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Filming Reconciliation: Affect and Nostalgia in The Tree of Life

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Abstract
This paper uses the affect theory of Gilles Deleuze, Raymond Williams, and Lauren Berlant, and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty to examine how affect constellates to film Christian reconciliation in Terrence Malick's 2011 release, The Tree of Life. As a working shorthand, we can understand affect as the fungible set of bodily processes that affirm, sear, or reshape a body’s and society’s relational structures. I contend that the film's fluid montage—analyzed with Deleuzian film theory—generates a non-reactionary nostalgia that binds Christian theological hope to the persistent melancholy of loss through the blurring of perception, memory, dream, and fantasy. Such blurring evokes the cultural ache to escape what Lauren Berlant terms the failure of the fantasy of “the good life.” In short, I argue that the fluid tactility of Malick's camera consciousness responds to the persistent threat of losing 'the good life' through the human ache for (Christian) redemption, and it does so with an active nostalgia that remains embodied and terrestrial.

Keywords
Terrence Malick, Tree of Life, affect theory, Deleuze, Berlant, Merleau-Ponty, Raymond Williams, reconciliation

Author Notes
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Introduction

In his classic essay, “What is Cinema?” André Bazin notes: “as good a way as any of understanding what a film is trying to say to us is to know how it is saying it.”¹ Attention to film form is especially important for understanding movies that fall outside of the Hollywood “blockbuster” genre, like the “poetic” or “phenomenological” ventures that Gilles Deleuze categorizes as dominated by “time-images” instead of “movement-images.”² Terrence Malick’s films land directly in this category. As one scholar notes succinctly, “Is it not true that in Malick’s films there is a primacy of shots over scenes; parataxis over narrative continuity; a gaze from an actor accompanied by a voice-over reflection as opposed to a suspenseful ‘what happens next?’ expression or a shot-reaction-shot?”³ Malick’s habit of paratactic expressivity disgruntled enough viewers of his 2011 release, The Tree of Life, that some theaters posted no-refund notices and warned customers that the film lacked linear storytelling.⁴ In the following essay, I will not attempt to piece together the story of this film (as worthy as that might be), but will instead examine how the formal qualities of The Tree of Life carry important theological and narrative functions.

Early in the film, a voice-over from the film’s only substantial female character, Mrs. O’Brien (Jessica Chastain) relates the childhood lesson she learned from the nuns about the difficult and ongoing life-choice between “the way of grace” and “the way of nature.” The film’s characters seem to crash and weave their way along this persistent choice without ever resolving it, but I’m
more interested in how the film’s restless camera—moving almost unceasingly, and cutting non-linearly—itself suggests a divine force that stitches together the humans’ disjointed and mournful restlessness, without unifying or homogenizing it. The cinematography, I submit, repeats the opposition between the way of nature and the way of grace, but also *reconciles* it in the eternal life of God. Put differently, the film’s formal, cinematographic restlessness reframes and reconciles the diegetic restlessness of its human characters. In arranging the film form in this way, I contend that Malick presents less a *story about* Christian faith than an *affective presentation* of Christian reconciliation.  

To evidence this contention, I need to explore how a filmmaker shows something like the feeling of reconciliation. Gilles Deleuze’s work in *Cinema II: The Time Image* offers useful vocabulary through his concept of *camera consciousness*, which refers to moments when filmic visuality frees itself from action-oriented plot. The camera might still align with a character’s point-of-view, but more often it caresses landscapes and situations from an ambivalent and autonomous perspective that does not equate neatly to protagonist, narrator or director. It is just this kind of liquid camera consciousness in *The Tree of Life* that, I argue, *performs and thereby affectively conveys* a theological reconciliation of the human restlessness. The nuns posit a rational choice between nature and grace, but the never-resolved choice is actually navigated in this film through
feeling, and also caught up in feelings that supersede the individual historically and cosmically.

To tease out this feeling of reconciling nature and grace, this essay draws on Deleuze’s theories of filmic temporality, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic phenomenology of flesh, and Lauren Berlant’s affect theory. Together, these thinkers enable me to examine the film’s formal, affective rhythms of memory, choice, grief and finitude. More specifically, the essay will first discuss Berlant’s use of Raymond Williams’ “structure of feeling” to show how affect is made central to *The Tree of Life*. Second, the essay draws the discussion of affect into an analysis of Jack O’Brien (Sean Penn), whom I call the ‘affective hub’ of the film. Finally, the essay uses vocabulary from Deleuze’s film theory, and Merleau-Ponty’s notions of chiasm and flesh to explain how the film’s form reconciles nature and grace through specific image-juxtapositions, especially the multiple jump cuts between trees and water. My basic argument, then, is that the film’s affective structure uses jump-cut interruptions of trees and water to effect a felt reconciliation of the characters’ restless phenomenological uncertainty. Put more expansively, I am suggesting that the cinematographic form of *The Tree of Life* performs a theological reconciliation that speaks directly to the common challenge of living well one’s finitude. Since I find it important that this reconciliation leans heavily on the textured embodiment of nostalgia, I will begin with the claim that *Tree of Life* performs a psalmic lament mediated by nostalgia.
Nostalgia

