The Problem of Evil and Humans' Relationship with God in Terrence Malick's The Tree of Life

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Abstract
Terrence Malick’s 2011 film The Tree of Life defies any attempt to be summarized in a few pat sentences. The movie tackles significant theological issues as it tells the story of one man’s journey to regain his faith after the loss of his beloved brother and a difficult relationship with his father. At the same time, it is also a film about humankind’s relationship to God, and about the kind of life human beings should strive to lead. In this paper, I will discuss two of the film’s main themes: Malick’s response to the problem of evil (or, as it is also known, the problem of suffering) and his meditations concerning what kind of relationship humans should seek with God.

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But for Terrence Malick, “challenge” is a progressive verb. Malick’s cinema is challenging, and we need that challenge. The tree of life is a common metaphor for the interconnectedness of all beings. While this metaphor is a familiar framework for ecological thinking—all regions, systems, and species are interwoven and inseparable—the tree of life is also a provocative paradigm for thinking about creativity. The Tree of Life is also both the name of Terrence Malick’s 2011 masterpiece and an apt descriptor for his creative process, as evident by The Criterion Collection’s 2018 release. God's rhetorical question, which opens the movie, serves as a reminder that humans don’t know all things and don’t know all stories, including, as suggested by The Tree of Life, our own stories. The Tree of Life. Terrence Malick’s fifth feature in 38 years, isn’t full of squarely, reasoned-out answers. It's a philosophical inquiry into the soul, and a meditation on mourning, as we follow a 1950s suburban Texas family, the O’Briens, hit by the loss of a son. Is God an amoral artist, simply splashing his best and brightest creations onto a canvas only to forget that his creations have to live, breathe, and suffer? Is God evil? Indifferent? Exploring The Tree of Life, a 2011 documentary featuring collaborators and admirers of Malick’s, including filmmakers David Fincher and Christopher Nolan; Brad Pitt, Jessica Chastain; and other collaborators who give a more personal look into the film. Emmanuel "Chivo" lubezki, asc, amc.