“LOVE EVERYTHING”: CINEMA AND BELIEF IN MALICK’S THE TREE OF LIFE

Robert Sinnerbrink (Macquarie University)

One of the questions that Gilles Deleuze explores is the relationship between cinema and belief: can cinema restore the broken link between us and the world? Does modern cinema have the power to give us ‘reasons to believe in this world’? My case study for exploring the question of belief in cinema, or what I call a Bazinian cinephilia, is Terrence Malick’s The Tree of Life (2011); a film whose sublime aesthetics and unorthodox religiosity have provoked polarized critical responses, but whose ambition is to create a mythology—personal, historical, and cosmological—capable of reanimating belief in cinema and in the world. At once a religious-metaphysical work and a meditation on the origins and ends of life, The Tree of Life expresses a philosophical version of cinephilia: a love of existence, an aesthetic response to nihilism, affirming the world’s dialectic of nature and grace via cinema’s revelatory powers.

As both a religious work of art and a meditation on belief in cinema, Terrence Malick’s The Tree of Life (2011), has been at once highly praised and sharply dismissed.1 The question I wish to explore here, controversies aside, is why the film has generated such polarized responses. These responses, moreover, have intensified in response to Malick’s subsequent films, To the Wonder (2012) and Knight of

---

Cups (2015), a trio of related works that we might call Malick’s “faith and love trilogy.” My contention is that this critical response to The Tree of Life turns on the question of belief, a question explored in the film on a number of levels: Can film depict belief, spiritual experience, and love in a manner that transcends our cultural scepticism? Can it give us “reasons to believe in this world” through aesthetic experience? Is belief in cinema still possible? In what follows I argue that, with its fusion of moral, historical, metaphysical, and spiritual visions, the film explores love and belief, challenging our pervasive climate of cultural scepticism, whether towards religion, mythology, or the aesthetic possibilities of cinema. Malick’s wager is that cinema has the power to express and evoke belief; it is a poetic machinery for the creation of revelatory images capable of offering “reasons to believe in this world.” Sequences such as we find in the film express an ethical sense of care and aesthetic acknowledgement of what exists—a philosophical cinephilia or cinematic ‘love of the world.’

The key to understanding the dynamic of love and belief in the film, I suggest, is via the dialectic between the way of nature and the way of grace. This dynamic, dialectical relationship is articulated at a number of levels in the film, from the young Jack’s attempts to reconcile his father’s egoistic self-interest with his mother’s grace and love, to the sublimity of nature in its elemental power in contention with the transcendent dimension of spirit that unites us with the cosmos as a whole. With these themes in mind I approach The Tree of Life as a film that is at once philosophical, religious, and mythic; a film that attempts to retrieve and renew a sense of belief in cinema and its revelatory aesthetic power. It is in The Tree of Life’s mythic evocation of cosmic, historical, and personal memory, its phenomenological capturing of contingency, duration, and nature, and its commitment to the transformative aesthetic power of cinematic experience, that we find the most powerful evidence for understanding the film as a case of ‘film as ethics’ or cinematic ethics—the idea of cinema as a medium capable of evoking an experience of ethical transformation (of our perception, sensibility, and understanding).

“Our Picture is a Cosmic Epic, a Hymn to Life”

Like his more recent films, The Tree of Life (2011) polarized critics and admirers. This is not surprising, given its coalescence of genres and styles: an evocative (and partly autobiographical) family melo-

---

2 Taken from Malick’s press release on the film before its public release.
drama/coming-of-age/memory film set in 1950s and '60s Texas (as well as in the present), featuring Hollywood stars such as Brad Pitt, Sean Penn, and Jessica Chastain; a sublime 'creation' interlude on the origins of the universe and evolution of life on earth, combining Kubrick-style cosmic meditation with awe-inspiring nature documentary; and a romantic-religious hymn celebrating existence, acknowledging the virtue of grace in the face of suffering and loss, and the life-affirming, transcendent power of love, concluding with a vision of spiritual redemption ‘at the end of time.’ Unsurprisingly, the film has challenged philosophically-minded critics. The latter were enthused by Malick's existential war movie The Thin Red Line (1998), with its Heideggerian meditations on being and Emersonian evocations of “one big soul” and “all things shining.” They were ambivalent about The New World, Malick's mythic love story and historical costume drama, with its romantic-elegiac explorations of the nascent encounter between cultural-historical worlds and poetic meditations on love and our historical dwelling in nature. They have been struggling, however, to find philosophical ways to acknowledge The Tree of Life, despite its success in winning the 2011 Palme d'Or at Cannes and several 2012 Academy Award nominations. As Kent Jones remarks, Malick’s “intense interest in origins—of violence, of the universe itself”—have made his recent films “anomalous in modern culture”—not least because of their aesthetic figuration of metaphysical ideas. Suffice to say Jones is not alone in detecting “a strain of embarrassment in some of the more hostile reactions to The Tree of