*The Tree of Life* opens—white words on a black screen—with a well-known citation from Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” The rhetorical weight of this citation has led critics and (even more so) bloggers to think about the film presumptively in terms of theodicy. But a filmic theodicy should pair Job with the Edenic Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and then engage themes of sin and exile—and these are not the film’s foci. It is not the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that titles and pervades the film, but rather the Tree of Life, a tree that Genesis describes as standing “in the midst of the garden” of Eden, just as trees stand persistently in the midst of Malick’s cinematographic frames (Genesis 2:9). Humans may have been kicked out of Eden for disobeying God, but Malick’s film seems to suggest that the Tree of Life—that is, the presence and grace of God through nature—follows us out of Eden and into the world. In short, the citations from Job do not evoke humanity’s dogged interrogation of God’s justice (e.g., how could a just God allow a good boy to die an early death?), because the question of why Jack’s brother died is as thinly treated as how and when he died. God’s justice is not under scrutiny, but rather humanity’s response—to God’s gift of life, to humanity’s inability to control this gift of life, and (therefore) to the inevitability of human suffering. The
context of the film’s reconciliation is not theodicy, I contend, but lament. Resonant with many of the Jewish Lament Psalms, the film’s universal complaints about human suffering in the face of loss wriggle out of the mysterious but incontestable bedrock of God’s love, mercy, and grace.\textsuperscript{10} 

\textit{The Tree of Life} conveys lament through a nostalgic and richly textured presentation of the late 1950s. Lubezki patiently and lovingly evokes mid-twentieth century suburban Texas (at least for white, middle-class viewers), and yet Malick’s trademark style of editing—specifically, its inconsecutive images, lack of predictable narrative, and overlay of whispering voices—prevents the coalescence of these images into a claimed ownership of some hoped-for past.\textsuperscript{11} Quite the contrary occurs. By overlaying the fluid presentation of a Norman Rockwell-like childhood with questioning whispers of human grief, the film offers a viscerally disturbing presentation of the human condition—a mournful, frantic uncertainty that swirls within a familiar Hollywood-like presentation of beauty and love. Moreover, Malick’s slicing of this human plane with geologic and cosmic planes reframes the characters’ particular stories as instances of a shared and fraught precariousness. As Judith Butler notes, “Lives are by definition precarious; they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed.”\textsuperscript{12} \textit{The Tree of Life} is saturated with this sensibility of precariousness. We see it in the infamous CGI scene of the dinosaurs, in the cosmic sequences of planets burning and breaking apart, in the
evolutionary sequences of organic life coalescing and strengthening, and in the sights of ontological vulnerability that are filmed from the children’s point-of-view: the disabled, limping man, the prisoners in need of water, the mangy dog, the frog shot off on a toy rocket, and the neighborhood boy who drowns at the swimming pool. Taking all of these together with the unseen death of Jack’s brother, it is clear that the film presents cosmic drama and human melodrama as conjoined in the common, precarious substrate of contingency, fungibility, and universal repetition. As such, the film’s ripe nostalgia does not glorify the past but slams viewers into a shared and visceral awareness of finitude.13

‘Structure of Feeling’ and Affective Exhaustion

Let me tie these comments about nostalgia to affect theory, since I suggest that the film foregrounds affect in order to create the medium by which to examine the rolling opposition between nature and grace. The potency of affect theory—such as that of Gilles Deleuze or Lauren Berlant—lies in its ability to reframe notions of subjectivity, intimacy, collective endeavor, religious practice, and political hope in terms of a micrological scale of intensities and networked relationships.14 Affect theory continues the modern and postmodern critique of the Cartesian subject, therefore, but also attempts to sidestep the postmodern obsession with semiotics and epistemology. Instead, affect theory analyzes the pulsing interstices between discourse, emotion, cognition, identity, and institutionality. It prioritizes felt relationship over cognized identities. As a working
shorthand for this essay, I will consider ‘affect’ the physiological and social intensities that sculpt bodily processes and thereby affirm, sear, or reshape a body’s and a society’s relational structures.

Many affect theorists draw on Raymond Williams’s famous discussion of ‘the structure of feeling’ to indicate the ways in which literature and film embed the affective dispositions of a period through the strategic presentation of fashion, automobiles, furniture, street scenes and cityscapes. Lauren Berlant, for example, describes the structure of feeling as, “a residue of common historical experience sensed but not spoken in a social formation.” She notes how earlier literary or filmic moments can give voice to the material but mute structure of feeling. For example, viewers know almost immediately the decade in which a film was made by its fashion or cars or speech patterns, in part because ‘today’ is so starkly different from ‘then.’ Williams stresses that this knowledge is gained by the fading away or failure to communicate a community’s dominant habits: “We are most aware of this when we notice the contrasts between generations, who never talk quite ‘the same language’, or when we read an account of our lives by someone from outside the community, or watch the small differences in style, of speech or behaviour, in someone who has learned our ways yet was not bred in them.” The structure of feeling is an organized but unspoken arrangement of experience, and its ineffability is part and parcel of its organization.
“After the carriers of such a structure die,” Williams writes, “the nearest we can get to this vital element is in the documentary culture, from poems to buildings to dress-fashions.”\(^{18}\) This is the first sense in which *The Tree of Life* compellingly evokes the 1950s for twenty-first century viewers, through the repetition of tangible things like clothes, hairstyle, building facades, furniture, toys, and cars. Viewers become absorbed in a *felt resonance* with memories of what a 1950s childhood *was like*— memories that may be actual or cultural, depending on the viewer’s age. Such a material articulation of the structure of feeling, Williams claims, “expresses that life to us in direct terms, when the living witnesses are silent.”\(^{19}\) In short, the structure of feeling is an important vehicle for pointing out how humans live in a constant affective engagement with material objects, an affective economy that only comes into conscious focus and clarity after that nexus disintegrates.\(^{20}\)

