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Viewing Terrence Malick's *A Hidden Life* as Political Theology: Toward Theocinematics

Abstract

In this article, I bring Terrence Malick's 2019 film, *A Hidden Life*, into conversation with two of philosopher Paul Ricoeur's concepts: (1) the "social imaginary" as the interplay of ideals, images, ideologies and utopias, and (2) Ricoeur's description of the genre of "parable" as a narrative-metaphor which provokes a "re-orientation by disorientation" within an audience's imagination. Drawing from Ricoeur's thought, I apply a theological film criticism I call "theocinematics" to *A Hidden Life* in order to call attention to the ways in which the cinematic form itself engenders sociopolitical and theological thought. Through emphasizing film aesthetics in my analysis, I am ultimately suggesting that *A Hidden Life* as a cinematic parable has the potential power to affect and inform our social imaginaries for the good.

Keywords

Theology and film, parable, social imaginary, Paul Ricoeur, Terrence Malick, *A Hidden Life*, theological aesthetics, film criticism, political theology

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Author Notes

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In his review of American filmmaker Terrence Malick's 2011 magnum opus, *The Tree of Life*, film critic Roger Ebert described the film as “a form of prayer. It created within me a spiritual awareness, and made me more alert to the awe of existence. I believe it stands free from conventional theologies.”¹ Certainly the seventh art has portrayed tales of our human quest for the divine since its inception over a century ago; as French film critic André Bazin aptly put it, “the cinema has always been interested in God.”² Yet, as Gilles Deleuze once asked, *how* is it that cinema is so adept at stirring up spiritual life? Can certain cinema function as a form of theology beyond the limits of conventional systematic approaches?

In this article, I examine Malick's 2019 film, *A Hidden Life*, and its depiction of a religiously radical individual's resistance to his surrounding sociopolitical ideologies.³ In its formal depiction of this individual, the film provokes the audience's ethical and theological imaginations through indirect means via distinctive cinematic aesthetics. To build this thematic bridge between form and content, as well as film and theology, I draw upon two concepts from philosopher Paul Ricoeur: (1) the “social imaginary” as the interplay of ideology and utopia informing our social and political paradigms, and (2) Ricoeur's description of the genre of “parable” as “narrative-metaphor” which provokes a “re-orientation by disorientation” in an audience's imagination. Through this, I seek to advance a fresh form of audiovisual theologizing, what I am calling “theocinematics.” Theocinematics is a constructive synthesis of theology and film criticism which considers film as “theology in motion” (*theos* + *kinēma*) akin to the “film-philosophy” practiced by philosophers such as Stephen Mulhall and Robert Sinnerbrink.⁴ In theocinematics, film-as-quasi-subject can express its own theological thought and reflection which invites and involves the spectator to engage in their own theological interpretations in a hermeneutical spiral. This opens up the possibility of an interconnection between theology and

cinema without prescribing a singular resolved “message” or method, nor subsuming/submitting one field beneath the other.

Before turning to the two Ricoeurian concepts and Malick’s film, allow me a lengthy detour explaining how theocinematics operates as a “sacramental” view of cinema.

Beyond Dialogue: Film as Theology

In the third edition of *The Modern Theologians*, a new chapter written by Jolyon Mitchell, “Theology and Film,” appeared as the coda. Its inclusion recognizes the established scholarly subfield located somewhere within the overlapping fields of “theology and the arts” and “theology and popular culture.” The chapter describes how “increasingly, theologians are using film as a source to illustrate rich theological themes or debates” and “film is used to illustrate and to support a broader thesis.”⁵ This illustrative/utilitarian posture typically results in a Christian theologian making certain interpretive claims about a film by using theological methods and terminology in what is commonly called a “dialogue” with cinema. Such “dialogue” is perhaps the most popular methodology employed in the field of theology and film.⁶ Despite stated good intentions, many theologians still practice a sort of “theological imperialism” when engaging with cinema, where the discipline of theology has both the first and final authoritative word in the conversation.⁷ In a helpful evaluation of “dialogue” approaches, Stefanie Knauss rightly observes that any intended dialogue often turns into a monologue where standards from theology and religious studies are primarily used to evaluate film: theologians studying film “tend to use religious concepts in order to think about film, but not the other way around, and typologies of the relationship between film and religion look at how religions or their representatives have reacted to film, but not at how films or their producers relate to religion.”⁸ Knauss also notes that the metaphor of “dialogue” can de-emphasize the affective, imaginative, and embodied dimensions of film reception, instead

prioritizing abstract propositional statements and semantic-based systems for understanding audiovisual-generated spiritual experiences. Additionally, “dialogue” implies a sharp separation between the so-called “secular” realm of film and the “sacred” autonomy of theology, as if the two were wholly distinct from one another—if film is *in dialogue with* theology, then film is inferred to *not* be theology, and vice versa. Yet this strict division is challenged by the rich history of Christian theological aesthetics suggesting that art can inform or function as theology,⁹ as well as the myriad individuals who describe having “spiritual,” “transcendent,” or “religious” experiences with artworks in general and cinema in particular.¹⁰ Despite greater efforts to engage with film *qua* film within the greater film-and-theology discourse, still too often not enough attention is given to the cinematic experience or audiovisual aesthetics before the film is placed under theological scrutiny and appropriation. Basic or essential elements within a film are frequently mistaken, misappropriated, or simply ignored, and film theory and film production is likewise given cursory attention.¹¹

In contrast to “dialogue,” I am seeking to overcome theological imperialism through an egalitarian approach which takes affective cinematic experience and film theory into equal consideration with theology, a methodology more analogous to cinematic “montage.” Though “montage” is synonymous with “editing” in American film terminology, editing suggests trimming or removal, whereas the French term *montage* connotes a creative constructive process by assembling images or sequences in juxtaposition, creating a new whole from the disparate elements. In this constructive manner, cinema and theology form a synthesis where fresh meanings are generated via their proximity and overlap. This is not to subsume one into the other, but to maintain a paradox of integration and alterity in a more equitable interrelation than the typical dialogical view. Where “dialogue” approaches tend to result in mere analogies while each

interlocutor can remain discrete and unchanged, “montage” informs and transforms each academic sphere, recognizing distinctions while also generating fresh understandings in the overlapping realm where film affords genuine theological reflection. Alongside “montage,” we could also think of this approach as a kind of “double exposure,” where multiple images are layered upon one another in a single frame. Within this photographic technique, there is a literal blurring of the boundaries between the two distinct images in order to create a singular whole. Likewise, in theocinematics, film *as* theology may inform our understanding of both God and film by employing methods from each field in a double vision—one views a film *simultaneously* as film critic and theologian, just as the film is simultaneously cinema *and* theology.

There are a handful of examples within the theology-and-film field which resemble the theocinematic view I am advocating, such as Gerard Loughlin’s “cinematic theology” and Paul Schrader’s “transcendental style.”¹² One particularly relevant example is experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky and his appreciation of films’ apparent “spiritual” capacities. He describes “devotional cinema” as not necessarily referring to religious content, but rather as “the opening or the interruption that allows us to experience what is hidden, and to accept with our hearts our given situation. When film does this, when it subverts our absorption in the temporal and reveals the depths of our own reality, it opens us to a fuller sense of ourselves and our world. It is alive as a devotional form.”¹³ Dorsky goes on to describe the “post-film experience,” how there is *something* in cinema beyond intellectual or narrative content that can “produce health” through its “mystical implications; it can be, at its best, a way of approaching and manifesting the ineffable.”¹⁴ Though Dorsky leaves this mystical “something” undefined, he argues that film nevertheless generates “revelation or aliveness” precisely through its formal dimensions (lighting, editing, cinematography, etc.). I would contend that certain films, such as Malick’s *A Hidden Life*, can be

considered such devotional cinema, not merely because of the film's religious content, but because of the spiritual experience the film's aesthetics generates for a receptive audience, opening up the "depths of our own reality." Such "spiritual" cinema need not be necessarily defined by orthodox Christian doctrines and systematic theologies in order to be considered valid forms of theologically-generative cinema—the film can "speak" of God and the transcendent in its own cinematic language.