3 Cf. the famous voiceovers in The Thin Red Line: Train: “Maybe all men got one big soul where everybody’s a part of. All faces are the same man, one big self. Everyone looking for salvation by himself. Each like a coal drawn from the fire.” Witt: “Who were you that I lived with, walked with? The brother, the friend? Strife and love, darkness and light--are they the workings of one mind, features of the same face? Oh my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.” The phrase “All things shining” comes from James Jones’ war novel, The Thin Red Line, upon which the Malick film is (loosely) based. The ‘one big soul’ recalls Emerson’s “over-soul,” that which unites men, nature, and God. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays. First and Second Series (London: J.M. Dent, 1906), 149–67.


5 Kent Jones, “Light Years,” Film Comment (December 2015) [www.film licz.org/daily/light-years-kent-jones-tree-of-life-review/]
Life," a hostility also evident in critical responses to *The Wonder* (2012) and *Knight of Cups* (2015). One explanation for this hostility would be to point to the anxiety generated by the film’s spiritual-religious dimensions. Repeating the reception history of Malick’s other films, critical responses to *The Tree of Life* stand polarized between rapturous celebration and sarcastic ridicule. Roger Ebert, for example, praised Malick’s work as “a film of vast ambition and deep humility, attempting no less than to encompass all of existence and view it through the prism of a few infinitesimal lives.” Amy Taubin, by contrast, complained that “the film’s attempt to represent the presence of the Creator in all living things from the Big Bang to the End of Time relies on an aesthetically insufferable pile-on of maudlin voiceover combined with a glut of classical religious music.” Taubin’s complaints about Malick’s use of voiceover (used less than in *The Thin Red Line*) and musical repertoire is representative of a common strain of critical rejection. What separates the perspectives of Ebert and Taubin, however, is less a dispute over the film’s aesthetic qualities than an implicit ambivalence over its status as a religious work of art. Indeed, I would suggest that it is precisely *The Tree of Life*’s Christianity—or its religiosity more broadly construed—that lies at the heart of the film’s curiously polarized reception.

What is striking here are the hermeneutic strategies critics have deployed in order to deal with the relationship between film’s aes-

---

6 Ibid.
7 In a similar vein, Scott Foundas asks why Malick’s *The Tree of Life* received such a hostile response at Cannes, whereas Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s 2010 Palme d’Or winning *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, ‘another meditative film about nature, death, and possible afterlives’, did not; “Cannes 2011 Report 2,” *Film Comment*, (July-August 2001). [www.filmcomment.com/article/cannes-2011-report-2/]
8 Roger Ebert, “*The Tree of Life*” [http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-tree-of-life-2011]
9 Amy Taubin, “All Movies Great and Small,” *Film Comment* (July/August, 2011): 57.
10 Most of the composers used in this sequence are not ‘classical’ but contemporary (Zbigniew Preisner, Giya Kancheli, John Tavener and Mother Tekla). The sequence concludes with the *Domine Jesu Christe* movement from Berlioz’s *Grandes messe des morts* (or Requiem) Opus 5 (1837).
11 As Peter Bradshaw remarks, “[p]eople would repeatedly reproach me for my own laudatory notice; this film, they said, was pretentious, boring and — most culpably of all — Christian. Didn’t I realize, they asked, that Malick was a Christian?” “*The Tree of Life*—Review,” *The Guardian* (July 7, 2011). [www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/jul/07/the-tree-of-life-review]
thetics and its religiosity. There are four that a survey of the film’s critical reception reveals: (1) uncritical affirmation of the film because of its religious content (the ‘Christian’ interpretation of the film); (2) uncritical rejection of the film for essentially the same reason (the anti-religious response); (3) disavowal of the film’s religious content in favour of its aesthetic merits (the ‘aestheticist’ reading); 4) acknowledgment of the film’s aesthetic merits and transformation of its religious content into non-specific or ‘post-secular’ forms of spirituality (the ‘revisionist’ approach). One common pattern is to downplay the religiosity and praise the film’s aesthetics, another is to criticize the film aesthetically as a way of rejecting its religiosity. The difficulty, however, is that the two aspects are inextricably entwined (the pointed use of voiceover, for example, that plays on religious as well secular meanings). The Tree of Life’s religiosity therefore poses a problem, not only for evaluating one’s aesthetic response to the film but for understanding the relationship between film, philosophy, and religion more generally.