In a later text Williams discusses structure of feeling a bit differently, this time not as an archive of a dead past but as something imminent and emerging. Indeed, he asserts, “it is the reduction of the social to fixed forms that remains the basic error.”\(^{21}\) Malick’s (or Lubezki’s) cinematography in *The Tree of Life* combines these two senses of the structure of feeling by presenting the ‘fixed forms’ of the 1950s through toys and fashion, but also deploying a cinematography that does not allow reducing the past to these objects. Instead, the film’s fluidity *dislocates* the cascade of object-images (toys, fashion, cars) from
the absorptions and of linear plot just enough to enable an inchoate circulation of sensation and feeling around relationships more than objects, and around an ever-receding loss rather than the certainty of temporal assignation. The film thereby evokes the 1950s affectively. Consider, e.g., the dinner-table scenes, the sequences of neighborhood play, or the moments in the school classroom: The narrative facet of each of these is brief and fragmentary, but the affective punch is cumulative and accretive. Viewers are drawn into a nostalgic regard for the 1950s objects and relationships (especially the gendered relations with the mother/wife and the female classmate), but are also rapidly pulled through and past them. The result is affective, not narrative: viewers experience a fluid and ambiguous sense of connection and loss rather than a narrative immersion in a past decade. As such, the film evades representation and settles not on a correct depiction of the 1950s but on a fluid looping of object, body, feeling and relationship that generates and stabilizes a specific filmic canvas. It is on this filmic canvas that the way of nature and the way of grace plays out its ongoing negotiation.

Writing about literature—but the point dovetails with Lubezki’s cinematography—Williams famously points to “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt.” He explains,

> We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity. We are then defining these
elements as a ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies.

I am most struck in this passage by the claim that what is often “taken to be private” is actually social and structured enough to yield to analysis. In *The Tree of Life* the apparently private experience of the O’Briens is connected through montage to the persons and creatures around them, and to the cosmic and terrestrial histories that precede them. The film’s structure of feeling really is an affective economy, constituting and sustaining the film’s contoured but oblique relational assumptions. Assumptions about values and dispositions such as propriety, faith, and devotion (grace) as well as self-interest, toughness, and pragmatism (nature) are thus carried through the relations of historical objects and persons and they show up intermittent but palpable intensities around gender, race, and class—barely whispered anticipations of the habits and social forces that ‘will have become’ civil rights and women’s rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Consider the brief but cumulatively important shots of Jack ogling the dark-haired girl in school, of Mr. O’Brien (Brad Pitt) fighting violently with his wife, or teaching the boys how to fight, how to ‘be men’. Consider also the brief but cumulatively important shots of racial difference, the way it is kept to the margins and shot hesitantly, as foreign or exotic. Such rapid, spotty moments
generate a filmic canvas on which the unending mortal battle between nature and grace can be played out. They show (but do not narrate) the pull of nature and the challenge of grace, and we viewers who live after the film’s diegetic time can—like Berlant’s scholars—look ‘back’ on the 1950s and ‘see’ forward to the civil rights struggle, the second wave feminist struggle, and other late twentieth-century changes in presumptions about race, gender, and sexuality.

Berlant analyzes this tension between the social values of ‘then’ and what scholars value ‘now’ through the notion of “impasse.” She cites Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of cinema as a technology that archives social gestures at the moment they are on the cusp of disappearing, and she notes that this archiving function captures and stores the various ways we have lived our attachment to fantasies of the good life. Think for instance of classic U.S. cinema’s glamorous cocktail parties, road trips, high-school dances, wholesome family life, rituals and practices that circulate the fantasies of gleeful consumption, unrestrained freedom, sexual bliss, and the warm protection of domestic love. “There’s no place like home,” these images promise us; or they incite us to “Take to the road and be free!” Berlant differs from Agamben, however, in claiming that cinema also shows us the “lived impasse” or felt gap between the dissolution of a certain set of bodily conventions and the formation of new ones. Akin to Williams’s claim that the structure of feeling presents both what is fading away and what is emerging, she writes, “cinema and other recording-forms not only archive what is
being lost, but [also] track what happens in the time that we inhabit before new forms make it possible to relocate within conventions the fantasy of sovereign life unfolding from actions.”

In other words, Berlant notes how a film’s structures of habit and ideology replicate the social fantasy of a good life in its multiple varieties and failures, and suggest the emergence of new (but equally problematic) conventions. A film’s structure of feeling conveys not only the particular ways of life of a certain era, but also the phenomenological uncertainty of living in the impasses those ways of life generate, that is, the gaps that yawn open between an era’s fantasized conventions of a good life, and this fantasy’s material impossibility. In *The Tree of Life*, the flashbacks to Jack’s childhood display both the fantasy of the good life and the turmoil created by the fantasy’s imperfections, its cracks and chips. Moreover, Jack’s adult unhappiness, despite his visible, material success, indicates the fantasy’s material impossibility, the way its failure leads, in time, only to an equally problematic set of lived conventions (in Williams’ terms, to a new set of fixed forms).