Another key influence on my theocinematics approach is theologian David Brown and his expansive work on sacramentality, which Brown describes as the "symbolic mediation of the divine in and through the material." For Brown, this mediation is not strictly instrumental or illustrative, nor solely limited to the ordained sacraments of a Christian tradition. Rather, "the material symbol says something about God in its own right, and so it is an indispensable element in assessing both the immediate experience and any further significance it may have."¹⁵ In *The Extravagance of Music*, Brown argues for a "generous excess," a kind of receptivity to God "which allows the dismantling of barriers between our world and God's that avoids God needing to do something over and beyond simple being already available in virtue of the divine ubiquitous or universal presence."¹⁶ Indeed, for Brown, music may serve as a form of revelation by effecting a change within the listener, "awakening to us an awareness of the aboriginal plenitude of the divine in which we always already stand."¹⁷ In this way, Brown assumes the transcendence of God is mysteriously present and available in the immanence of human experience. Moreover, even as he tends to use the language of "dialogue" in similar ways to the theology-and-film discourse, he resists an imperialistic view of the arts, arguing instead that "theology needs to cease to regard the arts as only appropriate when illustrative of truths already known through Scripture or tradition and instead carefully explore meanings first and with the expectation that the arts too can operate

as independent vehicles of truth.”¹⁸ If, as Brown maintains, the sacramental should be considered “as a major, and perhaps even the primary, way of exploring God’s relationship to our world” where “potentially, all [human experiences] may function as experiences of God,”¹⁹ then certainly this applies to perhaps the most ubiquitous cultural art form in our contemporary era: the moving image. Though viewing film for film’s sake has played a surprisingly minor role in Brown’s corpus, I am not suggesting that Brown has no appreciation of cinema; in our personal interactions, he has demonstrated keen insights and curiosity about film as an artistic medium. Still, Brown’s insights have not yet been adequately employed within the theology-and-film subfield. In thus applying Brown’s view of sacramentality to film via theocinematics, I suggest that cinema-as-art can be approached as potentially revelatory and imbued with the presence of the divine: God may possibly communicate Godself through *any* and *every* film, regardless of its ostensible religious content and especially through its aesthetic form.

With Dorsky and Brown in mind, I will ultimately draw upon the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur for my analysis of *A Hidden Life*. We may now turn to Ricoeur’s notions of the social imaginary and parable.

The Social Imaginary

In his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Paul Ricoeur suggests that the very conjunction of these apparently disparate phenomena, ideology and utopia, typifies what he calls a “social and cultural imagination,” or a social imaginary.²⁰ Charles Taylor also uses the term “social imaginary” in a similar way to Ricoeur; for Taylor, the social imaginary is the way in which ordinary people “‘imagine’ their social surroundings...not expressed in theoretical terms” but in “images, stories, legends, etc.”²¹ For Ricoeur, the social imaginary consists of both ideology and utopia, which share an internal and external polarity of a positive and negative function; in other words, there is a

dialect both *within* and *between* the two concepts. Ideology, at its worst, is a distortion of reality, a non-real, non-scientific upending of our individual paradigm and understanding of what is. Interestingly for our subject of cinema, Ricoeur, following Marx, uses the metaphor of a camera and photography to describe ideology, how the image is *inverted* and must be reversed again in order to be seen as it truly is. However, Ricoeur also suggests that ideology has a more positive function as *integration*: because all social action is symbolically mediated and enculturated—as human beings, we are always situated in a culture filled with meaningful symbols—ideology provides a mediating role by preserving personal and social identity. In this, it also legitimizes the present systems of authority, particularly in political and religious power structures. That is, ideology confirms and affirms *The Way Things Are*. Ideology, in Ricoeur's view, thus functions as a dialectic between distortion and integration, between powerful public authorities (whether political, religious, or otherwise) telling us how things are, and the stable continuity of our individual and communal identities.

If ideology at its best is integration, for Ricoeur, the best function of utopia is the exploration of “the possible.” At its worst, utopia is abstract wishful thinking, an escapist pipedream which distracts us from the reality at hand. The utopia questions what presently exists; it is an imaginative variation on the current power structures of authority. Ricoeur draws upon the etymological origins of “utopia” as a “nowhere” or “a place which exists in no real place”—in other words, an imagined fictional reality. As Ricoeur puts it, “From this ‘no place’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living.”²² In this way, utopia introduces imaginative variations on how we interpret society, family, government, religion, etc. and subversively questions the reigning normative

systems in power. Utopia provides a counterpart to ideology, *The Way Things Could (or Should) Be* as opposed to *The Way Things Are*.

Ricoeur ultimately claims that this polarity between ideology and utopia “may exemplify the two sides of imagination.” He continues: “One function of imagination is surely to preserve things by portraits or pictures. We maintain the memories of our friends and those we love by photographs. The picture continues the identity while the fiction says something else. Thus, it may be the dialectics of imagination itself which is at work here in the relation between picture and fiction, and in the social realm between ideology and utopia.”²³ This is not unlike Ricoeur’s distinction between *ipse* and *idem* in the human self in *Oneself as Another*, the ongoing dynamic between ipseity and alterity in our identity formation. Ricoeur concludes that we cannot escape the hermeneutical circle of ideology and utopia, but that awareness and wisdom can help us understand how the circle may become a spiral.

The social imagination is thus symbolized by the constant spiralling dialectic between the photographic picture and fictional story, between ideology and utopia—or, to turn to film studies, between realism and formalism, the dynamic between capturing the real-world and imaginatively re-creating the world through the cinematic apparatus. The parallel to cinema is apparent: the worst of cinema is empty escapism or distortive ideological propaganda, while the best of cinema is empathy-generating and imaginatively expansive, revealing both what the world is and what it could/should be.

Cinematic Parables

With the social imaginary in mind, we can turn to a second Ricoeurian dialectical concept, that of the parable as a “narrative-metaphor.” As I have explored this idea extensively elsewhere,²⁴ I’ll be brief: in his 1975 article, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” Ricoeur describes parable as the conjunction

of a *narrative form* and a *metaphorical process*.²⁵ As such, parable encompasses two of Ricoeur's larger philosophical projects, as narrative and metaphor are explored in great detail in *Time and Narrative* and *The Rule of Metaphor*, respectively. This narrative-metaphor points to a third element, an external referent beyond the parable which Ricoeur calls "limit-experiences." Limit-experiences are human encounters with the horizon of knowledge and material reality, or immanence colliding with transcendence. In this way, a parable is a transformative short story which redescribes the religious dimension of human existence without resorting to overtly religious discourse. It theologically or religiously refers to something *beyond* what was literally told in the narrative, even as the story remains coherent in itself—it is simultaneously religious and non-religious, sacred and profane.