David Sterritt, for example, praises the film as a “stunning achievement,” an ambitious, personal film evoking “a sense of divine wonder by artfully juxtaposing an autobiographical bildungsroman with sublime artifacts chose from the visual, verbal, musical, gestural, and architectural treasures” gleaned from the long history of Judeo-Christian culture. Nonetheless, he criticizes what he takes to be Malick’s theological position: the film’s shift from philosophy to theodicy, “arguing for God’s goodness despite the evidence of a fallen, iniquitous world,” which thereby removes, he claims, the human dimension of pain, struggle, and suffering.12 Sterritt thus implicitly rejects the Kantian ‘autonomist’ view of aesthetic value and adopts a ‘moralist’ position (that the aesthetic quality of works of art can be vitiated by their moral vices)—in this case, Malick’s alleged theodicy. No argument is offered, however, to justify the assumption that a film dealing with theology and religiosity—even in such an unorthodox manner as Malick, whose romantic nature mysticism recalls William Blake—must therefore be aesthetically compromised.

Moritz Pfeifer has articulated well the hermeneutic antinomy The Tree of Life generates by contrasting religious-idealistic and analytic-

---

modernist perspectives on the film. On the one hand, there is the idealist, for whom *The Tree of Life* is an ineffable aesthetic and emotional revelation, showing beauty and reality in ways that evoke spiritual truth. On the other, there is the analyst, for whom the film should be analyzed and understood as a self-reflexive historical meditation on memory and childhood experience, mediated by cinema and popular cultural imagery (the glass coffin image from Disney’s *Snow White*, for example, or the 1950s fascination with space, science, and the universe). From this point of view, any spiritual or religious meaning to be gleaned from the film is either filtered through the perspective of the various characters, or else makes reference to other cinematic works (Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Tarkovsky’s *Mirror*, for example).

An alternative approach, which I shall defend, acknowledges the film’s religiosity while also keeping open the multiplicity of meanings evoked by its aesthetic sublimity. The question of belief enables us to acknowledge both aesthetic and religious dimensions of the film, allowing us to read it as a meditation on belief in the world—in life, nature, love, and God—mediated via the revelatory potential of the cinema.

**Belief in Cinema: *The Tree of Life* as Mythic Work**

In a brief but rich essay, “Cinema and Theology,” Bazin identified three ways in which film has tackled religious themes: by retelling the Christ story, the ‘stations of the cross’ film; by hagiography, the melodramatic ‘lives of the saints’ movie; or by dramatizing the spiritual, psychological, and social struggles of the priest, the most exemplary instance of which is Robert Bresson’s masterpiece, *Diary*...
of a Country Priest (1951). There is a fourth way, however, which pertains to a number of films made since the 1960s and in more recent decades. This is what we might call the ‘post-secular’ religious film that explores the spiritual-existential struggle of an individual over questions of faith and belief, his or her experience of, or encounter with, what Rudolf Otto (1926) called “the numinous”: the awe-inspiring, terrifying but also fascinating encounter with a transcendent reality or the “wholly other.” Films dealing with the experience of the numinous no longer deal with a saint, priest, or the Church, but rather with everyday characters in the grip of an existential struggle, undergoing a shattering but transformative encounter with something overwhelming or incomprehensible. The aesthetic experience such films afford can evoke a sense of the numinous, without necessarily being reducible to a specific theological system, although they clearly affiliate themselves in different ways with various religious traditions.

Such is the case with The Tree of Life. The film’s opening quotation cites the Book of Job, situating the film within a Christian theological tradition (the Tree of Life found in the Garden of Eden); yet its title evokes a multivalent notion that spans many of the major

---

15 André Bazin, André Bazin at Work: Major Essay and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties, (tr.) A. Piette and Bert Cardullo (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 64.