As an example, consider the first sequence in which viewers see the adult Jack. The images jump and flow from his waking up in bed next to an unnamed woman, his morning toilette, his nearly-empty house (surrounded by trees outside its many windows), the woman bringing greenery into an alcove, Jack lighting a candle, his interactions with the spaces and people at an urban office, the shores of a waterfront, his walking on rocky terrain, exterior shots of an office building
that towers into sky and clouds, snatches of a telephone call with his father, his brothers (Laramie Eppler and Tye Sheridan) and he (Hunter McCracken) playing as children, and shots of churning water. It is difficult to know what to think of this seemingly random set of images, but it is easier to acknowledge how it makes viewers feel: his adult world is cold, the natural world surrounding his house and office is lush, the relationships of his childhood are rich and exciting, and the dream images of rocky terrain and waterfront feel unstable (a feeling heightened by the tilting camera). Jack is living a good life, but it is sterile. He is living it as the failure of the life promised by his childhood, even if that promise is still in play through his ongoing relationship with his father. In sum, viewers can here sense both the fantasy of ‘the good life,’ and the turmoil created by that fantasy’s limitations, which are inflected but not caused by the death of Jack’s brother.

Berlant intends her general insights about film, structure of feeling, and the fantasy of the good life to diagnose a contemporary affective exhaustion arising from “the impasse of adjustment created by constant crisis.”27 Writing from the assumed constraints of biopower, she observes that current economic conditions render most Americans stuck in lives of impasse, trying to adjust to a life that is continually interrupted by crisis (political, economic, environmental, familial or personal).28 Biopower works on populations less through direct coercion than through oblique economies of abandonment—i.e., letting groups die slowly through hazardous waste dumps or unending refugee status—and through
mandated techniques of medical regulations and required surveillance procedures. This larger political-economic context might seem irrelevant to The Tree of Life, and yet we see quite clearly in the film’s depictions of the father, and know from our own lives, how the sense of “the good life” connects intimately to a sense of gender identification (what is it to be a real wo/man?), as well as how difficult it is to wrest the phenomenology of “a life worth living” from the social prescriptions of success. Because we see Jack’s adult character in similar social roles as his father (successful corporation man, distant husband/lover), and because the only non-dream or non-fantasy connection viewers see between the adult Jack and his childhood family is the phone call Jack makes to his father in this initial sequence with Jack’s character, it is not hard to connect Jack’s adult unhappiness not only to the singular experience of losing his brother, but also to the always already impossible task of acceding to his father’s place because of the larger social changes that reset both center and goal of ‘success.’ Jack may “have” more success than his father—a more stable career, a larger (emptier) house, a beautiful and successful wife—but the linear gain of all of these social goods occurs on the surface of vast and shifting social currents that do not value heteronormative family structure or the excesses of consumption in quite the same way: the family of the 1990s is, beyond a doubt, not the idealized family of the 1950s. Jack’s stumbling solitariness (amid the corporate bustle) and the sterility of his house signal an existential agony and a social impotence or evisceration. The
repeated *habitus* of the 1950s childhood, along with its affective impulses that carry into Jack’s 1990s adulthood underscore the workings of nostalgia in the film as painful and not glorious. Framing and interrupting this work of nostalgia, however, are the intercut images of nature and cosmos, which work powerfully—that is the film form, not the images alone but their juxtaposition works powerfully to overcome the impasses and turmoil of the characters’ lived choices between the ways of nature and grace. The effect of nostalgia is thus ameliorated through montage: the hurt of Jack’s life is reconciled by the fluid cinematography that interrupts and rethreads it according to divine and eternal sensibilities.

**Jack: the Film’s ‘Affective Hub’**

I am arguing that film’s liquid camera consciousness serves to rope Jack’s sensory perceptions—which he cannot help but feel as *his own*—to broader durations of family, history, cosmology and eternity. In asserting the connection between Jack’s adult life and the rest of the film, I am claiming that the film *is* Jack’s story. The claim is not obvious since Jack is not always present in the film’s scenes; most pertinently, we hear the mother’s voice, we see and hear the mother and father together, and we see and hear the father at work and at church—all without Jack. How can the film really be, or simply be, Jack’s story? It is clear that the assertion holds only to the degree that there is no singular ‘Jack’, no
subjectivity whose borders or essence can be clearly demarcated.\textsuperscript{31} And yet, one of the messages of the cinematography, which itself conveys the film’s theology, is that each body repeats with a difference the finite options and constraints of creation. Each person is constituted by stardust, and each creature is shaped in body and proclivity by the long millennia of evolution and by the short conflagrations of childhood and family development. In this light, it is possible to see the scenes without Jack as explaining the being-of-Jack without the weight of discourse. That is, by positing the same existential dilemma in his mother, father, and brothers, the film presents—affectively and disjointedly—how and why Jack selects and contests the options and constraints of creation, options that are at once shared cosmically and delivered, particularly, for him alone.

To substantiate this claim by the film text, consider the scenes with the father and the scenes with the adult Jack. The scenes repeat the father’s gruff and distant personality in the son, as well as each man’s tender regret and questioning.

In contrast, the scenes of the mother without Jack—expressing her abject grief
and the tensions of her marriage (Figure above), do not tell us much about her character so much as present her (in a rather sexist fashion) as pure affect. Even more suggestive are the brief sequences of the mother that seem to be dream, or fantasy: the moments when she is flying under the huge tree in their yard (Fig. left), and the “Snow White” image, when she seems to be lying in a glass-covered casket in the woods (Fig. below). Here, not only is the mother pure affect, she is Jack’s pure affect, the desires and assumptions he quietly holds about his mother.