Realism—in its aesthetic and cinematic sense—is an essential element in Ricoeurian parables. For Ricoeur, this realism gives the parable its distinct rhetorical strength; something surprising, shocking, or scandalous arises in the midst of the ordinary. For Ricoeur, parables are "narratives of normalcy," or "radically profane stories" where "there are no gods, no demons, no angels, no miracles, no time before time...nothing like that, but precisely people like us."²⁶ Ricoeur contends that parables are stories which could have actually occurred to typical people in everyday life, yet contain a peculiarity or eccentricity, not through fantastical or magical elements but precisely because of the parable's realism; as Ricoeur puts it elsewhere, parables depict "the extraordinary within the ordinary." This quality "remains a fantastic of the everyday, without the supernatural, as it appears in fairy tales or in myths." This is the paradox of the parabolic structure: it begins in a realistic ordinary circumstance which the audience recognizes as the "real world," only to upend the audience's expectations through an affective crisis and subsequent open-ended coda. This collision of the ordinary with the extraordinary elicits a crisis of response as the parable

is received and appropriated by the audience—parables “*disorient* only in order to *reorient* us.” What is specifically reoriented? Ricoeur declares that is it our *imagination*, “the power to open us to new possibilities, to discover another way of seeing, or acceding to a new rule in receiving the instruction of exception.” We can discern the utopian dimensions in this description. Thus, within this formal structure, parables display a “metaphorical network which contains, potentially, several theologies.”

For Ricoeur, true parables may generate a diversity of theological interpretations and applications out of a single narrative-metaphor, reorienting and re-forming our theological, moral, and—here is where ideology and utopia come in—*social* imaginations. The dynamic between ideology and utopia in the social imagination is parallel (perhaps even identical) to the dynamic between the *ordinary* and the *extraordinary* in parables. Parables subversively and indirectly open up our awareness to the Way Things Are while stimulating our imaginations to consider What Could Be. This has obvious political dimensions, in that the social imaginary does not simply apply to an individual’s outlook, but to the view of political systems as a whole—it’s not simply the Way Things Are or What Could Be for an individual autonomous self, but how this new way of being in the world may affect the wider body politic.

With Ricoeur’s conceptions of the social imaginary and parable in mind, we may now turn our full attention to Malick’s *A Hidden Life*.

Terrence Malick’s *A Hidden Life*

Before turning to filmmaking, Terrence Malick had been on an academic path, studying philosophy at Harvard under the mentorship of Stanley Cavell, being awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to undertake a PhD at Oxford under the supervision of Gilbert Ryle on the concept of “world” in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein (Ryle rejected Malick’s topic for being “not

philosophical enough”), teaching phenomenology courses at MIT, and publishing a scholarly English translation of Heidegger’s *The Essence of Reasons*. Subsequently, Malick’s cinema has been described as both “Heideggerian” and “Kierkegaardian,” and film scholars and philosophers alike have lauded his films for their metaphysical magnitude.²⁷ More than philosophical, Malick’s cinema from *The Tree of Life* onward has also been recognized for its theological/religious dimensions due to prominent Christian allusions, as well as an evocative sense of the transcendent through the captivating images, powerful music, and mythopoetic tone.²⁸

A filmmaker as distinctive as Malick invites “auteur” film criticism, a view which emerged from 1950s French *Cahiers du cinéma* critics influenced by André Bazin; this later solidified as “auteur theory” in American film criticism through critic Andrew Sarris. Auteur theory privileges the film director, giving interpretive priority to their biography, beliefs, and intentions. For Sarris, only true auteurs are capable of addressing the “interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art.”²⁹ By Sarris’s standards, Malick can certainly be considered an auteur, and scholarly consideration of his films usually takes an auteurist approach. However, auteur theory rightly has its critics,³⁰ and I am not advocating here for a strict auteurist methodology which views Malick’s Christian beliefs or philosophical background as the primary hermeneutic for interpreting this film. Cinema is a uniquely collaborative art form, and privileging the director for determining a film’s meaning can be reductive at best, distortive at worst. Instead, I appreciate Stanley Cavell’s experiential and phenomenologically descriptive “cinematic circle” which privileges the dynamic between the elements of a film, the filmmaker(s), and the audience.³¹ Cavell’s hermeneutical circle bears resonance with Ricoeur’s own phenomenological hermeneutics, what Ricoeur describes as the worlds *behind, of, and in front of* the text (or, in this case, the film).³² Following Cavell and Ricoeur, we must *pay attention to the particulars* of the film itself, focusing on how the cinematic

form engenders and discloses its own theological insight, and how it generates potential theological responses within an audience. In this approach, I seek to avoid instrumentalizing the film's artistic qualities and beauty (i.e., reducing the film to mere theological concepts) or imposing external directorial intentionalism (i.e., any theological meaning must be derived from Malick's explicit or inferred intent as the director).

My theological film criticism focuses on three aesthetic dimensions of *A Hidden Life*: (1) the film's pacing and its protracted narrative structure as a Passion tale, including its central performances; (2) the epiphanic cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and editing/montage techniques, particularly the improvisatory roaming "pneumatological" camerawork; and (3) the use of lyrical voiceover and musical score to generate a sense of the sacred through sound. To be clear, parsing these elements is not to suggest that they should solely be viewed as individually dissected components; indeed, a film is more than the sum of its parts or an amalgamation of other artistic forms, as we experience *all* of these elements synchronously in film-viewing. Rather, this is merely a scaffold for outlining my argument in order to more clearly call attention to cinema's distinctive formal aesthetics and their implicit theological and political dimensions. Once one is able to recognize these elements, one can better appreciate the whole. In all of this, my purpose is to call attention to the ways in which *the cinematic form itself* engenders sociopolitical and theological thought: I am suggesting that *A Hidden Life* as a cinematic parable has the potential power to affect and inform our social imaginaries for the good.

1. Pacing and Narrative Structure

A Hidden Life centers around the real-life story of Austrian farmer Franz Jägerstätter (August Diehl) and his refusal to swear allegiance to Hitler in World War II due to his Roman Catholic faith. Though ostensibly an epic World War II movie, like Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), the

film is unconventional in that it does not depict any major military battles nor the Nazis' atrocities towards Jewish people in the Holocaust (the latter of which has been a point of negative criticism). The film was originally titled *Radegund* after St. Radegund, the name of the Edenic mountain village in Austria where Franz and his beloved wife, Fani (Valerie Pachner), lived with their three young daughters. In the film, theirs is a peaceful life of farming, family, and faith; as Fani murmurs in the opening voiceover narration, "It seemed no trouble could reach our valley. We lived above the clouds." All of this is upended by the growing influence of the Third Reich, and when Franz is conscripted into Hitler's army, his silent dissent leads to his imprisonment for treason. The historical Franz was executed on August 9, 1943 at the age of 36; he was later beatified as a martyr by Pope Benedict XVI on October 26, 2007.

Franz's life and death was mostly unknown to the wider world until sociologist Gordon Zahn encountered the farmer's story while doing research on German Catholics, and subsequently published as *In Solitary Witness: The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter* in 1964.³³ Thomas Merton also included a chapter on Jägerstätter's life in his 1968 book, *Faith and Violence*,³⁴ though Malick's script is based mainly on the real-life letters written between Franz and Fani which were collected and edited by Erna Putz.³⁵ Malick has previously drawn from historical accounts: *Badlands* is loosely based on the real-life 1958 murder spree of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, and *The New World* (2005) depicts the lives of historical figures Pocahontas, John Smith, and John Rolfe. Malick has also formerly incorporated autobiography: *The Tree of Life* and the films of the "weightless" or "twirling" trilogy—*To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015), and *Song to Song* (2017)—all contain parallels to Malick's personal history. But while Franz and Fani's historical lives serve as the foundation for *A Hidden Life*, Malick structures the film not as a conventional biopic with a view toward historical accuracy, but as a mythopoetic reimagining of

the Passion, with Franz in the Christ role and Fani as a Marian/Magdalene figure.³⁶ My focus here is not so much the narrative content of *A Hidden Life* as its formal style, that is, *how* it shows Franz and Fani's story and the resultant theological and political reflection this engenders. To be sure, I do not wish to suggest that formal style can be divorced from content, or that Malick's aesthetics are merely decorous flair—indeed, Malick's style *is* the content. Film-philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink says it well: Malick's cinema aims “to resensitize us through a *cinematic poesis* towards the sheer presencing of things, while at the same time disclosing different, often conflicting, aspects of our shared historical worlds.”³⁷

