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Abstract

This is a film review of *To the Wonder* (2012), directed by Terrence Malick.

Keywords

Terrence Malick, Psalms, David Foster Wallace, James Joyce, Ingmar Bergman, Robert Bresson

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“The beginning of wisdom is wonder,” said Socrates, and according to Terrence Malick, the same can be said of film. The idea that wonder is the key to attaining wisdom and appreciating life is the thread that is woven through all of Malick’s films. And the principal means of observing this thread is the *sensus divinitatis*—the receptivity to the notion that someone, or something, called God exists, that one can relate to this God in some fashion, and that this divinity provides coherence to the universe and lends wholeness to life. Those lacking this *sensus divinitatis*—those who are, in Isaiah Berlin’s phrase, “tone-deaf” when it comes to God—and those who cannot tolerate abstract, ponderous films in which dialogue is scarce, may not fully appreciate *To the Wonder*.

Malick’s latest film, coming on the heels of his artistic and religious masterpiece, *The Tree of Life* (2011), is a further illustration of his overriding belief that the world is suffused with a mystery that we cannot understand. Much as the biblical psalms are verbal contemplations of the divine rendered in lyrical form, *To the Wonder* is a visual contemplation of the divine rendered in cinematic form, laced with a multitude of psalmic and biblical resonances. “You got me out of the darkness. You gathered me up from earth. You’ve brought me back to life,” could be mistaken for Psalm 30: “I will exalt you, Lord, for You have drawn me up... You have raised up my soul from the lower world; Lord, you have restored me to life from *she’ol*.” And, like *Tree of Life*, it is beautiful in both the religious and artistic sense; knowing how to carefully blend these elements into a luscious mixture is Malick’s *métier*.

As *Tree of Life* demonstrated, films are “religious” even when they lack overt depictions or mentions of religion when they attempt to point to a greater majesty in the universe, when they guide viewers toward contemplating the wonder and mystery of life, and when they

generally touch upon concerns of meaning. Because of Javier Bardem's Father Quintana, this religious motif in *To the Wonder* is not difficult to espy. Quintana's passionate, tormented search for God renders him Davidic; just as David prays, "Lord...should You but conceal your face, I would be confounded (Psalm 30:8), and "Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?" (Psalms 88:14), Quintana cries out, "Everywhere you are present, and still I can't see you. How long will you hide yourself?" His other meditations contain other biblical allusions; "Shine through us" evokes the Priestly blessing of Numbers 6:26, "May the Lord shed his light upon you." And in his love and care for the most powerless individuals in society, he is Christ-like; we observe him visiting the sick, the poor, the imprisoned, and the downtrodden, struggling to communicate the message of God's love to those who are most in need of it. A paragon of saintliness, Quintana is also undergoing a crisis of faith. Nevertheless, he does not permit his existential doubts to impede his good works, and serves as a filmic example of the religious hero whose virtuous actions overcome his theological doubts.

Viewing *To the Wonder* only through the prism of religion would result in a favorable assessment of the film. However, *To the Wonder* is not only religious poetry, but it is also a film. While this may seem self-evident, the apparent neglect of various cinematic elements leave the film denuded, and leave its audience deprived of what could have been a truly wondrous spectacle had its cinematic and religious elements cohered. Films like *To the Wonder* and *The Tree of Life* are the cinematic equivalent of abstract expressionist art, and can only be fully appreciated by a rather attenuated niche audience—an audience that is not stupefied by questions such as "what is this love that loves us?" But by casting marquee-name actors like Bardem, Rachel McAdams and Ben Affleck, *To the Wonder* runs into the very paradoxical problem David Foster Wallace warned against in his essay "Rhetoric and the Math Melodrama": some

contemporary art is “so abstract and involute and technically complex” that it can only be appreciated by “people with extensive educations in the history and theory of these arts”; thus, the attempt to garner a wider audience for these genres by simplifying, popularizing, and otherwise diluting its artistic purity will alienate the audience who would truly appreciate it and yet still fail to sufficiently simplify its content to the extent that it would be liked by those who would not have fully appreciated it in its pure form.¹ Perhaps Malick thought he could duplicate his rare *Tree of Life* achievement, in which he brilliantly fused an artistic, theological, and commercial movie into a coherent film that attained relatively broad appeal. But this feat was due to *Tree of Life*’s more linear, limpid storyline, its bravura performances from Brad Pitt, Jessica Chastain, and Hunter McCracken, and breathtaking imagery that generated a genuine sense of wonder. Because all those elements are lacking in *To the Wonder* (the irony that *Tree of Life* engenders more wonder than *To the Wonder* is lost on no one), Malick fails to replicate *Tree of Life*’s unique harmonization of the filmic, dramatic, artistic, and religious elements. But, much as Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* is, according to some critics, a glorious disaster, *To the Wonder* is a consequential *auteur*’s magnificent, glorious failure; every great artist is entitled to at least one.

