

An Interview with Steven DeLay, Editor of *Life Above the Clouds*

Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick

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Terrence Malick is a filmmaker often regarded through philosophical perspectives. While scholarship on Malick has focused on philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein as important figures in gauging his artistic aesthetics and distinctive narrative structures, the intersecting scholarship of film studies and philosophy has continued to provide new perspectives of philosophical analysis. Philosophy has thus been a critical fixture in approaching Malick, but it has yet to be proven exhaustible in terms of exploring the complex themes, aesthetics, and ethics of his work.

Steven DeLay further privileges this strong interdisciplinary approach in his new edited collection *Life Above the Clouds: Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick* (SUNY, 2023). As a philosophy scholar merging into film studies discourse, DeLay's current anthology on Malick uniquely continues the philosophical discussions of Malick's films with fresh perspectives, while also fostering a bevy of new Malick scholars who primarily come from philosophy backgrounds. While these contributors extend critical conversations of Malick's philosophically imbued style of filmmaking, they also give noticeable attention to his more contemporary films (which Robert Sinnerbrink refers to as the "Weightless trilogy") and offer renewed insights toward his critically disregarded trio of films: *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015), and *Song to Song* (2017). In the following discussion, DeLay summarizes his recent volume on Malick scholarship and further explores philosophy as a crucial continuing perspective in addressing Malick's films as complex, challenging, and rich philosophical film texts.

MJ: Steven, as editor of this recent book on Terrence Malick, what can you say of your early experiences in viewing and studying this filmmaker?

SD: The first Malick film I ever saw was *The Thin Red Line* (1998), when I was twelve. This was the same year as the release of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and I remember quite clearly people at the time not knowing what to make of Malick's film (Fig. 1). It wasn't at all a conventional Hollywood war film—it certainly didn't idolize war nor was it designed to drum up patriotism. In those respects, it was very different from Spielberg's treatment of the Second World War. At the same time, neither was it a conventional Hollywood anti-war film. It wasn't a film offering a political or ideological critique of war. There was something much more primal, metaphysical, or existentialist about it. It undercut any grandiose narratives about the meaning of war by underscoring the personal, indeed private and interior, struggles of the soldiers, while simultaneously placing these human events in a cosmic perspective. I was incredibly interested in military history as a boy, so I had already read the James Jones novel on which the film was based. The film, consequently, captivated me immediately. It was only many years later, upon the release of *The Tree of Life* (2011), that I came to realize Malick was considered to be a highly unique and important filmmaker. I went and watched all of his other movies, which I immediately became quite fond of as well.

By this point, I was a philosophy graduate student, so I recognized and appreciated the various philosophical and theological threads laced through *Tree*. I looked into Malick's biography, and read that he had a background in philosophy



Fig. 1 | Light shines through the Pasifika foliage. A still from *The Thin Red Line*, 00:30:51. 20th Century Fox, 1998.

that particularly focused on the phenomenological tradition, especially figures such as Edmund Husserl and Heidegger, whom he had written a thesis about at Harvard. I assumed there must be substantial extant philosophical literature on Malick, so I went searching out what had been written on him and took my initial bearings from there. Scholars Simon Critchley and Hannah Patterson had written pieces on the Heideggerian influences on Malick. I found those informative. Not long after *Tree* was released, I ended up heading off to Oxford to complete my doctoral studies. Having read about his biography, I was aware of his own time as a philosophy student at Oxford, so I felt a personal connection between us in that regard. While overseas, *Knight of Cups* was released just as I was finishing up my dissertation, and that film, along with *To the Wonder* (Fig. 2) before it and then *Song to Song* (Fig. 3) shortly thereafter, solidified my conviction that Malick was up to something worthy of careful philosophical scrutiny. He was using film as a medium of philosophy in the phenomenological sense, in effect showing us essential features of life, while at the same time harnessing the mechanisms of film that make it the uniquely expressive art form it is: the language of the image, the manipulation of time and space, the employment of voiceover and music, all these things bring life into focus in a way that it would otherwise not be. In doing so, his films also lead naturally to questions about the relation between aesthetics and philosophy and theology, about what it means for something to be a work of art, or of philosophy.

My view at the time, and still now, is that Malick is attempting to express the inexpressible, to recover and display the most fundamental, basic, and crucial of life's features that make the human experience human, dimensions of life that are ineffable, if you like, things that cannot be adequately conveyed by literature, or painting, or others modes of expression, things which are, despite their considerable elusiveness, nevertheless common and familiar to us all, because they are the very



Fig. 2 | Olga Kurylenko's Marina yearns for her soul to take flight in *To the Wonder*, 01:42:50. Magnolia, 2012.