16 Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational, (tr.) J. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926). Otto popularized the concept of the numinous (from the Latin, numen), which was taken up by Carl Jung, C.S. Lewis, and in the religious studies of Mircea Eliade. It describes a shattering encounter with a transcendent dimension beyond ordinary experience (the “wholly other”) that resists description and comprehension; as a religious experience it is characterized both by a sense of terror (a “fear and trembling” or mysterium tremendum) eliciting dread or anxiety, as well as rapture or fascination evoking silent awe or wonder. It spans both religious and non-religious uses, and could be described as a key element of post-secular forms of religiosity.

17 In this category we might include films like Kubrick’s 2001, Tarkovsky’s Solaris (1972) and Stalker (1979), Kieslowski’s The Double Life of Veronique (1993), Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010), Béla Tarr’s The Turin Horse (2011), and Malick’s The Tree of Life.

18 The Tree of Life is mentioned in the Book of Genesis, after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and hence are cast out of the Garden of Eden: “And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3:22, King James edition). The film evokes this quest to retrieve the fruit of the Tree of Life (eternal life), but within the limits of our natural and historical dwelling.
world religions, many mythological accounts of the origin of life, but also connotes Darwin's conception of evolutionary development. This coalescence of meanings in the title of the film—combining Christian, mythological, and evolutionary senses—is reflected in its bringing together of disparate styles and genres. There are at least three narrative/mythic dimensions of The Tree of Life—the familial melodrama, the historical-spiritual Fall or loss of the American Dream, and the cosmological myth combining spiritualism and naturalism—all of which are woven together in the story of the O'Brien family.

Given the film's 'mythic' coalescing of personal, historical, and metaphysical dimensions, some further consideration of its structure seems warranted. All three dimensions co-exist and communicate with each other in a topology that could be called mythopoetic (combining myth and poetry). (1) The first layer is the familial melodrama, which centres on middle-aged architect Jack O'Brien's [Sean Penn] spiritual-existential crisis on the anniversary of his younger brother's death (killed when he was only 19). Set during the course of this one day, a troubled and lost O'Brien recollects, via a remarkable and complex use of flashbacks, the lost life and joy of his childhood, growing up with his two brothers, stern father [Brad Pitt] and serene mother [Jessica Chastain] in Waco, Texas, during the 1950s. (2) The second layer is the historical-spiritual story, the way the O'Brien family's story depicts—through visual style, mise-en-scène, framing, composition, light, and musical accompaniment—a mythic Fall from the romanticized historical 'Eden' of the 1950s Midwest to the spiritually destitute space of contemporary America. (3) The third layer is the cosmological creation myth, interpolated within the familial melodrama and story of the Fall, which evokes the sublime emergence of life within a re-enchanted universe; a naturalized cosmos developing with evolutionary vitality imbued with aesthetic grandeur and spiritual wonder. This third story culminates in an eschatological myth (Jack's transcendent vision of the 'end of time'), which combines the familial melodrama, story of the Fall, and mythic

19 Steven Rybin points out that Malick has composed the story of Jack's childhood through flashbacks that go well beyond what the adult Jack could remember (or what the young Jack could have experienced directly), thus exposing and exploring the inherent ambiguity of the flashback as a way of communicating recollections of the past in a manner that overflows individual memory. In this way, The Tree of Life could be read, Rybin argues, as "a philosophical inquiry into the very nature of the flashback as a source of meaning in film" (Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film [New York: Lexington Books, 2012], 176).
quest, explored through the sublime experience of spiritual reconciliation through love.

This decidedly mythic tenor of the film is signalled in its opening sequence, which frames what follows as a response to God's challenge to Job, to state whether he could have witnessed, as a mere mortal, the emergence of life from the primordial darkness:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation...while the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:4,7)

A numinous image of coloured light set against a dark background (a 'Lumia' image from Thomas Wilfred's work, Opus 161 (1965)) is accompanied by signature Malick background sounds of a susurrating nature (wind, waves, bird cries). Taken by some critics as a depiction of God's presence, the image, as Kent Jones remarks, highlights Malick's fascination with light, indeed his equation between light and life; but also, I would add, between cinema, nature, and the world—the 'realism' of cinema, its power to capture an aesthetically transfigured sense of reality (almost every outdoor shot in the film, for example, displays the setting or rising sun, in the background yet shining brilliantly through trees, radiating across faces, illuminating the everyday world).