By blurring Jack’s perception, memory, dream, and fantasy with those of his family, his world and the universe, the film’s fluid camera consciousness effectively conveys human melancholy about human finitude and human struggle, and it binds this melancholy to a
decidedly theological hope—that is, it conjoins the ‘way of nature,’ (imaged in the film by roiling water, soil, and darkness) to the ‘way of grace’ (imaged by trees, sky, and light). The fluid blurring of distinct conscious states keeps the audience’s affective attention on the embodied presentation of nostalgia through the hub of Jack’s character. Put differently, the cinematographic reconciliation enacted by the juxtaposition of filmic symbols of nature and grace is itself juxtaposed to Jack’s fretful resistance to ‘the way of grace,’ thus aligning Jack’s visible “good life” with something like what Berlant terms “cruel optimism”—that is, a fantasy of happiness and control that remains longed for, but painfully out of reach.

Perhaps Jack’s unbalanced stumbling within the opposing currents of cruel optimism and compassionate grace explains why many viewers reject his character. Audiences have called Penn’s top billing unwarranted in light of his marginal appearance in the film. It is true that Penn’s character—the adult Jack—appears only intermittently, while most of the film’s action intercuts his present with its own past, demonstrating what Berlant calls the “mediated affect” of the present. “Memory and the past,” she adds, “emerge in mediated zones of visceral presence distributed across scenes of epistemological and bodily activity.” Malick himself could hardly have given us a better description of Sean Penn’s role in the film. Jack’s adult “present time” exists only as palpably intercut with memories ‘in mediated zones of visceral presence,’ and these
memories continue to affirm, sear, and reshape his bodily and social relations, as they are ‘distributed across scenes of epistemological and bodily activity.’ The adult Jack is the switch-point for this temporal intercutting, so that his body generates the film’s affective hub. Jack is the channel through which self, world, and temporality blur. He is the ungraspable center of the film’s diffuse, theological ache for redemption. Perhaps the narrative unfolding of the film is thus, in the end, not Jack’s story so much as simply the story of affect, the story of Williams’ structure of feeling, of Berlant’s mediated zones of visceral presence, or of the theological see-saw between the call of grace and the pull of nature (ego). In this light, The Tree of Life is quite materially about the affective and sensible processes that affirm, sear, and reshape a body’s and a society’s relational structures. Penn’s top billing does not arise from his importance to the plot, but rather from his importance in the affective and temporal relay.

Jack’s singular life thus stands in for an infinitely repeated pattern. Within the world’s fundamentally shared matrix (what Merleau-Ponty terms ‘flesh’), the connected contradictions of the choices bearing down on each life are reconciled and positioned as an eternally repeated event—at once singular and universal. We can now better understand the nostalgic affect of this reconciliation. Nostalgia signals the lament of finitude, but also brings into relief—or carves out of the shared visibility and sensibility—the conundrum of living as both a singular particularity—one life, my life—and as a creature inevitably caught up in an
anonymous sensibility, that is, in God’s presence in the world. For example, at the adult Jack’s sparse, modern home, viewers see Jack, and then the tree (grace) outside his window, and then the water (nature) running from his bathroom faucet. We witness how Jack’s “worlding”—the congealing of his own doubt, sin, and restless, faulty lament—is shown as framed and intercut with larger ethical frames, both cosmic (in the sense of materially and interminably repeatable) and divine (in the sense of materially and interminably available). And equally the other way: God’s eternal grace is framed and intercut with historical choices for and against that grace. Sean Penn’s role as an affective and temporal relay enables the film to deploy nostalgia as the particular staging of a universal encounter between (human, creaturely) struggle and (divine, cosmic) hope.

**Deleuze, Post-traumatic affective cinema, and the Time-image**

I want to turn now from the basic affective structure of *The Tree of Life* to the specific interruptions of water images and tree images that, I have promised to show, enact a theological reconciliation of the narrative opposition of the way of nature and the way of grace. To do this I will draw on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Deleuze’s film theory.

Deleuze’s two cinema books delineate the cinematic changes wrought by the cultural and bodily traumas of WWII, yielding a dislocating and affective film
form that he calls the time image. Instead of recording action, event and effect, the camera in this new ‘realism’ develops image-relations of witnessing, called “opsigns,” and image-relations of sound, called “sonsigns.” The classical film form of mid-century had been organized around linear plots formed by clear actions and their consequences, a technique called “cutting to continuity” because the film editing maintained fidelity to a steadily unfolding plot. Even when classical film form used dreams or flashbacks, the temporal ‘interruption’ was subsumed within a clear narrative track that chugged along to a happy ending. Deleuze notes that after World War II a different, post-traumatic film form organizes itself. Through these “pure optical and sound situations” a floating sense of character, plot, and time develop. These films are less entertaining stories than presentations of the temporal phenomenology of memory and trauma. They show characters that misrecognize what they see, or simply wander about and reminisce.