Fig. 1 | Romantic memory rendered in the final moments of *Song to Song*, 02:03:40. Broad Green, 2017.

fabric of what it is to be human. I think this interest of his in the ineffable—his preoccupation with the mysterious—sheds legitimate light on why he would have gone in the direction he has as a filmmaker after having abandoned academic philosophy: unlike his teacher Gilbert Ryle, the ordinary language philosopher, Malick is a thinker of interiority. He's interested in revealing and exploring the basic dimensions of human life that are often covered over by our everyday linguistic and social practices, the quiet things that we all wrestle with alone in solitude.

MJ: What did you intend to readdress, in terms of philosophy in Malick's oeuvre? Is there a main theme throughout his work that you found missing from earlier Malick writings?

SD: It was standard among the earliest philosophical interpreters of Malick to classify his films as "Heideggerian cinema." There is something undeniably correct about that, though as time went on and the philosophical discussion deepened, others noted that this is a bit of an oversimplification, given the fact that there are other philosophical figures essential to assessing his films: Gilles Deleuze, Kierkegaard, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and so on. When Malick releases a new film, it allows viewers, critics, and interpreters the opportunity to reassess the whole of his previous body of work in light of the new addition. It's very much an hermeneutic circle. That's been the case with *A Hidden Life* (2019), because it's pretty apparent that part of what's going on in the film is Malick's own self-reckoning as a director over Heidegger's influence on his work, given Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi party. If there were a single word that comes to mind when describing his films, it is "beautiful." And yet, interestingly, the role of beauty is relatively neglected when analyzing his films. It could be that beauty has received less attention than it deserves in the philosophical reception of Malick simply because his work has been heavily interpreted through the lens of Heidegger. This takes us back, in a way, to the Romantics and German Idealists. Beauty for them is central to philosophy, to life in general, and certainly to art. A number of the volume's contributors delve extensively into the nature of beauty.

MJ: Currently, *Life Above the Clouds* harbours the largest collection of contributors within a single text on Malick. The book also introduces many new scholarly voices on this subject. How did you source your writers for the volume?

SD: Initially, I had been envisioning a volume that would be a large handbook, something with dozens of brief entries from contributors addressing different topics and themes in Malick's films. The idea was to create a Malick lexicon, if you like. But that proved to be infeasible for a number of practical reasons, which made it necessary to adopt a different approach. I think in the end that was for the best. In a traditional volume of collected chapters, contributors have adequate space to write substantial essays, without having to worry about the constraints of a word count. As for finding the contributors, thankfully that ended up being easy. The first thing to do, I decided, was to solicit interest from well-established Malick commentators. After that, I reached out to those who have done work in the philosophy of film. To find new scholarly voices, one thing I did was contact those who I suspected might have a personal interest in Malick having read their work, given their philosophical sensibilities and interests. Very often, it turned out that they indeed love Malick's films as I had thought might be the case, and they were very eager to write about him, as they had not done so before. Along

the way, of course, you receive pointers about who else might be worth contacting, so a number of the contributors came on board as a result of other contributors having suggested I contact them.

MJ: It is also evident that the book discusses Malick's contemporary "Weightless trilogy" films more than previous collections. Given that these three films are generally disregarded in many critical circles, what do you find to be important in readdressing these films?

SD: Malick's work has always been divisive. There are distinct camps of reception. Some highly esteem *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978), but dislike the rest of it. Others adore all of his films up to and including *The Tree of Life*, a film which they consider to be his magnum opus, but then they dislike everything that follows, with the possible exception of *A Hidden Life*, which they see as a return to form. There is a third group, those who see *The Tree of Life* as Malick's first misfire, the point at which he goes wrong, and the moment from which all that follows becomes a lesser exercise in what was already bad about *Tree*. And finally, you have those, such as myself, who like all of Malick's films. Those who dislike his work will often call it "pretentious." I'm not sure what that means exactly. But when people do try to clarify precisely what they dislike about his movies, they will frequently note two things: first, that his films lack character development, and second, that they lack plot, or at least conventional narrative. *To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups*, and *Song to Song* have widely been accused of those two shortcomings. It is worth revisiting them, it seems to me, to see whether they, in fact, do tell a story. I think there is a compelling, genuine depth to the characters.