Still in 'mythic' mode, the film proper begins with a recognizably Malickian voiceover, belonging to the adult Jack, presented as meditative 'prayer' directed at an unnamed presence: "Brother, Mother. It was they who led me to your door." The line recalls the image of an empty door frame in the desert wilderness that we see Jack hesitate before at decisive moments in the film. Like Pocahontas/Rebecca in The New World, whose voiceover invocations call for her 'Mother' (her own and mother earth), Jack's voiceover, like that of his own mother, hovers between recollection and meditation, voice of conscience and silent prayer. Like all voiceovers in Malick's films, the voice both belongs to a particular character and serves to articulate a communal experience. It narrates a particular character's story, witnessing his or her subjective experience, while also taking on an 'any person whatever' role: that of a mythic narrator witnessing a

---

20 Thomas Wilfred was an American-Danish artist who was a pioneer in creating 'Lumia' images or visual music; works of art composed of light, colour, and form, using the colour organ or 'Clavilux'.

21 Kent Jones, "Light Years."
shared experience transcending the particularities of psychology, place, or history.

The mythic use of voiceover continues with the introduction of Jack’s mother. Her childhood recollections as a girl is sequenced in lyrical images flowing from girlhood to married life, accompanied by a voiceover that invokes the dynamic interplay of nature and grace that lies at the heart of the film:

In man’s palace there are two ways through life: the Way of Nature and the Way of Grace. You have to choose which one you’ll follow. Grace doesn’t try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself. Gets others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy, when all the world is shining around it and love is smiling through all things.

The duality of Nature and Grace, usually personified by characters both in communion and conflict with each other, features in a number of Malick films. It is evident in contrast between Wit and Welsh in *The Thin Red Line*, Smith and Pocahontas in *The New World*, even Kit and Holly in *Badlands*. There is opposition and conflict but also interweaving or entwining of these two poles, which are intimately related, mutually transforming, but never fully reconciled. This is true of *The Tree of Life*, which makes explicit the dialectic between nature and grace within a religious-mythic frame, while at the same time exploring their complex attunement in a dynamic ‘unity of opposites’. Malick both evokes and subtly shifts the religious dimensions of this relationship, demonstrating that their initial opposition reveals a more complex dialectic as the film unfolds.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that *The Tree of Life* articulates the relationship between the way of Nature and the way of Grace within a Christian theological context. As a number of interpreters have pointed out, Mrs. O’Brien’s description of the contrast between the two ways through life is reminiscent of medieval mystic Thomas à Kempis’s account in *The Imitation of Christ* (Book 3, Chapter 54). The way of Nature is that of self-preservation, the struggle for survival, rational egoism; the way of Grace is that of self-transcendence, openness to the world (or God), and selfless love. At first blush it

---

22 A point well made by Rybin, who also notes that, unlike Kempis, “Malick is ultimately concerned to show us how both the ethereally spiritual and the brutally natural are intertwined” (*Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film*, 172).
appears that the contrast between Nature and Grace is mapped directly on to the characters of Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien, the stern, egoistic, disciplinarian Father versus the loving, forgiving, gracious Mother; or between young Jack torn between these two conflicting impulses in contrast with the aesthetic sensitivity of his younger brother, the budding guitarist, ‘R.L’ [Laramie Eppler]. At the same time, the film complicates this contrast, showing how Grace and Nature co-exist, struggling with each other, Grace having need of Nature but also how Nature is imbued with Grace (as Mrs. O’Brien says, Nature torments itself, ignoring the beauty and glory shining through all things). The film does not simply endorse the mother’s grace and forgiveness, which Mr. O’Brien at one point calls ‘naïve’, against the father’s ‘fierce will’ and desire to ‘lord it over others’—his way of preparing his sons for the way of the world. On the contrary, the mother’s grace is severely tested by the tragic loss of her beloved younger son R.L., which she takes as God’s personal slight against her, while the father struggles with his own suppressed feeling, his thwarted musical ambitions, and compensatory pleasures in the transports of music, a poignant reminder of a life-path not taken. Neither character is entirely representative either of nature or of grace, even though each clearly decides in favour of one path over the other, the family being where both paths encounter and conflict with each other. Like “this war at the heart of nature” (The Thin Red Line), or the struggle between British Colonists and Algonquin ‘Naturals’ in The New World, the ways of Nature and Grace in The Tree of Life remain locked in a dialectical embrace, each pole depending on the other yet maintaining itself in a relation of dynamic tension with its opposite. Indeed, Jack’s story is precisely that of the struggle between these two ways, his lifelong quest to somehow to reconcile Nature and Grace (“Father, mother: always you struggle inside me”)—to rediscover the glory that imbues the world and nature with love and light.