This new affective cinema, Deleuze writes, “is no longer sensory-motor, as in [classical] realism, but primarily optical and of sound, invested by the senses, before action takes shape in it.” He continues,

Everything remains real in this neo-realism…but, between the reality of the setting and [the reality] of the action, it is no longer a motor extension which is established, but rather a dreamlike connection through the intermediary of the liberated sense organs. It is as if the action floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it.
“Action floating in the situation” seems to capture *The Tree of Life* perfectly. Deleuze’s description of optical and sound situations that give rise to his opsigns and sonsigns, that is, to fragments of felt-sight and felt-sound help me see better how and why *The Tree of Life* unfolds as it does. The fact that Deleuze gathers opsigns and sonsigns under what he calls *tactisigns* emphasizes the *haptics*—or touch—of film, and also aligns well with the affective register of Malick’s film, which grabs and caresses its viewers. Deleuze compellingly notes that sensory images “liberated” from the linear temporality of action films are both “tactile” and “touching”: The eye “grabs,” the ear “caresses.” In *Tree of Life* images stroke and whispered voices grip its viewers, pulling them into a rushing sensory current. Deleuze concludes that the rise of tactile opsigns and sonsigns generates “a camera consciousness…no longer defined by the movements it is able to follow or make, but by the mental connections it is able to enter into.”42 Instead of presenting cause and effect, or action and reaction, or one body and then its point of view, this new camera consciousness suggests imperceptible connections that Deleuze terms ‘mental’ because they involve oblique connections between memory, perception, and sensation. These visual and sound connections are felt, affective; as he says, they are “invested by the senses” and thereby present time in its lived directness, with all its fluid confusion. The sequence in *Tree of Life* portraying the cosmic and terrestrial evolution of life exemplifies this lived directness of time, but so, again, does the first sequence portraying the adult Jack,
a sequence that slips rhythmically from perception to memory to sensation in ways that are not quite Jack’s but also only his.

The notions of opsigns and sonsigns provide a useful rubric for designing the material canvas of Malick’s fluid, time-drenched but non-linear cinematography. As I see it, opsigns and sonsigns not only convey the opposition of nature and grace, but also reconcile it, specifically through an insistent juxtaposition of tree images and water images. For example, the sequence that introduces Jack frames his house as cushioned by trees and also shows the trees in the office building’s courtyard (correlated with sky and clouds), but then cuts to the single shot of a rushing waterfall (correlated with the rocky terrain of Jack’s dream/fantasy). Viewers, in short, are introduced to Jack only through this sequenced opposition of trees (sky) and water (earth). The specific juxtaposition of trees and water is best analyzed through Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological discussion of chiasm and flesh, to which I turn now.43

**Merleau-Ponty and the Chiasm**

In Merleau-Ponty’s posthumous essay titled, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” he attempts—like current affect theory—to think past the Cartesian divide of mind from body, and of subjects from objects, by describing how our perceiving, perceptible, and materially sensible bodies form a chiasm or double-entwining
with the perceiving, perceptible, and materially sensible world around us. He writes, “There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one.” Merleau-Ponty argues that the chiasm of sight and touch pulls the world into my own body, so that I make a world *for myself*, and it also pulls me out of my singular body, into a shared and anonymous visibility and sensibility. He labels this shared visibility *flesh*. Flesh is not the matter of my body, but something he calls a “style” of Being, or an “element” along the lines of water, air, earth and fire. Flesh, he writes, is “the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body.” He continues, “We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit—for then it would be the union of contradictories—but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being.”

Like Deleuze’s camera consciousness, the shared visibility and sensibility here do not belong to any one perceiver. Merleau-Ponty writes, “it is not *I* who sees, not *he* [sic] who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal.” In *The Tree of Life* this philosophical ‘flesh’ enfolds a number of factors and bodies, including the roving camera consciousness that forms the frame of the film, the viewers outside the frame, and
the characters within the frame. But flesh also includes the blades of grass, the cosmos, the dinosaurs, the world of trees and doorways, of rivers and dinner tables—that is, the world of the film. This anonymous “visible” is thus more capacious than any single “seeing body,” whether that of the bodies in the film, the bodies watching the film, or that ‘eye’ implied by the camera. From the fluid and affective conjoining of these various chiasms, these multiple and connected opsigns and sonsigns, viewers viscerally sense “the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body.”

Reviewing the film shows trees positioned as wide canopies extending over and around human action; trees are often shot from below, increasing their majesty and power (Figure above), and they are often positioned directly beside or behind characters, shadowing them or counterposing them (Figures below).
Perhaps the most intrusive instance of this occurs in the same sequence introducing the adult Jack: he walks down a glassed corporate hallway that borders an enclosed courtyard and the camera angle keeps Jack aligned with the tree in the courtyard, resonant with how Adam and Eve are narratively aligned with the Tree of Life in Genesis (Figure below).

Water images often follow on the heels of tree images—and here I am concentrating on shots of the smooth but fast-running river, of running household faucets and garden hoses, and of the high-angled shots of a churning, white waterfall (Figures below).

Lubezki’s camera never pauses—
like blood flowing in the veins, like breathing in and out—and the doubling of
this camera movement over the flowing water doubles and intensifies the
affective rush and tumble, especially when contrasted with the camera’s smooth
pan across the stately trees.

It is primarily
because of this
camera
consciousness of
movement-
stillness cut with
moving-
movement that I sense these water shots as mimetic to human restlessness,
longing, transience and suffering. This general intuition can be substantiated
throughout the film. To take one example, consider the early image of the adult
Jack wiggling his fingers through water flowing from a tap, a shot preceded and
followed by his walking through his nearly empty house, outside the windows of
which the trees seem more ‘homey’ and comforting than the furniture or other
artifacts. Also noteworthy is the sequence in which the child Jack (Hunter
McCacken) steals into a neighbor’s house, takes the housewife’s slip, and runs
with it by the riverside before throwing it into the moving current. Again, the
surrounding trees are embracing and steady compared with the flowing angst of the water.