One way in which *A Hidden Life* attunes us to the “sheer presencing” of the world is through its patient, protracted pacing. The film shares many characteristics with “slow cinema” or “contemplative cinema” and its various practitioners (e.g., Andrei Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni, Béla Tarr, Pedro Costa, Kelly Reichardt, Carlos Reygadas) in its emphasis on time over narrative. In slow cinema, time does not serve storytelling as much as it *becomes* the story; as filmmaker Paul Schrader writes, “it's experiential, not expositional.”³⁸ In this way, the film functions as a spiritual exercise or discipline, a consecrated period of contemplation requiring attentive prayerful focus not unlike Dorsky's “devotional” cinema. At 174 minutes, *A Hidden Life* is currently Malick's longest theatrical film,³⁹ testing the endurance of its audience in its elliptical and unhurried approach to story-telling. Even with its relatively fast-paced editing and dynamic camera movements compared to other slow cinema, the film's lengthy runtime is primarily devoted to Fani and Franz's exterior actions and interior spiritual struggles, primarily explored through meditative voiceovers and laconic scenes which flow one after another in dream-like vignettes, punctuated by the extra-diegetic sounds of church bells ringing (more on this below). There is little actual spoken dialogue from the primary characters, and what they do say is often

cryptic, muted in the sound design, and experienced *in media res*—we as the audience typically enter and exit scenes mid-conversation and must work to discern the context and significance. Where the historical Franz was outspoken in his eccentric quasi-fanatical religious and political views, Diehl's portrayal in *A Hidden Life* is composed mainly of gestures and subtle glances. He silently watches as the town mayor (Karl Markovics) drunkenly spews pro-Hitler xenophobic rants and denounces Franz as a traitor. He listens with a worried expression while the local Catholic priest (Tobias Moretti) and bishop (Michael Nyqvist) try to convince him to swear allegiance to Hitler as obedience to Romans 13: "God doesn't care what you say. Only what's in your heart." He maintains quiet composure as a tempter/Satan character, Captain Herder (Matthias Schoenaerts), mockingly inquires as to whether God has directly spoken to him, trying to enervate Franz through half-truths: "He who created this world. He created evil. Conscience makes cowards of us all. Take care, my friend. The Antichrist is clever. He uses a man's virtues to mislead him." The Nazi military judge (Bruno Ganz) who oversees Franz's trial is left shaken by his encounter, evoking an image of Pilate with Christ. In all of these scenes, Franz is repeatedly asked by those around him to give reasons for his convictions. He is, for the most part, silent. Where Hollywood melodramas or Christian "faith-based" films would likely give Franz stirring Oscar-worthy speeches about how his Christian faith prompts him to defy nationalist fascism, the Franz-as-Christ-figure in *A Hidden Life* does not open his mouth—he is led like a lamb to the slaughter, silent like a sheep before its shearers (cf. Isa. 53:7). This silence has strong parallels to medieval English Corpus Christi pageants and Passion plays, particularly the York Cycle: "At the climax of the narrative, the long and grueling trial sequence, Christ, the Logos, the Word stands alone before his accusers, virtually silent, beaten, and abused—a visual icon of suffering."⁴⁰ Indeed, this is precisely how Diehl portrays Franz, a Christ-figure whose very silence critiques the surrounding

political voices attempting to condemn both him and the God he trusts—it is a *full* silence, a weighty quietude which leaves an impression on the diegetic characters as well as the audience. In treating Franz as an opaque subjective individual and leaving his actions undefended and unexplained, *A Hidden Life* situates Franz as the Suffering Servant of this cinematic *Via Crucis*, allowing such eternal mysteries to remain mysteries while also provoking the audience’s imagination into active thought as to ponder Franz’s motives and behavior: do we view him as a stubborn fanatic who abandons his family for a zealous mission, or as a faithful paragon of religious and moral integrity in the face of immeasurable social opposition? Though Franz’s actions are not necessarily salvific, this is not to suggest that they have no earthly or ethical merit; indeed, the closing lines from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* serves as the film’s postscript and the source of its title:

...for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.⁴¹

This coda implies that Franz and Fani’s story *matters*, that it has (and will) make a difference not just in transcendent eternity, but within the immanence of lived history as a model of virtuous resistance to evil ideologies.

One brief scene symbolizes how such cinematically depicted “unhistoric acts” might contribute to “the growing good” of our world: following the trial where he is found guilty and sentenced to be executed for treason, the Nazi soldiers escorting Franz back to prison briefly visit a local German shop. As Franz is ushered back outside, the guard in front of him accidentally bumps an umbrella by the door, knocking it to the ground. Shackled and having just been condemned to death, Franz silently and deliberately kneels, picks up the umbrella, sets it upright, and walks out the door with his captors. The act is at once mundane and profound—history will

neither remember nor celebrate a restored parasol, but for the God who sees such charity done in secret, there is nothing hidden that will not be made known (cf. Matt 6:4–6; Luke 12:2). This scene suggests that our unseen acts of virtue are not ignored but remembered by the divine pneumatological witness that the hovering film camera represents (more on this below). *MUBI* film critic Josh Cabrita affirms this, arguing that the Eliot quotation declares “without a hint of ambiguity...that Franz’s unacknowledged sacrifice, and the unacknowledged sacrifices of all those like him, is not only significant in light of eternity but also in the world immanent to the act.”⁴² That is, the life and death of such faithful witnesses—both cinematic and historical—is in some way a *meaningful* contribution to the “growing good” of the world, both in the immediate historical context of the past and, through the transportive power of the cinematic medium, in the present sociopolitical context of twenty-first century Western culture. Indeed, Franz and Fani’s counter-cultural postures prophetically speak to our present-day theological, political, and moral imaginations as a type of cinematic political theology, calling for strong resistance to prevailing nationalistic ideologies by drawing strength from the religious “utopia” of the Christian kingdom of heaven. As *Vox* film critic Alissa Wilkinson observes in her review, “*A Hidden Life* feels as if it could have been written last year, a movie created in direct critique of our age, in which radical right-wing nationalist sentiment and white supremacy too often cloaks itself in the disguise of Christianity.”⁴³ In the words of the Gospel writer, let the reader understand.

One of the film’s most provocative and theologically-charged scenes is an encounter between Franz and an artist who is painting religious images on the walls of the local parish church where Franz serves as sacristan. Credited as “Ohlendorf, the Painter” (Johan Leysen), the man shares a remarkable meditation with Franz (and us, the audience) on the relationship between art, theology, and ethics:

I help people look up from those pews and dream. They look up, and they imagine that if they lived back in Christ's time, they wouldn't have done what the others did. They would have murdered those whom they now adore. I paint all this suffering but I don't suffer myself. I make a living of it. What we do, is just create sympathy. We create...we create admirers. We don't create followers. Christ's life is a demand. You don't want to be reminded of it. So we don't have to see what happens to the truth. A darker time is coming...when men will be more clever. They won't fight the truth, they'll just ignore it. I paint their comfortable Christ, with a halo over his head. How can I show what I haven't lived? Someday I might have the courage to venture, not yet. Someday I'll...I'll paint the true Christ.