Mrs. O’Brien describes the ‘two ways’ through life as something the nuns taught her, a spiritual teaching that has proven important for how she has lived her life. The moral-spiritual challenge, however, is to maintain grace and love in the face of senseless suffering and loss. The most important point in Mrs. O’Brien’s voiceover thus comes at the end of this sequence, where she concludes her meditation with a recollection prompting an avowal of faith: “They taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end. I will be true to you, whatever comes.” “Whatever comes,” however, is not fortune and happiness but loss and despair, the sudden death of Mrs. O’Brien’s beloved youngest son, aged nineteen, a promising...
classical guitarist (named in the credits as “R.L.”). This shattering event is announced by the mother’s silent reading of a telegram delivered to the family home, and a devastating phone call to the father drowned out by the drone of propeller engines. This tragic loss threatens to destroy the mother and the father, transposing the lesson of Job to an ordinary family in the American Midwest. Waves of grief reverberate throughout Jack's adult life, which is materially and professionally successful but emotionally and spiritually void. His enduring melancholy culminates in the day that frames the entire movie, presumably the anniversary of his brother's death. We see Jack waking with a start in his austere, architecturally designed home, his wife silent, withdrawn; unable to communicate his emotion, Jack lights a solitary candle in commemoration of his lost brother and, perhaps, his own childhood self.

The son's death is the crucial event that defines this family odyssey, Mrs. O'Brien and Jack both struggling to reconcile this loss with belief in a benevolent God. In a significant moment during her grieving, Mrs. O'Brien questions God while trying to recite a comforting prayer, asking, plaintively, “What did you gain?” The grandmother [Fiona Shaw] tries to counsel her, advocating a Christian stoicism in the face of pain and suffering: “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away...sends flies to wounds he should heal.” The waves of grief reach across time, his brother’s loss still affecting Jack in his adult life, as struggles with his sceptical despair: “World's going to the dogs. People are greedy, just getting worse,” he murmurs in a voice-over recalling his character in The Thin Red Line. Ascending a glass lift in his austere modernist building, he apologizes to his father for their exchange of harsh words about his brother's death, a loss that has marked his whole life, especially on this day: “I think about him every day and I shouldn’t have said what I said. It's just this day.” Jack is in despair, without purpose or a home. In images evoking existential disorientation, we see Jack, dad in a black suit, wandering in a spiritual wasteland, as he questions an unknown other (his brother, his deeper self, God): “How did I lose you? Wandered. For-got you.” Remembering his brother, we see an image of a young boy shrouded in a curtain, being kissed by a messenger figure and prepared for death. An important image, in long shot, of a young boy standing alone on a beach shore, concludes Jack's reverie: “Find me,” says the boy, presumably R.L. This image of the lost brother will recur at the end of the film, during Jack's epiphanic vision, his experience of spiritual reconciliation through love.

This familial drama and spiritual quest narrative is interrupted, however, by the film’s most controversial sequence: the ‘cosmologi-
cal creation myth, an extraordinary fusion of abstract imagery, animation, nature footage, and cosmic speculation. Critics have claimed that this sequence is filtered through Jack’s consciousness, his fascination, typical of the 1950s, with space, dinosaurs, the universe, and the like (although it is R.L. that we see reading a book about space travel). It is introduced, however, via Mrs. O’Brien’s voiceover, the mother recast in the role of Job, questioning God for inflicting so much suffering upon a faithful servant: “Lord. Why? Where were you?” Mrs. O’Brien’s words echo the quotation from the Book of Job that opens the film (“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation...”) What follows is Malick playing God, so to speak: showing Mrs. O’Brien (and the viewer) what no mortal could ever see, a cosmogonical myth of creation, a re-enchanted vision of the universe combining evolutionary naturalism with spiritual sublimity. Malick’s images of origin span the abstract depiction of the numinous origin of things, images of creation and the emergence of matter, the evolution of life from the primeval chaos, the appearance of dinosaurs on earth, including a startling ‘state of nature’ sequence in which a dinosaur displays a moment of animal grace, a mythic depiction of a meteor hitting the earth, bringing about the extinction of the dinosaurs, destroying in the blink of an eye what had taken eons to evolve.

