is known for his idiosyncratic Christianity. One is inspired by actual history and the dialogue across Christian and Islamic cultures in Algeria, the other by a cross-culture jump that links the American fifties with the Creation of the World, bringing both periods into the contemporary scene and beyond.

On the surface and in spite of the critical acclaim that both films received, the contrast between them could not be greater and might be expressed in a simple question. How does historic scale come to compare with the cosmic one? This is, of course, a rhetorical question to set the argument going, for there is plenty of common ground upon which Beauvois and Malick tread. First, the superb cast of performers who mediate between the script and the audience, leading their roles with the aura of their artistic identity and, simultaneously, winning the viewer to a deep empathy with their impersonations: Lambert Wilson as Christian, Michael Lonsdale as Luc, Olivier Rabourdin as Christophe, give admirable portraits of their split between the frailties of human condition and the inspiring light of faith in *Des hommes et des dieux*; Hunter McCracken as young Jack, Laramie Eppler as R. L., Jessica Chastain as Mother, Brad Pitt as Father and Sean Penn as middle-aged Jack, also give excellent performances of their grappling with disappointment, sickness and death, as these come to be balanced by the grace of compassion and the memory of love in *The Tree of Life*.

Xavier Beauvois and Terrence Malick are also consummate experts in making the sound and the visual architectures of their films highly operative. The tension of the musical scores with visual imagery is as productive as the combination of the different genres in clusters of meaning: *a capella* liturgical singing and classic ballet music, in Beauvois; sacred, symphonic and instrumental music, in Malick. In one as in the other, the scores powerfully highlight the states of the soul by, running the whole scale of human emotion, but,

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simultaneously, they are brought to the foreground as structural and thematic components of the stories, in parallel with the multi-layered soundtracks, becoming as relevant as the visual images to the meaning of the films. But most interestingly, perhaps, in both directors, is the deliberate use of silence against which all other sounds appear to be measured. Silence also backs up efficiently the travelling camera over the landscape or in the enclosed spaces of dwelling, fulfilling as much a significant function in relation to sound as the opposition created between the natural light of the exterior scenes and the darkened inside of the interior ones.

As in the novel, there are many ways of playing around a theme or a motif in cinema, which, on being approached from different angles and being told in different styles, fosters a wealth of distinct connotations. The Trappist monks were the tree where the "birds" of the region alighted. They were the spiritual and the material sustenance of the villagers, the healing friends in times of deprivation, and, on such an account, analogized to the enduring natural element – "we are the birds, *you the branches of the tree*" (my italics, my translation) – against which vulnerability likened to a bird's is measured. In Catholic symbology, the "tree of life" represents the immaculate state of humanity before the fall, but to Pope Benedictus XVI, the cross becomes understandably the true tree of life.³¹ According to these two standards, *Des hommes et des dieux* concurs with Malick's central symbol and film title. Manifestly branching out in as many directions as those of a universal symbol, the "tree of life" is always associated with *interconnectedness* between distinct times and distinct spheres, linking immanence to transcendence, in its variable cultural appropriations. I could hardly think of a better title for a film that is intent on establishing a bridge across the beginning of the world, throughout our contemporary age into the Shores of Eternity.

³¹ In his address to youth in World Youth Day, Pope Benedictus XVI emphasized the connotations to the usual meaning of the cross upon which Jesus died, associating them with love and peace, such an association drawing, in my opinion, a parallel with the in-between lines statement of Christian de Chergé in his "Testament". René Girard used the innovative approach to the death of Christ as an act of pure love for his fellow-men in the book, *Des choses cachés depuis la foundation du monde* (1978). See Benedictus XVI's complete address in "Pope tells WYD youth: the cross of Jesus is the real tree of life". *AsiaNews.it*. 4 September 2006. <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Pope-tells-WYD-youth:-the-cross-of-Jesus-is-the-real-tree-of-life-5864.html> (accessed in 18/01/2014).