The Painter's musings are a near word-for-word transposition of certain sections in Søren Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*, where Kierkegaard discusses the difference between an "admirer" and an "imitator" of Christ, and how these postures correspond to "loftiness" and "lowliness," respectively—for Kierkegaard, "only the imitator is the true Christian."⁴⁴ Kierkegaard specifically mentions how the admirer of Christ assumes a "pagan" relation to Christianity due to Christendom's influence, and how this admiration gave birth to a "new paganism—Christian art."⁴⁵ Kierkegaard finds it incomprehensible as to how the artist assumes that they can capture the true Suffering Servant that is Christ: "The artist was admired, and what was actual suffering, the actual suffering of the Holy One, the artist has somehow turned into money and admiration, just as when an actor plays a beggar and almost directs toward himself the compassion that rightfully is due to the actual poverty."⁴⁶ Kierkegaard is clear: he is not meaning to "assail the artist or any particular work of art," but rather to submit a "riddle" he is pondering—is it possible for artistic and cultural works to truly create imitators of Christ, and not mere admirers? To put it into Ricoeurian terms, can certain artworks genuinely shape our social imaginaries for the utopian good of the kingdom of God practiced by the "lowly" suffering Christ, or is Western Christian art limited to simply perpetuating the ideologies of Christendom?

I view Malick's inclusion of this scene with the Painter, which plays no overt significance in the plot and has no apparent historical basis, as a self-reflexive meditation on the theological

and political affordance of artworks in a vein similar to Kierkegaard. Because the paintings are part of the church's architecture, they bear an immersive and liturgical quality: these are not merely static illustrations but heuristic environments which engender participatory ways of knowing. How might such enveloping, involving works of art (i.e., cinema) interrogate the so-called aesthetic-ethical dichotomy perpetuated since Kant, re-forming or transforming the audience's religious and moral perspective and praxis by means of beauty? The painter's words act as a direct challenge to the Western church's historical complicity in social injustice (such as the Holocaust) due to complacency and political ideology. Malick-as-artist appears to be questioning whether he has created mere "admirers" of his theo-philosophical cinema who yet remain unchanged, or if such stimulating cinematic artworks like *A Hidden Life* can create genuine "followers" or "imitators" of the true Christ by reorienting our theological imaginations and ethics. Can cinematic parables create true *communities* of political resistance, or mere *audiences* who may observe (but not absorb) the parable's deeper meaning? Through this scene, we are theocinematically confronted with the cost of discipleship in a manner reminiscent of fellow World War II martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death."⁴⁷ Are we ourselves worshiping the true Christ who suffered unto death, or merely a modernized "comfortable Christ" we have created for ourselves? Even as *A Hidden Life* does not offer a definitive answer to these questions (the "riddle" of Kierkegaard), it does seem to be more hopeful than despairing—it *is* possible for such cinematic parables to reorient audiences' social imaginations towards the good. As we watch the painter alongside Franz, we hear church bells faintly tolling in the background—a diegetic impossibility, as Franz is the bell-ringer and sacristan, and the bell sound seems to originate from a distance—as the hovering camera slowly focuses on a dancing shimmer of sunlight on the church floor. This same natural light is later seen flickering on Franz's shoulder, as if it were a living

tongue of fire resting on the religious martyr in a symbol of vocational blessing. We should now turn our attention to this light-seeking “spiritualized” cinematography.

2. Cinematography, *Mise-en-scène*, and Montage

Over his past several films, Malick’s cinematographic and editing techniques have increasingly and intentionally deconstructed conventional North American modes of filmmaking, emerging in a distinctive “Malickian” visual style: a wandering “spiritualized” camera, at once humanized and ethereal by the use of Steadicam camerawork which captures aesthetically beautiful glimpses of everyday moments and objects. The editing style/montage includes frequent cutaway shots to images of nature; an upward shot of sunlight shining through trees is a common Malickian motif, and many shots of characters are low-angle shots pointed upward, connoting a sense of wonder and reverence. Using natural sunlight and often shooting at the “golden hour” of the day just before sunset, the film’s images of agricultural life and the natural landscape are frequently awe-inspiring. In an interview, *A Hidden Life*’s production designer, Sebastian Krawinkel, describes Malick’s improvisatory process for capturing these extraordinary-within-the-ordinary moments:

Terry would wander off sets with the actors and the director of photography, Jörg Widmer, in order to capture his unspoiled moments. He always called it “picking the low-hanging fruit.” He always wants to capture the beauty that is created in an unforeseen moment by chance or by natural light, the actor that is caught in an unexpected moment, when he feels unwatched, an animal that is doing something unexpected, or simply the beauty of anything that appears by accident in front of him and the camera.⁴⁸

In another interview, actress Valerie Pachner describes Malick’s direction regarding lighting: “There was no artificial lighting, so especially when we were shooting inside, he would always say, ‘Search the light.’”⁴⁹ *A Hidden Life*’s naturally front-lit interior images, often with dark foregrounds, prompt comparisons to Vermeer and Rembrandt paintings—there is a light shining in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it as the cinematography allows the organic

beauty of the pastoral *mise-en-scène* to shine through. Cinematographer Jörg Widmer, who has served as a Steadicam camera operator on all of Malick's films since *The New World*, utilizes both the panoramic horizontal axis (suggesting immanence) and the upward-turned vertical axis (suggesting transcendence) in the camera's movements and framing to generate a sense of the material world imbued with the divine. Beyond the numerous painterly shots of the majestic mountain landscape surrounding St. Radegund, this transcendent–immanent visual dynamic is demonstrated during scenes of Franz's imprisonment: there are long sequence shots of the invisible floating camera slowly moving down the prison corridors past seemingly endless rows of prison cells, drawn towards windows and doorways flooded with natural light. The protracted uncut Steadicam images combined with Franz's prayerful voiceover narration (more on this below) generate a mood of reverence, transforming the prison environment into a place of worship—Franz's prison cell *mise-en-scène* carries the qualities of a monastery cell. Shots of radiant sunlight beaming through prison windows and overhead “God's eye view” shots of Franz in his cell suggest an active-yet-invisible divine presence: the camera's intentional visual framing gives the impression that this is a “God haunted” world.

In alignment with Malick's previous films, *A Hidden Life* has a pneumatological cinematography: the “spiritualized” camera appears to be hovering within the diegetic world, a disembodied presence wandering or searching, invisibly bearing witness to the events in a kindly curiosity. Malick encouraged actors to be always moving, with Widmer's camera following closely nearby, reacting to whatever the actors chose to do. The use of 12 mm and 16 mm short lenses on the RED Epic Dragon digital cameras allowed Widmer to capture spacious high-resolution images of the actors and landscapes without having to make significant lighting or focal adjustments. The results are beautifully detailed compositions which appear both intimate and

expansive in an ultra-wide 2.35:1 aspect ratio; quite literally, we are able to see *more* of the material world than we would with the naked eye, and in full clarity through deep focus. The wide-angle lens tends to give the image a slightly distorted concave effect, where the edges of the frame are curved and elongated, creating an immersive dream-like mood for the film's entirety. The center-focused symmetrical curvature of the composition recalls how celestial images in frescos painted on a rounded church ceiling appear stretched, and we see many such ecclesial interiors throughout *A Hidden Life* juxtaposed with images of nature.⁵⁰ In this way, the diegetic world of *A Hidden Life* is the material "real" world, but viewed with a subtly spiritualized expressionistic style: the whole world is depicted as a cathedral, a place of worship where the divine is available. Using digital cameras rather than film stock (this is Malick's first all-digital movie) allowed for extremely long takes, sometimes 20-40 minutes of captured footage. This provided actors and crew an immense amount of freedom to explore the natural environment, improvising and experimenting with unscripted dialogue, gestures, and camera angles while waiting for what Widmer describes as magical "moments," those spontaneous everyday epiphanic instances which generate a sense of excess or transcendence.⁵¹ This visual style strongly correlates with Bazinian realism, especially Bazin's praise of the long takes and deep-focus photography of Jean Renoir as an "invisible witness" which both hides and reveals reality.⁵² Since everything in the frame can be seen with radiant clarity, the audience is invited, rather than directed, to make their own meaningful sense of the scenes, generating an awareness of both personal interpretive freedom and ethical responsibility. In this open and exploratory filmmaking mode lies a cinematic equivalent to the theological paradox of God's sovereignty and human free will as Malick's camera acts as a spiritual viewfinder which guides but does not coerce us to truly *pay attention* to the pro-filmic world in a manner again echoing Simone Weil; that is, of active receptivity to God in a posture of

patient self-emptying prayer. Or, to allude to Dorsky's aforementioned devotional cinema, *A Hidden Life* is a truly *spiritual* film in every sense—its spiritualized camera opens up the audience's spiritual awareness of a “revelation or aliveness” imbuing the created world.

