

## Ogni Pensiero Vola: the embodied psyche in Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life*

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*The Tree of Life* touches on embodiment of the soul in an early sequence covering courtship, marriage and the first pregnancy of a young couple. In a delicate formal scene, Mrs O'Brien, nearing full term, treads gently along a river's edge summoning infant souls luminous in white linen. She opens a minute book of life to one of them, preparing his entry through the iron gates that open on embodied life. Presently the infant soul rises up from his underwater home beyond the reach of conscious awareness: Mrs O'Brien gives birth to her first son Jack. This is the boy who will eventually become a middle-aged man in crisis. Ravaged then by grief for his long-dead younger brother and his own inability to live at peace with his family or himself, his memories, visions and reflections accumulate in a way that makes him a suffering Hermes for the early twenty-first century.

The initiating episode of the infant's birth complements the embodied and affective experiences of those in the audience who accept the film's sensual invitation to steep themselves in the immense scale of its gorgeous sounds and images. They then discover on the pulse that, more than the history of one Texan family, it attempts nothing less than the necessary re-creation of the godhead for the early twenty-first century. Contrary to the rigid medieval dogmas of so many orthodox religions, *The Tree of Life* assures us not of a changeless eternity but rather the sacred and ceaseless metamorphosis of numinous energy.

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*The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas  
-- for my body does not have the same ideas I do.*  
(Roland Barthes)

By necessity, stories impose more order into a telling than there is in real life. That is why we tell and listen to them in the first place. Filmmakers can, and most do choose

to feed audiences weaned on mainstream storytelling with obvious plot points linked by the script in a familiar cause and effect chain that ensures narrative thrust has right of way. But so doing, they risk discouraging spectators from looking beyond the plot arc, and lead them to expect that obvious entry-level pleasures will satiate their appetite. Once that motivating appetite for basic answers to basic questions has been slaked, filmgoers interested exclusively in entertainment may find that they need to look no further. Indeed many excellent films deliver manifold pleasures in just that way.

However, this dominant conventional pattern breeds audience dependency on easily recognised generic markers to show the way through a movie. When the story is difficult to make out, it causes some spectators unease. Some did indeed leave the cinema screenings of *The Tree of Life* that we attended in California and Scotland. The film does not work *blatantly* to seduce the audience so much as open a sensual door inviting their experience. However, having opened a door into the unknown, which is both sensual and surreal, Malick invites spectators to abandon resistance and succumb to the brilliant light that exposes to view memory's dark places. Rather than give priority to a narrative arc centred on character development, the film tempts audiences to revel in spellbinding images and sumptuous music. Ryan Gilbey writes of its commonest currency being images that drift free of narrative context and montages that convey mood alone, as when the three elated O'Brien boys race round their home knowing that their father is away on business (2011).

The film's register thus seeks to govern the audience's first responses to its screening so that, succumbing to sensual suffusion, they cannot focus steadily on taking hold of obliquely indicated plot points. Jana Branch remarks, 'It's a body film before it's a head film' (2011). Her observation implies a broader context that Vivian Sobchack develops in theorising embodiment as,

a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*. (Sobchack, 2004, p.4; original emphasis)

The film experience, she argues, 'is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies*' (2004, p.60; original emphasis). Jennifer Barker extends this

idea and introduces the idea of a 'liminal space in which film and viewer can emerge as co-constituted, individualized but related, embodied entities. Watching a film, we are certainly not *in* the film, but we are not entirely *outside* it, either' (2009, p.12; original emphasis).

As Raymond Bellour expresses it, each change of shot, each movement in the camera is a mini-shock; and the body and nervous system of every spectator adapt to the rhythm, affecting his or her bodily sense of time (2012). We would add, developing an implication of Barker's work, that such mini-shocks must affect the experience of emotion. She borrows Jennifer Deger's phrase the 'transformative space of betweenness' (Deger, 2007, p.89) to characterise the experience of contact between image, imaged, and viewer. Such transformative space has significance for our understanding of emotions for Barker who argues that meaning and emotion do not reside as pre-existing phenomena in either films or viewers. Rather meaning and emotion emerge in the intimate, tactile encounter between them (2009, pp.15-16).

Love isn't something a lover "has" for a loved one; but something that emerges in the encounter between lover and loved, just as "fear" isn't "in" someone fearful, but emerges in the contact between two entities, in which they take up a certain temporal and physical orientation toward one another. (*Ibid.*)

Reaching the understanding that consciousness is always consciousness of something, one learns to attend not only to the object itself but also to the conscious act through which it is perceived, and to do both together recognising that they cannot exist separately (Barker, 2009, p.17). In this way existential phenomenology acknowledges the role of subjective experience in co-constituting objects in the world (Ahmed, 2004, p.5). It's a position that entails our appreciation that 'aesthetic objects... call for a certain attitude and use on the part of the body – witness... the cathedral that regulates the step and gait, the painting that guides the eye, the poem that disciplines the voice' (Mikel Dufrenne in Barker, 2009, p.11).