What is happening, then, when the camera cuts between trees and water? As with much of the fluid cinematography of Malick’s other films, these opsigns and sonsigns could be deleted from the film without changing its basic plotline, which is only to say that plot doesn’t matter here so much as another kind of experience, another kind of story. In *The Tree of Life*, the juxtaposition of trees and water exemplify the chiasm of visibility and tactility; the shared ‘flesh’ of the world, that is, the element of the world’s shared visibility and sensibility constitutes a connected world through which pulses the contradictory but connected ways of nature and grace. Said differently: The juxtaposition of water and trees creates a chiasm of choice that is woven on *flesh*, that is, *reconciled* on the all-encompassing *element* of anonymous visibility conveyed to viewers through the film’s restless, fluid camera consciousness. The juxtaposition at once separates and conjoins the bodies of these worlds, so that Jack’s life—his memory, his grief, his labor and love are taken as both singular and social, both his own and a cosmic repetition of a continuous choice. The film’s moving network of images situate trees as an encompassing, gentle curtain of grace, and associate water with the distress and unsettled anxieties of ‘natural’ selfishness. Jack’s life and struggle are intercalated between these trees and waterfalls—his life is one example, one template of the ongoing choice between the way of nature
and the way of grace. The film’s cinematographic restlessness here formally reframes and reconciles the film’s existential restlessness on the level of plot. In short, the liquid camerawork juxtaposing trees and water attempts a theological reconciliation of the human characters’ restlessness, born of finitude and grief.

Conclusion

I have argued that the juxtaposition of trees and water in *The Tree of Life* expresses through cinematography the persistent and pulsing existential choice between nature and grace, a choice shown as reconciled through the affective hub of Jack’s body and the film’s affective camerawork. Trees cut by water reframe Jack’s story as everyone’s story; the camera consciousness severs and conjoins all the human and non-human bodies of these worlds, so that Jack’s life—his memory, his grief, his labor and love—take on the quality of an allusive example or fable: However unique Jack’s life and loss, it all remains the same. As such, restlessness reframes and reconciles restlessness. The camera’s pulsing and anonymous sensibility forms a cosmic and intimate context for the restless ache of human existence. Its fluid cinematography, especially the opsigns and sonsigns of trees and water weave a pulsing and anonymous visibility and sensibility, a suprahuman flesh that forms a cosmic and intimate context for the lament of human finitude. Amid the intercutting of trees and water, the film splices a relentless unfurling of other tactisigns that “gel” a nostalgic memory of American childhood—at least for a particular white, suburban middle-class demographic. This remembered childhood does
not lure viewers into an oceanic feeling about a glorified past, however, but stings viewers with what Lauren Berlant terms “cruel optimism,” a commitment to a fantasy of the good life, our attachment to which becomes the reason we are not flourishing, the reason we ache for redemption. Redemption cannot lie in glorifying or ‘returning’ to this beautiful but cruel past, in part because eternity trumps temporality: We live in God’s presence, the film-form argues; humans along with all of creation float in memory, memory of ourselves, and memory of God.

Instead of a yearning for the past, *The Tree of Life* deploys an affective and time-saturated cinematography to express a non-reactionary nostalgia. It does this in three ways. First, its opsigns and sonsigns solder the longed-for beauty and affective pleasures of childhood to that past’s recoiling pain still navigated in Jack’s present. Second, the film interpellates the human past of this family with geologic and cosmic repetitions, suggesting that the past is never really past but continues both to shape contemporary structures of feeling and to intimate inchoate rumblings of change. Finally, the film inflects its complex temporality as well as Jack’s clear ache for redemption with the status of example or fable. Jack’s story, that is, the affective and temporal story he mediates, is unique, and yet every human repeats it. The film’s opsigns and sonsigns, and the structure of feeling it intimates as flowing amid society’s fixed forms, crisscross in an ethical, agonistic, and political posturing on the flesh of the world. *The Tree of Life* captures the insignificant singularity of one small family, and its eternal
significance, because Jack and his mother and father repeat the connected chiasm of galaxies and dinosaurs, and because their unique and tiny lament at the loss of their brother and son is remembered and reconciled, eternally, on the rolling waves of God’s forgiving grace.

The last three terrestrial shots of the film position Jack, again, as just this affective and temporal switch-point between eternity and history, between grace and nature.

The camera cuts from a close-up on Jack (Figure above), staggering outside his skyscraper architectural firm, to a low-angle shot of the same skyscraper with the sky and clouds above (Figure above), and finally a long shot of a bridge over the Hudson River (Figure below).
Jack is not folded into the past, but aching for the redemption that will propel him forward into his future, over the bridge spanning the moving waters of his past.


The setting of the film in white, suburban Texas is starkly Christian, specifically Roman Catholic. Likewise, the scenes on the lakeshore replete with humans and angels also evoke American Christian sensibilities. Obviously, the themes of creation, grace, reconciliation, angelic guidance, and faith are not unique to Catholicism or to Christianity, but the latter is the religious frame through which Malick navigates these themes.