Malick's characteristic approach to editing his films complements his pneumatological cinematography. The footage was shot in the summer of 2016, but the film was only finally released in 2019 at Cannes; the nearly three years of post-production allowed for Malick's extensive editing process. Working with three editors (Rehman Nizar Ali, Joe Gleason, and Sebastian Jones), this involved compiling the massive amounts of digital footage into a coherent and poetical whole. Malick shifts and alters sequences, moving them around and weaving them together with music and voiceover (see below) into a cinematic tapestry that is more interested in expressing moods than conventional narrative arcs. Scenes of the striking natural scenery, particularly the colossal mountain peaks surrounding Fani and Franz's home and church in St. Radegund (cf. Ps. 121:1), are juxtaposed with the more intimate close-ups of pastoral and familial life. Interspersed within these spiritually-charged images of beauty are disturbing archival reels from Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, as well as archival footage of Hitler on holiday or playing with children. This footage is contrasted with images of Franz playing or dancing with his daughters, provoking us to make an interpretive comparison. We also see a scene of Franz at basic training watching film reels of Nazi military victories amongst fellow conscripted soldiers; where others applaud the images, Franz sits in silence, his expression suggesting internal turmoil. Such scenes are, like the aforementioned painter conversation, self-reflexive engagements with the possibilities of the cinematic medium itself: Malick is contrasting cinema's history of promoting evil ideologies (in the Ricoeurian sense) with its capacity to foster virtue (or Ricoeurian utopias) through the re-creation of the hidden lives of

unheralded religious martyrs. In this way, *A Hidden Life* functions as a cinematic theological ethics: the film suggests that both *what* is shown and *how* it is shown may cultivate either virtue or vice in the viewer. That is, *A Hidden Life* as a film itself, in its use of Nazi propaganda films to contrast with its images of Fani and Franz, suggests that the cinematic medium has the power to shape our social imaginaries towards immoral ideologies or towards utopias of righteousness.

There is also what might be called an “apophatic” rhythm to the editing in *A Hidden Life*.⁵³ Where other directors might reveal, Malick often denies the audience the image by choosing to cut away from or hide certain moments, particularly images of violence. For instance, in the prisons, we see Franz experiencing torture and beatings at the hands of Nazi guards; Malick even employs a rare POV shot from Franz’s perspective as guards beat and drag him through the Tegel prison corridor. Yet during these scenes, we rarely actually witness the physical blows; the film cuts away right at the moments of impact, which produces a jarring psychological effect for the audience, provoking our imaginations into active thought to fill in the spatiotemporal gaps. Similarly, we do not witness the actual execution of Franz. Instead, we see an affecting scene of Franz comforting a distraught fellow prisoner, then a sequence of shots of Franz entering through a black curtain into a factory-like interior filled with bizarre individuals followed by another POV shot of the empty guillotine—we are not made privy to Franz’s death, a limit experience Malick again leaves only to our imaginations. This apophatic approach echoes Robert Bresson’s view expressed in his published diary, *Notes on the Cinematograph*: “Hide the ideas, but so that people find them. The most important will be the most hidden.”⁵⁴ In this way, the eponymous “hidden life” is not only the historical Franz Jägerstätter, but also the invisible *deus absconditus* just beyond the frame, suggested but never directly shown. Malick’s elliptical (but not obscurant) editing and vivid imagery thus generate a cinematic experience which evokes a sense of yearning or seeking within

the audience—the film may not be transformative for *every* spectator but only for those with eyes to see and ears to hear (cf. Luke 8:10).

3. Voiceover, Sound, and Music

Lyrical voiceover is another signature Malickian trait. With *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, this narration was more conventional, originating from a single character which offered subjective commentary on plot developments, at times including enigmatic poetic self-reflection. Malick's voiceover technique shifted greatly towards this latter dimension with *The Thin Red Line*: we hear a polyphony of ambiguous voices which are often unfixed in time and unaffiliated with the on-screen characters and events. This voiceover is not so much descriptive observations about the plot machinations as it is the revelation of a contemplative and complex interiority engaging with existential and theological yearnings; it is as if the film has recorded the ineffable existential longings of the human subconscious or spirit. With Malick's later films, such polyphonic and poetic voiceover nearly replaces dialogue entirely, with characters often silently wandering through scenes while the narration provides subjective access to their complex interior perspectives. This voiceover approach can be characterized as an "*acousmètre*," a concept originating with film sound theorist Michel Chion. A trope unique to cinema, the *acousmètre*—a French neologism combining *acousmatic* and *être*—involves an enigmatic oscillating relation between the images and sound; it is a voice neither wholly inside nor outside the image, but is somehow unmoored from a subjective body while nevertheless maintaining a link to a subjective character—it is an invisible all-powerful subject.⁵⁵ Where a pure *acousmètre* is a voice coming from "everywhere" which never visually appears in the diegetic world yet seemingly "inhabits the image" and has an omniscience and omnipotence akin to a deity (Chion states elsewhere that "the greatest *acousmètre* is God"⁵⁶), Chion specifically describes Malick's voiceover aesthetic as

paradoxical acousmêtre, in that the heard “internal voices” are linked to distinct diegetic characters—we only hear Fani and Franz’s voices in *A Hidden Life*—yet “are not understood to be in the present of the images we see but rather float lyrically in time.”⁵⁷ In a uniquely cinematic depiction of the mind-body problem, these voices are linked to (but not confined by) bodies and chronology; their prayerfully verbalized articulations give a sense of journeying towards and emerging from a more eternal subjectivity.⁵⁸ We thus hear (but do not directly see) Fani and Franz voice their prayerful questions and painful laments, as well as narrate the letters shared between them during Franz’s imprisonment, much of it directly quoted from the real-life Jägerstätters’ epistolary correspondence—such voiceover is the narration of their souls. One of the most significant examples of this voiceover is a poignant scene featuring Franz and Fani praying in tandem. Immediately following the aforementioned umbrella scene, we hear their prayers oscillating back and forth between the two voices in transcendental extra-diegetic dialogue, spoken in untranslated German as we view a montage of images showing a weary-looking imprisoned Franz juxtaposed with shots of his home in St. Radegund. Included is a close-up shot of a furry black caterpillar crawling across a handwritten letter from Franz to Fani and his daughters, signifying impending transition and transformation. Though physically separated by spatial distance, and soon to be existentially separated by the boundary of death, this distinctly cinematic use of dialogical voiceover transcends such limits and spiritually reunites the lovers in a shared acousmêtric colloquy of prayer: they may be temporarily separated, but in their prayers to Christ they remain knit together.