We do not need to imagine cathedrals to recognise this effect. The architecture of houses and offices shapes the movements of those who live in them – and hence impacts on family and professional life. One of Malick's characters, Jack (Sean Penn), becomes a successful architect and property developer: his work contributes to

shaping people's embodied lives. In his sky scraping office buildings, people walk, talk and dress in certain uniform ways. His buildings are puritanical in design like his beautiful but barren house, diamond precise like his searing towers. But *The Tree of Life* sets off the razor-edged prism of his cityscapes against the centre-ground churn of cosmic space and time. Do Jack's towers mock or yearn for the heavens they reach up to?

The phenomenological model advanced by Sobchack and Barker emphasises the interactive, theatrical attributes of cinema in a way that will invite us to extend their hypothesis and make room for the unconscious.

We *cause* the film to erupt in sound and music in a given moment in the same way that we inspire a close-up with our desire for a closer look or provoke an action film's aggressive tracking shot with our desire to catch up to the fleeing villain. (Barker, 2009, p.148; original emphasis)

Although most helpful, this account of embodied experience in the cinema does not of itself enough account for the sensation of breathless exultation with which this film seized the present writers. Happily it complements Ira Konigsberg's explanation of the process of emotional investment as one which involves fantasy and the experience of energies whose source may not be registered in full consciousness by viewers or filmmakers. As is fitting for a film as subtle and demanding of complete attention as *The Tree of Life*, Konigsberg specifically discusses spectators' experience in the cinema (rather than in front of television sets with their degraded sound, diminished picture frame and all the attendant distractions of home life).

In the silent, darkened theater, removed from a direct confrontation with reality, and perceiving images that seem half-real and transitional we slip into a state of half-wakefulness, into a reverie that weakens our defenses and sets loose our own fantasies and wishes to interact and fuse with the characters and even the landscape that we see on the screen. I do not have to describe for you the way in which we loosen hold of ourselves at times and become fastened to what we see on the screen, but not completely fastened – a merging takes place, a sense of the characters as me and not-me, as part of my subjective world and part of objective reality. What actually transpires is a process of introjection followed by projection, a process by which we... take in the

images and then project ourselves into them as they appear before us – a process of introjection and projective identification...

In the dynamics I am describing, the introjection of the film images triggers an internal process by which we invest these images with our own psychic and emotional overlays and then project them back out, along with our own involvement, onto their imprints on the screen – a process that continues, back and forth, as we watch the film. (Konigsberg, 1996, pp.885-6)

Konigsberg's project was the development of post-Freudian and Lacanian theoretical perspectives on film, but his observations harmonise sweetly with the Jungian recognition that the spectating subject makes an emotional investment in the film (Izod, 2006, p.17). We may now take Barker and Konigsberg together, adding Jung's reminder that, while we think we possess emotions, our emotions can control us (Jung, 1934, §667). He wrote, 'emotion is the moment when steel meets flint and a spark is struck forth, for emotion is the chief cause of consciousness. There is no change from darkness to light or from inertia to movement without emotion' (Jung, 1954a, §179). Christopher Hauke adds that a popular cultural form such as cinema can provide the container for intense experiences, making them more accessible, less intense and therefore bearable. 'As in therapy, the raw material offered by cinema is made available in a form that the psyche can work upon more consciously' (Hauke, 2014, p.4). In sum, our unconscious complexes and the operation of archetypal images will complement the conscious experience of the cinema.

In more than one way, *The Tree of Life* touches on embodiment in its formation of on-screen characters. Actors by definition embody characters, their capabilities for so doing being a main consideration in casting them in any role. Malick encouraged Jessica Chastain to adopt unusual methods in her preparation to signal Mrs O'Brien's state of grace and wholeness of body and spirit by,

studying the hands of Raphael's Madonnas in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, reading, watching old Lauren Bacall films (to learn about grace). Not to mention learning reams of Malick's lines, which he'd then ask her to say *in her head.*' (Rose, 2011; original emphasis)

Gilbey, in line with his notes on the film's aesthetic pattern, says that with many shots of Mrs O'Brien, her arms and hands slip swiftly into and out of frame (2011). Such ecstatic, free movements respond as much to the currents running through her soul as the breezes passing across the yard and the light held in net curtains.

The film opens the theme of the soul's embodiment in an early sequence covering courtship, marriage and Mrs O'Brien's first pregnancy. Blithesome in its glancing, minimalist visual style, these lustrous scenes are saturated by a gorgeous, exquisitely Mozartian andante. The music's delicate formality culminates in and blesses a vision: approaching full term, Mrs O'Brien treads gently along a river's edge summoning infant souls luminous in white linen. Marie-Louise von Franz notes that, for its transparency and delicacy, this fabric has a long history in myths as a textile belonging to the realm of the spirits. 'Linen has to do with fate, with destiny, with the feminine' (1999, p.68). And also, as Malick will show, with shrouding the dead.