Trees are correlated with sky, birds, and light in the film—that is, with natural elements arcing toward (or originating in) a heaven that is spatially ‘above’ or ‘out of the world’. Water images are correlated with earth and darkness—that is, with natural elements that flow and churn downward. In this sense, I see the jump-cut water images as symbolizing human ego and human flesh (i.e., the fact that humans are about two-third water) more than a metaphor for the sacramental use of water. This latter sense of water is indicated in the waterfront scenes, though there, too, grace is infused through birds, open sky, and angel-like beings as much as through the water itself. Also in these waterfront scenes, the sanctity of water is interrupted by an asp and by a dark, floating mask. It is as if the film argues that on earth (at least) the ‘choice’ between nature and grace is really the choice to persist in discerning how to live that choice. We cannot not be nature, and the choice for grace is always against nature (against ego) to some extent.

See David Sterritt, “Days of Heaven and Waco: Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*.” *Film Quarterly* 65:1 (2011): 52-57. When I presented a version of this paper at the 2012 meeting of the Film and Visual Culture Group of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago, the other two presenters explained and theorized the film in terms of theodicy. A Google search of “Tree of Life, theodicy” affords a number of December, 2011, and January, 2012 blog-posts on the theodicy of the film.

The Tree of Life is cited also in Revelation 22:2, but Malick’s treatment of the evolution of life (on multiple scales) in this film guides me to Genesis instead of Apocalypse. The opening quotation from Job, and the scene of the pastor giving a sermon that draws on Job both serve as decoys. The point of the sermon, after all, is not the justice of God in light of human suffering, but our human inability to control or secure anything in our lives. The film’s epigraph, too, does not emphasize Job’s questions but God’s response, powered by God’s majesty and the joy that erupts from the stars and “sons of God” in response to God’s glory.

And yet see Roger Ebert’s review, in which he writes, “I don't know when a film has connected more immediately with my own personal experience. In uncanny ways, the central events of The Tree of Life reflect a time and place I lived in, and the boys in it are me. If I set out to make an autobiographical film, and if I had Malick's gift, it would look so much like this.” I have not seen anyone else make such a claim, one that likely arises from Ebert’s rather unusual exposure to film and its possibilities. Roger Ebert, “The Tree of Life,” (June 2, 2011), Rogerebert.com, accessed February 17, 2014. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-tree-of-life-2011.


Williams, The Long Revolution, 64.

Williams, The Long Revolution, 65.

Williams, The Long Revolution, 65.

“Affective economy” is the title of an essay by Sara Ahmed (Social Text, 79 (22:2), Summer 2004, 117-139), that has been taken up as a common term in affect theory.

Williams, Marxism and Literature, 129.

Williams, Marxism and Literature, 132.
Thus the ‘good old days’ represented by the film’s reproduction of the 1950s required the reduction of white women to housewives and mothers, and a wide-range of exploitations of African American women and men. One wonders—or I wonder, since I was born in Texas and spent summers in the Hill Country—about the elision of Mexicans from the film. Texas always, still, has a fraught relationship with Latino/as.

Biopower is a term drawn from Michel Foucault. His mid-1970s lectures at the Collège de France theorized the general (but never complete) shift from sovereignty, in which a dominant social power (the General, the King, the Prime Minister) holds the power to “make die” or “let live”, to biopower, a fluid and social set of power relations that focus on and capture of human biological capacity by “letting die” or “making live” (Foucault, ‘Society Must Be Defended’, Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976, trans. David Macey (New York, NY: Picador, 2003): 247). The constraints evoked by Foucault and Berlant are operating acutely since the 2008 economic meltdown.

For the phrase “economies of abandonment” and its analysis, see Povinelli, Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

When I presented an earlier version of this paper at the 2012 American Academy of Religion conference in Chicago, my suggestion that the film is Jack’s story was vociferously contested. My thanks, especially, to John Lyden for helping me clarify my position.


The next sections on Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty will substantiate these parenthetical claims.

Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 11.

35 Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 7: “The present is perceived, first, affectively,” she writes, “it is...a thing that is sensed and under constant revision.”

36 Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 52.

37 I am convinced that Deleuze’s argument is itself less historical than relational; that is, I do not think the particular trauma of WWII that birthed this new affective sensibility, but rather this affective sensibility arises in the face of any and every existential or social trauma. That the 1950s generated a new film form has more to do with the genealogy of filmic technology than the uniqueness of the phenomenological claims Deleuze forwards. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that C2 replicates Kant’s argument about indeterminate judgments and the sublime in his Critique of Judgment. See Hamner, “Witnessing Witness: the circulations of space and gaze in Ousmane Sembene’s Guelwaar, presented at the Third Annual Deleuze Studies conference. Amsterdam, The Netherlands, July 12-14, 2010.

38 Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 3-9.

39 Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 3.

40 Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 4.

41 Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 4.

42 Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 23.

43 Though Deleuze is often thought to critique the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the latter’s notions of chiasm and flesh can be aligned with a Deleuzian ontology rather easily. For further discussion of the mutual dependence of Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, see William Connolly, “Materialities of Experience,” in New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 178-200.


45 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, 134.

46 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, 146.
Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 147. This quotation is especially important for seeing the resonance of Deleuze with Merleau-Ponty, since the previous quotations seem to presume a separable “body”, which is *mine*, and “world”, which is *not-mine*, but this final sentence obviates the orginary or stable status of something like “my body” and, in fact, positions body and world as two *emblems* or what Deleuze might term *concepts*. See Deleuze, *Desert Islands: and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, tr. Michael Taormina (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 2004), 22-51.


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