We also periodically hear the sound of church bells tolling throughout the film, such as in the various montage sequences noted above, as well as during Franz’s lone conversation with the bishop: “You hear those bells? They’re melting them for bullets.” The bell sound is both diegetic

and extra-diegetic at different points in the film, exhibiting a quasi-*acousmétric* quality. Though any singular symbolic meaning of the bell sound remains hidden (a call to worship or prayer? a symbol for death? a symbol for victory? a blessing? a warning? all of the above?), it serves as both formal punctuation indicating a new chapter in the narrative, as well as an evocative reminder of an invisible (divine) presence in proximity to the characters as perhaps a cinematic *vox dei*. That is, the sound of church bells connotes God's ongoing faithful presence to both the diegetic characters and the audience experiencing the film.⁵⁹

Additionally, James Newton Howard's musical score for *A Hidden Life* suffuses the film with a sense of the sacred. In a commentary, Howard describes Malick's vision of St. Radegund: "Terry wanted Radegund to feel like Shangri-La...a garden of Eden, where no one could touch them. Then the snake invades." The main musical leitmotif running throughout the film features a harmonic oscillation between piano and violin, where the piano provides an underlying murmur, like the trickle of an ever-flowing river, as the violin's overlaying minor key connotes a melancholic sense of hopeful yearning. Elsewhere, Howard describes this musical theme as Malick's desire to create "a sound for light. A sound, or a tune, or a feeling, or a motif for hope."⁶⁰ *A sound for light*—in these interviews, one gets a sense of Malick's collaborators struggling to express the inexpressible as they resort to such metaphors. Howard continues: "It was important for this [musical] theme to have a sense of longing, as through much of the film, Franz and Fani are apart. Terry often spoke of how love is often accompanied by suffering."⁶¹

This dialectic between love and suffering is also expressed through the use of the "Silentium" movement from Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* piece, *Tabula Rasa*, during three critical sequences: (1) The music plays over (and thus links) a montage of jump cuts: in a woodcutter shed, Fani tells Franz, "When have our prayers not been answered? If we are faithful to Him, He'll be

faithful to us. I believe it. We love Him. That's enough"; a waterfall; water trickling down a stream; a water wheel turns at a mill; Franz makes bread with the miller (Johannes Krisch), who shares a tearful diatribe about how "the whole world's sick"; a villager, Eckinger (Wolfgang Michael), speaks with Franz in a barn; in the church, Eckinger says to Franz, "They ask you to take an oath to the Antichrist. It's a life without honor. Is this here, the end of the world? Is this the death of the light?"; Franz in a beautiful field blanketed with fog at dawn, a look of impenetrable awe on his face; a close-up of the miller screaming (silent in the sound mix) and Franz looking distressed; a sharp cut to black. Throughout the sequence, "Silentium" slowly crescendos to a near-overwhelming volume while the diegetic sounds drop out before the music suddenly cuts to silence and we hear bells toll. Immediately following is the scene of Franz receiving the letter calling him up to serve, signaling the end of the film's first hour and the beginning of Franz's *Via Dolorosa*.

(2) "Silentium" crescendos again during a montage sequence of Franz being transferred to Tegel prison by train: we see a rush of images of train travel as Franz's voiceover tells Fani not to worry, then the music suddenly drops out when the Tegel prison cell door locks behind him. (3) When Franz is brought before the Reich military tribunal to be condemned, we briefly hear "Silentium" rise in volume as the prosecutor's voice reading the charges fades out to silence in the sound design, a medium close-up of Franz's face situated in the center of the pneumatological frame. Pärt's "holy minimalist" music has been recognized for its spiritual and theological resonance,⁶² as well as being a "vehicle of solace" for those approaching death in palliative care by creating a peaceful-yet-elegiac sonic environment.⁶³ The inclusion of "Silentium" at these pivotal transition moments in *A Hidden Life* parallels the "bright sadness" of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, where a person must lose their life in order to save it in the paradoxical tension between suffering and hope, further emphasizing the film's Passion structure.⁶⁴

Conclusion: Toward Theocinematics

As demonstrated above, *A Hidden Life* as a cinematic parable acts as a catalyst for stimulating an audience's theological and moral imagination. In this way, the film itself acts as a teacher or guide, yet is never didactic. Indeed, in his review praising *A Hidden Life*, film critic Matt Zoller Seitz makes this observation: “‘A Hidden Life’ isn’t interested in push-button morality. Instead, *in the manner of a theologian or philosophy professor*, it uses its story as a springboard for questions meant to spark introspection in viewers.”⁶⁵ That Seitz (who is non-religious) personifies the film and equates it to “a theologian or philosophy professor” is worthy of our attention, as Seitz’s observation resonates with my proposed theocinematics approach: he sees how *the film itself* is functioning as both a *theologian* and as *theology*, leading us out into new realms of knowledge not through moralistic propositions but through affective story-telling and the audiovisual experience. That is, *A Hidden Life* does not so much present a given theological viewpoint, but rather opens up and invites us experientially into the political and theological work dynamically occurring within itself.

Throughout this article, I have been practicing a form of theological film criticism I call “theocinematics.” This approach recognizes that ours is a cinematic era, a world of screens filled with moving images which may potentially inform and invigorate our theology. Rather than a conceptual, propositional, and systematic approach to the question of God, theocinematics is an experiential, affective, and imagistic mode of engaging with the divine. To be clear, theocinematics is not limited to overtly religious or “arthouse” films such as Malick’s *A Hidden Life*, nor should we expect every film or filmmaker to theologize—all films may be possible sites of divine encounter, but not all films are beneficial (cf. 1 Cor. 10:23). Nor am I arguing that this is the sole methodology for theological consideration of a particular film or a filmmaker’s oeuvre. Yet I do

want to make the suggestion that we Christian theologians must take such spiritually-enlivening films even more seriously in our theological endeavors by humbly learning the language and grammar of cinematic style, paying attention to the particularity of film *on its own terms* in order to receive the theological wisdom it may bestow. For *A Hidden Life* as cinematic parable contains multitudes: it is simultaneously political theology, theological aesthetics, theological ethics, hagiography, mythopoetic meditation on love, interrogation of the problem of evil, and prophetic parable for our contemporary sociopolitical crises. What affords this paradoxical simultaneity is that *A Hidden Life* is *cinema*—it stands free from conventional theologies as it stirs up a (hidden) spiritual life.

Notes

¹ Roger Ebert, “A prayer beneath the Tree of Life,” *RogerEbert.com*, May 17, 2011, <https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/a-prayer-beneath-the-tree-of-life> (Accessed June 5, 2023).

² André Bazin, “Cinéma et théologie,” *Esprit* 19, no. 176 (February 1951): 237.

³ In May 2019, I had the unique opportunity to attend the Festival de Cannes in France as a professional film critic and see the debut of *A Hidden Life*. See Joel Mayward, “72nd Festival de Cannes: Finding Faith in Film,” *Journal for Religion, Media and Film* 5, no. 2 (November 2019): 204–213.

⁴ See Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016) and Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: An Introduction to Cinema as a Way of Thinking*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

⁵ Jolyon Mitchell, “Theology and Film,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd ed., eds. David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 753.

⁶ See, for instance, the “film as dialogue-partner” section in Clive Marsh’s chapter, “Theology and Film” in William L. Blizek, ed., *The Bloomsbury Companion to Religion and Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 64–67; as well as how Christopher Deacy and Gaye Ortiz employ a “two-way dialogical process” in *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), x. See also the subtitles for Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); Anthony J. Clarke and Paul S. Fiddes, eds., *Flickering Images: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2005); Antonio Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Ulrike Vollmer, *Seeing Film and Reading Feminist Theology: A Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Robert K. Johnston, Craig Detweiler, and Kutter Callaway, *Deep Focus: Film and Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

⁷ I borrow the phrase “theological imperialism” from David Brown and Gavin Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 189–190.

⁸ Stefanie Knauss, *Religion and Film: Representation, Meaning, Experience* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 82–85.

⁹ See, for instance, Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), Cecilia González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), Natalie Carnes, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), Chris E.W. Green, *All Things Beautiful: An Aesthetic Christology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2021), and Thomas Gardner, *Lyric Theology: Art and the Doctrine of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2022).

¹⁰ On cinema's revelatory spiritual dimensions, see Jonathan Brant, *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Kutter Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), Zachary Settle and Taylor Worley, eds., *Dreams, Doubt, and Dread: The Spiritual in Film* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), and Richard Vance Goodwin, *Seeing Is Believing: The Revelation of God Through Film* (Westmont: IVP Academic, 2022).