In the present context, the textile can be interpreted as linking the spiritual with the psychological. Fiona Ross sees the manual weaving of fabrics as an embodied process that implicates the psyche. Held to a constant rhythm extending across long hours, the weaver's unconscious may influence his or her conscious actions, and vice versa. The labour may reinforce existing archetypal patterns, or if long-familiar patterns in the fabric are altered, may develop to meet the changing psychological needs, whether of an individual or a collective (1998: 245-6).

In the sequence just referred to there is a hint at immortality attained through reincarnation, with young souls dressed (as it were, fleshed out) in preparation for embodied life. Yet the audience of the early twenty-first century cannot miss that the infants' clothes are cut in a fashion that dates them to the late 1940s or early 1950s. Thus the children can be understood as representations of ancient archetypes dressed anew in images connected with, but variant from the past, and ready to enter the changing post-war era.

In this sequence, the mother-to-be opens a minute book of life to one of the souls, preparing his entry through the iron gates that open on embodied life. The new arrival will pass through the gaping maw of a hellish ogre, its menacing inscription *Ogni*

*Pensiero Vola* warning that all thoughts fly from those who take this journey. The infant soul rises up through the river from his underwater home beyond the reach of consciousness. Mrs O'Brien gives birth to her first son Jack. This is the boy who will eventually become a bewildered middle-aged man in crisis. Ravaged then by grief for his long-dead younger brother and his own inability to live at peace with his family or himself, his memories, visions and reflections accumulate in a way that makes him a suffering Hermes for the early twenty-first century.

Alexandre Desplat's subtle chamber pieces help characterise the mother and her first and later infants. His pieces delay melodic resolution but evolve quietly and thereby deliver a sense of slow change. With 'In Childhood' a piano stitches a delicate, vital energy in a simple, one-handed motif with open-ended notes lifting over the quiet hum of strings – innocence in a garden. It links the infants' tender threads of life with their mother and reaches out from the cycle of their individual lives to weave them into the fabric of universal time. The music also enriches the images of Mrs O'Brien (arms/ house/ legs/ grass/ hands aloft/ trees and radiant sky) and communicates her grace to those around her. The combined effect draws listeners toward empathy with her spiritual ease, her oneness with the infants. In Barker's terms, as we sense in ourselves that same virtual grace, the kinaesthetic qualities of Chastain's performance and the light and music of the filmic moments when she occupies the screen, the totality arouses in us a corresponding, embodied response, 'not *in* the film, but... not entirely *outside* it, either' (Barker, 2009, p.12).

As John Bleasdale recognises, 'Malick is always grounded. This might seem like an odd claim, when viewing the visual poetry that at times is almost overwhelming, but his films can only get to the spiritual via the intensely physical... The ordinary is elevated, tinged though it is with the elegiac' (Bleasdale, 2011). Gilbey complements this thought with the observation that 'the repeated positioning of the camera at knee level, tilting upwards, makes even the tiniest children in the film as ennobled and imposing as Easter Island statues' (Gilbey, 2011). So Chastain's Mrs O'Brien is not the only character whose body and soul are indivisible: each of the sons when newly born is bonded in uroboric unity. Later, the simplicity of Desplat's 'In Childhood' grows slowly in his 'Circles' toward something by degrees more substantial, stronger and darker, just like every individual's life. Then, as the three lads pass beyond

infancy into vigorous boyhood, Smetana's *Ma Vlast* colours the imagery of their wild and joyful summer games. As if gathering the energy of Smetana's River Moldau, the children race around neighbouring streets and meadows, moving into the broadening currents of life around them. Their experiences during the early years of attachment will live on inside them as a deep well they will have access to, but inevitably the passing years nudge them into boyhood, adolescence and on toward adulthood.

But what of embodiment for the audience – the ground on which Sobchack and Barker stand? Two factors on which we have already touched throw the audience's attention toward the sensory. Firstly, they cannot immediately find sufficient information to satisfy in the relatively scant dialogue their need to know; and secondly the plot line is not explicated in the classic and familiar manner. But the film does offer sumptuous pleasures to the eye and ear in the movement of its characters, the rich play of light and shadow, saturated colours, camera style and, before all else, music. Impossible in the moment to disengage from their unifying effect, to resist the tug toward shifting in one's seat, exultation, or tears. But this said, the film also invites the viewer to pull back from unguarded inflation.