I should, though, admit that my fondness for these films may be due partly to the biographical fact that, living in Houston at the time as a graduate student, I happened to be at Austin City Limits when *Song to Song* was being shot. So, I have a personal connection to the mood of Austin it captures, and the sort of experiences it depicts. But as for those who don't like these films, it may be that in order to appreciate the way in which they tell the stories they do, it is necessary to be receptive to the way Malick employs voiceover and the use of the film image itself in them. I would say these films are among his richest philosophically and theologically: the character of Cook in *Song to Song*, of course, is a straightforward adaptation of Milton's Satan, *Knight of Cups* draws heavily on Plato, and the whole trilogy can be profitably interpreted with reference to Kierkegaard. The fact, for instance, that *Song to Song* was originally titled *Lawless* is quite telling. Among other things, I think it explores how love and sexual desire inevitably lead to calamity, heartache, and destruction, when love fails to be harnessed ethically, or even religiously, when, in other words, love remains essentially aimless, subject to whim and the empty pursuit of novelty and pleasure for their own sake. Malick, I take it, is showing us what happens when lovers remain at the level of Kierkegaard's first sphere of existence: the "aesthetic."



Fig. 4 | The birth of the universe in *The Tree of Life*, 00:20:49. Fox Searchlight, 2011.

MJ: Do you find yourself drawn to a particular Malick film, as it relates to your specific areas of research?

SD: In the Bible, it says that God is revealed through creation. As a phenomenologist, I'm interested in the question of God's appearing. Of all his films, I think *The Tree of Life* is the one that most deals with that phenomenon. This theological question about how God is manifest in the visible world lends itself naturally to the medium of film, since there are questions surrounding the status of the film image itself, and how it is able to capture reality.

MJ: What might viewers and Malick enthusiasts come to expect with his upcoming biblical project *The Way of the Wind*?

SD: Many philosophers, theologians, and artists have pondered the relationship between religion and art. Can art adequately represent the content of religious faith, or is there something about the religious life that renders it fundamentally inaccessible to artistic representation? If, for example, one thinks that art ultimately is in the business of disclosing beauty, this poses a potential problem when it comes to depictions of certain religious truths or events. The torture and death by crucifixion of Christ, after all, is ugly and horrific, not at all beautiful. What, then, are we to make of artistic depictions of it? Has any such artistic representation of it truly captured its horror? Could it? If so, would not the work in question no longer be beautiful, in which case it would seem to follow that art is not really essentially defined by its relation to beauty? But if that is the case, then what is art bound by? A related but different worry here is that art inevitably sanitizes the hard truths of religion, by rendering them aesthetically palatable. I know Malick himself is very sensitive to this danger.

In *A Hidden Life*, Franz meets with the village church's painter, who tells Franz that all the painting he has done in the church depicting the life of Christ only produces

admirers of Christ, but not followers. The elderly painter's work shows everyone an exalted Christ, not the suffering Christ. It is worth noting that the painter's lines are virtually direct quotations of passages from Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*. Kierkegaard's point is that people consider themselves to be Christians simply because they admire Christ, and yet they do not follow him, suffering as a result. When seeing the film, my hunch was that this scene between Franz and the painter was in part functioning autobiographically: Malick, in the figure of the painter, is confronting his own relation to Christ as an artist, wondering whether his films are truly capable of adequately representing the truth of Christ, in short, whether they merely encourage audiences to admire Christ, or whether they somehow inspire people actually to follow him.

The Way of the Wind, then, seems to be the film that will attempt to resolve these aesthetic and existential quandaries. This will be Malick's attempt to represent faithfully the life of Christ cinematically. How will he do so? Will he present the various episodes of Christ's life in their chronological succession? Or, will he arrange the images differently? If so, what will be the principle of their organization? In showing various scenes from Christ's life, we no doubt will hear the words of Christ. Given Malick's use of voiceover, will we also be given access to Christ's private thoughts? If we take seriously the words of the painter from the scene in *A Hidden Life*, it seems that Malick's stated measure of success for *The Way of the Wind* is a film that does not only produce admiration for Christ, but inspires us (or convicts us) into following him. This will be a film, I think, that does not just represent Christ with the intention that we admire what we are shown. I don't think Malick wants us to admire a representation of Christ, but to be as Christ is. It's a film that would convert. That challenges the very limits of cinema as an art. ■