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Both directors are concerned with values that from the beginning of times have set the human heart wondering and speculating. Is the human condition fated to live within the limits of a universe perceived in the exclusive terms of its materiality? What about the pull toward the unknown, the unfathomable intuition that there is something beyond bodily existence, that in the absence of spiritual life, the mind may dwindle to the shadow of one's shadow? In his Testament, Brother Christian de Chergé speaks of a "consuming curiosity" that only death may appease, and also of the hope to look in the eyes of God and, through them, to contemplate His children of Islam. There is ambiguity in this statement, especially because the reason for the peculiar curiosity is left unsaid. But will it not be of the same kind as the hushed, tentative addresses of the voice-over to that numinous "You" in *The Tree of Life*? And is the elusive deity not the source of Job's anxious despair, the Mysterious Presence rhapsodized in Biblical Psalmody? Cinema is by nature particularly attuned to the performance of ambivalent moods and indefinable states of the soul. It is by definition the art of the ellipse, built on the gaps in time and space continuity within a narrative, on such an account, becoming a privileged means of bringing home a point of view that necessarily interpellates the viewer's, simultaneously, returning him/her, to the pleasures and difficulties of his/her own wondering self in *Des hommes et des dieux* as well as in *The Tree of Life*.

On a concluding note, I should like to add that both films approach transcendence from a perspective that is consonant with the shifts in paradigm, characteristic of our age. Feelings of brotherhood towards the impoverished Islamite villagers are very much within the habits of Christian charity; unusual is the participation of the Christian monks in a Muslim religious ceremony, addressing the same One God of the local people, with whom they join in prayer for mercifulness and the sparing of unbearable affliction. Also, the connection of evolutionary theories with the idea of Creation challenges common beliefs in the perfectibility of the created world and introduces a picture that owes as much to religion as to science. For centuries, God appeared to inhabit particular regions and specific denominations, accommodating to the narrow limits of the human mind. Not any longer in the present circumstances. Obsessive exclusivity has become the realm of human experience metaphorically circumscribed to the here and now of materialistic existence, "the flat two

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dimensional 'planar' reality" that ignores the ongoing quest of our species towards forms of inclusive spiritual dimensionality.³²

There is a common denominator that Xavier Beauvois and Terrence Malick pursue in their films built on the convergence of once-estimated oppositions. *Des hommes et des dieux* invites a transcultural reading of texts that are fundamental in the Catholic and the Islamic faiths, *The Bible* and *The Qur'an*, in order to establish the religious nature of the bond between Father Christian de Chergé and the militia leader Alli Fayattia. At a deeper level, the juxtaposition of the two sacred scriptures allows us to gain new insights into the motifs that led the Catholic priest to write a moving Testament, ending in the double interjection: "Amen! Inch' Allah." These are indeed the last words on which the silence falls as the monks disappear into the engulfing snow. Almost equivalent in the different linguistic systems, "Amen!" and "God willing," when placed side by side, echo in distinct complementary resonance, representing the synthesis of human expectation with the acquiescence of God. Another kind of convergence, this time between two distinct areas of knowledge, science and religion, is at the source of *The Tree of Life*, a film that combines the metaphysics of Creation with the laws of physics and anthropology. Only a transdisciplinary comprehension of the structure of the cosmos and a prejudiced-free attitude capable of accepting that intellectual intuition is a reliable method of inquiring into the complexities of our multidimensional universe will grant our fellow men and women a chance to question the suitability of the single concern with day-to-day material existence and an opportunity to enter the spiritual adventure of their inclusive condition.

Filmography

³² According to Ubiratan D'ambrosio, survival is a common feature to the diversity of species in the planet, but the essence of humanity lies in the reaching out to transcendence, the third dimension which differentiates men and women from all other living species and gears them "beyond the two-dimensional space of the real" into self-conscious spirituality. "From Survival To Sublimation: an Unbounded Humanity" (15).

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Des hommes et des dieux. Dir. Xavier Beauvois. Perf. Lambert Wilson, Michael Lonsdale and Olivier Rabourdin. 2010. DVD. Video 1203/2011.

The Tree of Life. Dir. Terrence Malick. Perf. Hunter McCracken, Laramie Eppler, Jessica Chastain, Brad Pitt and Sean Penn. 2011. DVD. Video 3508/2011.

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