Bernard Aspe argues that the audience is caught, by the very structure of the film, between embodiment and reflection. He shows that the root origin of things in *The Tree of Life* is not the story. Language comes later and the whispering voices over are structurally retrospective. They do not so much express what a character is thinking as let us understand what he or she ought to have thought but does not realise until much later (Aspe, 2011, pp.20-1). It's a device that demonstrates the prerequisite imperative to becoming a complete psychological being: self-reflection. Freud said that the unconscious is timeless, as if time is suspended. As Malick's plot oscillates back and forth in time it allows us to see, as Jack uncovers memories, that chronological time cannot be conscious without living in present time. The concept of time and space is experienced in relationship to memory. In order to live in present time memories need to be recognised and assigned value and meaning. Thus, encountering meaning becomes an embodied experience not just an intellectual exercise. Through this undertaking memories are given spatial recognition so they can be assigned to the past tense, freeing the psyche to live in present time. With conscious remembering the self evolves: a creative process of becoming fully embodied.

In the film's opening seconds, nothing can be seen but light and the manner in which it sculpts the space in which beings exist, the amplitude that this life can have, the weave of existence. Only after that comes the creation of the world forged according to our modern myths: the big bang, emergence of the elements of life and of animals. Thanks to Malick's method of reducing shots to the minimum possible (like recollected bursts of happiness) grace and beauty saturate the entire film. Aspe adds that the fact that these retrospective voices are sometimes associated with moments in the images which they ought to have accompanied permits a kind of reparation. It is as if the grace that has not really been experienced can nevertheless return provided there is a conjunction between the voices arriving late and the present tense of the light (*Ibid.*). If Aspe's thoughts ring true for the middle-aged Jack, then they are potentially equally true for the audience which sees and understands retrospectively with Jack, their trickster messenger. As Jung wrote in 'On the Nature of the Psyche',

Image and meaning are identical; and as the first takes shape, so the latter becomes clear. Actually the pattern needs no interpretation: it portrays its own meaning. (Jung, 1947/54, §402)

Translated into Jungian terms, Aspe perceives the process of individuation not only in the characters but (to reintroduce a metaphor that Ross so intriguingly discusses) the very weave of the film. In his *Answer to Job*, Jung reworks the story of Job into the story of God's self-discovery through the agency of man. We experience a comparable urge toward reforming the numen in the organising drive expressed throughout *The Tree of Life*. Half a century after Jung chose Job to challenge an angry but ossified deity as humanity's agent, Terrence Malick and his creative team use Sean Penn's Jack, verging on old age, as their agent. Malick makes him an everyman (none the less so for being a leading architect) for whom the Church's stern orthodox dogmatism has killed religion (as Nietzsche foretold). His life to date has borne witness to Robert Johnson's assertion that the practical is the enemy of the numinous (1993: 59-60). Through the newly-made trickster Jack – his body that goes tremulously walkabout, his intelligence that grasps so well the elegant dynamics of physical structures, his emotions (so hauntingly needful of release), and his discovery of a creation mythology fitting for the twenty-first century and consonant with every

facet of his existence – through Jack’s whole being, then, we experience nothing less than the necessary re-creation of the numen.

The numen in *The Tree of Life* takes a form that no longer mirrors humankind’s face back at itself. Instead the film integrates humanity into the universal order – an order, which, unlike the rigid medieval structures of so many of the world’s orthodox religions, assures us not of stasis but the unending metamorphosis of energy.

Jung wrote to a clergyman ‘God is light *and* darkness, the *auctor rerum* is love *and* wrath’ (*Letters 2*, 17 December 1958; original emphasis). Light and darkness in *The Tree of Life* reach into the theatre. To cite Jung again, ‘the light which shines in the darkness is not only comprehended by the darkness, but comprehends it’ (1954b: §756). Light and music involve our reciprocal embodiment – grace experienced in the cinema stalls. Just as music performed is embodied first by singers and instrumentalists, so (as we noted earlier) acting is embodied first in the players’ performances. But audiences respond in an embodied way to the playing, albeit constrained by socially acceptable forms of conduct. Yet, for example, they flinch and gasp confronted by fearsome attack, stretch the muscles in moments of relief, and share too the pleasure of laughing out loud in the unseen community of their fellows. Likewise, listening to *The Tree of Life* many will feel music moving feet, hands or head – a physical expression of the dancing, soaring heart.

For the psyche to approach completion in its movement toward individuation, the hardships of transition and release into wellbeing must be felt in the emotions, and affect the body of the engaged spectator. Psyche and world, the material and spiritual are inseparable. For Romanyshyn ‘the body is a hinge around which consciousness and unconsciousness revolve’ (1982, p.150). And Jung wrote concerning his own life at Bollingen, where he felt most deeply himself,

At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons. (1961, p.252)

Jung’s words, published half a century before the release of Malick’s film, capture what it is fully to experience *The Tree of Life*.

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