Malick, as usual, has something profound to say: that the search for love, with all its difficulties, vagaries, ecstasies and betrayals, is the quintessential metaphor for the search for God. While this idea may not be particularly novel for those who read *Song of Songs* allegorically, Malick’s greater insight, expressed through the vehicle of Bardem’s character, is that what is outwardly a purely religious quest—the search for divine love—is one and the same with the longing for human love. But it is unfortunate that he employs a baffling, frustrating, and (much-noted) self-parodying manner for expressing this idea. Faint outlines of a storyline are sketched, and are adumbrated as the film progresses: a man (Neil, played by Affleck) falls in

love with a woman (Maria, played by Olga Kurylenko) in France, and, together with Maria's young daughter, they move to Neil's home-state of Oklahoma. While back in Oklahoma, Neil reconnects with his former inamorata, Jane (Rachel McAdams), and Neil becomes torn between them. Meanwhile, Father Quintana (Bardem) struggles with his faith and his vocation. While Quintana's role is not as cliché as Affleck's Neil, it is still far from original. The concept of clergymen undergoing spiritual crisis was famously mined by Ingmar Bergman, most poignantly in *Winter Light*, in which Gunnar Bjornstrand plays a pastor whose theological uncertainties are reflected in his ministerial difficulties. From Claude Laydu in Robert Bresson's *The Diary of a Country Priest* to Joaquin Phoenix in Philip Kaufman's *Quills*, the tormented priest has been a recurring filmic motif. As a priest suffering a simultaneous spiritual and vocational crisis, Bardem's Father Quintana is most reminiscent of Bjornstrand's Tomas Ericsson. However, the interiorized, complex Father Quintana character is far more compelling than the wooden, simplistic Neil, and is one of *To the Wonder*'s redeeming features.

The Neil-Marina-Jane love-triangle is not only hackneyed but as agonizingly affectless as the Affleck character. And unlike *Tree of Life*'s masterful allegorization of a microcosmic human story with the grand cosmic drama, *To the Wonder* cannot quite relate the love-triangle dilemma to the broader mysteries of life and universe. While *To the Wonder* is somewhat similarly suffused with a bevy of wide-shot long-takes of natural beauty that are certainly wondrous, a few beautifully photographed panoramas a masterpiece does not make. While Malick may have intended *To the Wonder* to be a religious film (in the sense that viewing it could elicit the kind of questions of meaning that are addressed by religion), I doubt that moviegoers exclaiming "thank God!" upon the film's conclusion (as I heard one viewer utter at Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater) were the sort of religious sentiments he imagined that *To the Wonder* would evoke.

In *Tree of Life*, Malick successfully deployed the abstract and the sublime as a means of stimulating a sense of the *mysterium tremendum* in audiences which were not tone-deaf to such a frequency. Yet, whereas the gnostic qualities of *Tree of Life* contributed to its aura of wonder and majesty, the gnostic qualities of *To the Wonder* detract from its sublimity. Other diversions similarly undermine *To the Wonder*'s aura of spiritual majesty. Olga Kurylenko's ethereal quality is mostly lost in her incessant, distracting twirling. And while the film's dream-like visuals and long stretches of silence can engender a state of reverie, as Roger Ebert noted in his review of the film, Neil's prevarications—into which we're given scant insight—likewise detract from the film's transcendent, contemplative aspects. The *Tree of Life* cast expressed the kind of psychomachic characteristics that the actors in *To the Wonder* do not. Because of this severe want of discernible interiority (save for Bardem's character), *To the Wonder* is severely lacking in the emotive elements that make for compelling cinema.

Joyce did not write another novel after the glorious disaster of *Finnegan's Wake*, dying shortly after its completion. Malick aficionados can take solace in the knowledge that *To the Wonder* will not be his last effort—he has another film currently in production, *The Voyage of Time*—but can only hope that *Voyage of Time* hues closer to *Tree of Life* than *To the Wonder*.

¹ Wallace, David Foster. *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 215.

Reference

Wallace, David Foster. 2012. *Both Flesh and Not: Essays*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.