¹¹ Two relatively recent theology-and-film publications which do engage well with film theory are M. Gail Hamner, *Imaging Religion in Film: The Politics of Nostalgia* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) and Crystal Downing, *Salvation from Cinema: The Medium is the Message* (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹² Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) and Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018 [1972]).

¹³ Nathaniel Dorsky, "Devotional Cinema," in Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, eds., *The Religion and Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007), 407. See also Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: Tumba Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Dorsky, "Devotional Cinema," 408–409.

¹⁵ David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 30. See also *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Brown and Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music*, 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ David Brown, *Divine Generosity and Human Creativity: Theology through Symbol, Painting and Architecture*, ed. Christopher R. Brewer and Robert MacSwain (London: Routledge, 2017), 13.

¹⁹ Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, 6, 33.

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

²¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 171–172.

²² Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 16.

²³ *Ibid.*, 310–311.

²⁴ See Joel Mayward, "The Fantastic of the Everyday: Re-Forming Definitions of Cinematic Parables with Paul Ricoeur," *Horizons* 47, no. 2 (2020): 283–314. On the application of Ricoeurian parables to a different set of filmmakers, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, see Joel Mayward, *The Dardenne Brothers' Cinematic Parables: Integrating Theology, Philosophy, and Film* (London: Routledge, 2022).

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 29–148.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Listening to the Parables of Jesus,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 239.

²⁷ See Thomas Deane Tucker and Stuart Kendall, eds., *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); James Batcho, *Terrence Malick’s Unseeing Cinema: Memory, Time and Audibility* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Robert Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); and Steven DeLay, ed. *Life Above the Clouds: Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023).

²⁸ See Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston, eds., *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick* (London: Routledge, 2016) and Peter J. Leithart, *Shining Glory: Theological Reflections on Terrence Malick’s The Tree of Life* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013).

²⁹ See Andrew Sarris, “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6th ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 561–564.

³⁰ Most notably Pauline Kael in “Circles and Squares,” *Film Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1963): 12–26.

³¹ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (London: Harvard University Press, 1979), xiii–xiv. Cavell was a mentor of Malick while the latter was studying philosophy at Harvard, and Cavell praises Malick’s *Days of Heaven* (1978) in the foreword to the enlarged edition of *The World Viewed*; see xiv–xvi.

³² Ricoeur’s hermeneutical circle can be found throughout his work, most notably in *Time and Narrative* Volumes 1 and 3, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984/1988). See also Kevin Vanhoozer’s theological application of Ricoeurian hermeneutics to popular cultural “texts” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Slesman, eds. *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 48–54.

³³ Gordon Zahn, *In Solitary Witness: The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

³⁴ Thomas Merton, “An Enemy of the State,” in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 69–75.

³⁵ Erna Putz, ed. *Franz Jägerstätter: Letters and Writings from Prison* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009).

³⁶ Alan Jacobs makes a similar observation; see “Patience: Terrence Malick’s *A Hidden Life*,” *The Point*, March 5, 2020, <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/patience-a-hidden-life/> (Accessed February 5, 2023).

³⁷ Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick*, 70.

³⁸ On slow cinema, see Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 10–33; Ira Jaffe, *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action* (London: Wallflower Press, 2014); and Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorges, eds. *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

³⁹ The Criterion Collection’s Malick-approved 188-minute extended version of *The Tree of Life* is longer than *A Hidden Life*. Malick views this longer cut not as final or definitive, but simply as “another version” of the film. As of this writing, Malick’s film on the life of Christ, *The Way of Water*, has not been released.

⁴⁰ Alexandra F. Johnston, “‘His language is lorne’: The Silent Centre of the York Cycle,” *Early Theatre* 3, no. 1 (2000): 185. There is also a scene of the villagers of St. Radegund celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi yet disallowing Franz and Fani’s three girls to participate in the procession.

⁴¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition) (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 785.

⁴² Josh Cabrita, "For the Growing Good of the World: Terrence Malick's 'A Hidden Life,'" *MUBI*, January 17, 2020, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/for-the-growing-good-of-the-world-terrence-malick-s-a-hidden-life> (Accessed June 20, 2023).

⁴³ Alissa Wilkinson, "Terrence Malick's *A Hidden Life* is not a typical World War II drama," *Vox*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/5/20/18631526/a-hidden-life-review-terrence-malick> (Accessed June 25, 2020).

⁴⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity No. III*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Jong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 237–257, esp. 251–255. My sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out this connection to Kierkegaard.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Volume 4)*, ed. Geoffrey B Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 87. Interestingly, for a brief period in 1943, both Bonhoeffer and Jägerstätter were in Tegel prison in Berlin at the same time: Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5 and Jägerstätter arrived at Tegel from Linz on May 4. One wonders as to whether the two men had any interaction.

⁴⁸ Sam Ankenbauer, "Talking with Production Designer Sebastian Krawinkel about Terrence Malick's *A Hidden Life*," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, June 1, 2020, <https://brightlightsfilm.com/talking-with-production-designer-sebastian-krawinkel-on-terrence-malicks-a-hidden-life/> (Accessed June 19, 2020).

⁴⁹ Chris O'Falt, "Working with Malick: Inside the Dance Between Camera, Actor, and Light in 'A Hidden Life,'" *Indiewire*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/01/a-hidden-life-terrence-malick-process-cinematographer-jorg-widmer-valerie-pachner-august-diehl-interview-1202200111/> (Accessed June 25, 2020).

⁵⁰ Film critic Bilge Ebiri makes this observation: see "With *A Hidden Life*, Terrence Malick Takes on the Evils of History," *Vulture*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/12/a-hidden-life-review-terrence-malicks-new-movie.html> (Accessed June 30, 2020).

⁵¹ O'Falt, "Working with Malick."

⁵² See André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, ed. François Truffaut (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 87.

⁵³ Here I am drawing on the etymology of "apophatic": *apophēmi*, meaning "to deny."

⁵⁴ Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematograph*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: New York Review Books, 2016 [1975]), 25.

⁵⁵ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 125–126.

⁵⁶ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 27.

⁵⁷ Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 127–128.

⁵⁸ See Steven Rybin, "Voicing Meaning: On Terrence Malick's Characters," in Tucker and Kendall, *Terrence Malick*, 13–39.

⁵⁹ I'm reminded of the miraculous tolling of church bells in the final scene of Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, as well as the iconic eighth sequence of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*, which features the casting of a church bell.

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- ⁶⁰ Bilge Ebiri, “A Long Talk with James Newton Howard, One of Hollywood’s Most Accomplished Composers,” *Vulture*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/01/a-long-talk-with-hollywood-composer-james-howard-newton.html> (Accessed June 30, 2020).
- ⁶¹ James Newton Howard, “Scoring the Soundtrack to ‘A Hidden Life’ | Composer Commentary,” SonySoundtracksVEVO, May 5, 2020, https://youtu.be/ACQhggL-n_I (Accessed June 30, 2020).
- ⁶² See Peter C. Bouteneff, *Arvo Pärt: Out of Silence* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016).
- ⁶³ Alex Ross, “Consolations: Arvo Pärt,” *The New Yorker*, December 2, 2002, https://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/arvo prt_1.html (Accessed June 29, 2020).
- ⁶⁴ We hear additional sacred music throughout the film such as Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*, Handel’s *Israel in Egypt*, Wojciech Kilar’s *Agnus Dei*, and Henryk Górecki’s *Kleines Requiem für eine Polka*.
- ⁶⁵ Matt Zoller Seitz, “A Hidden Life,” *RogerEbert.com*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/a-hidden-life-movie-review-2019> (Accessed June 20, 2023). Emphasis mine.

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