What the cosmological myth shows is how nature and grace are not opposed but co-exist within a dynamic unity of opposites (recalling a Heraclitean vision of cosmic fire and divine logos united in ‘dynamic harmony’); how a naturalistic-scientific understanding of the evolution of life in the universe can co-exist with a sense of spiritual transcendence, an experience of the numinous; and how the lives of an ordinary family are enveloped by a sublime vision of re-enchanted nature (and spirit). The sublimity of the cosmos, from the overwhelmingly vast to the infinitesimally small, echoes the sublimity of mind or spirit—indeed the miracle of the cinema—that can contemplate and reveal such wonders in the form of moving images. Here Malick and Bazin alike affirm the mythopoetic power of cinema to reveal reality anew, to transfigure the everyday, to illuminate aspects of the world and of nature with a revelatory power that inspires conviction and belief—images with the power, to use Deleuze’s phrase, of giving us “reasons to believe in this world.” The ‘realism’ of Malick’s creation sequence, combining cosmological speculation, evolutionary naturalism, science fiction grandeur, and

23 See Moritz Pfeifer, “Either and Or: On Terrence Malick’s Tree of Life.”
24 What appears to be a Troodon confronting an injured Parasaurolophus.
spiritual sublimity, attempts to convey the Grace enchanting Nature and the Nature underlying Grace. The film offers, in this interlude, a re-enchanted mythic vision of the living cosmos of which human beings, with their pain and suffering, hope and joy, are a tiny but significant part. Malick creates a cinematic ‘aesthetic mythology’ (as the German romantics called it), one striving to overcome the dichotomy of Nature and Grace, marryng the universal and the particular, reason and faith, art, religion, and science, in a vision of mythic wholeness.

Indeed, Malick’s *The Tree of Life* can also be understood as enacting a kind of philosophical cinephilia, not only in its concern with light, movement, affect and mood, but by inviting an ethical openness, an aesthetic attentiveness, a philosophical acknowledgement of the obscured beauty of everyday existence. This philosophical cinephilia is closely aligned with the idea that one of the most significant ethical dimensions of cinema finds expression through its aesthetic form, its kinetic qualities, and its expressive potentialities. It can be understood as a way of articulating the intimate and implicit nexus between aesthetics and ethics in the art of film. It is defined by a love of cinema (and of philosophy), and by a commitment to the idea that cinema can reveal the world anew, disclosing it in new ways, altering its horizons of meaning, or wiping away, as Bazin once wrote, “that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it.”

By presenting cinematic worlds both lost and regained—an Edenic world of childhood set against the sterile emptiness of the present, yet reconciling the past with the present through love and grace—*The Tree of Life* can be experienced as an expression of philosophical cinephilia: a love of movement, of cinema’s revelation of worlds, an experience capable of evoking an aesthetically intensified, even ethically transformative, experience of reality. It expresses a love of the world and a care for being, whether for human beings or non-human beings, for nature or spirit, for understanding the experiences of existential despair and of spiritual reconciliation through love.

It is in these senses that *The Tree of Life* exemplifies a cinema of belief: a belief in this world, encompassing the conflicting powers of Nature and Grace; a belief in love, in the philosophical-spiritual sense of *agape*; a cinematic love of nature and of the world, expressed aesthetically in the radiant cinematography of Emmanuel Lubezki, capturing the everyday in its contingent beauty; a belief in the reve-

---

latory power of cinema, its capacity to challenge our scepticism towards moral, aesthetic, or spiritual authenticity. From this point of view, *The Tree of Life* expresses thought in images, what we might call a cinematic thinking: a meditation on childhood, grief, and loss; a metaphysical-spiritual speculation on the origin and end of life; a symphonic poem on the meaning of suffering, death, and love.

robert.sinnerbrink@mq.edu.au