

## Talking to God, under Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life*<sup>1</sup>

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"Film is language that bypasses the mind and speaks directly to the heart".

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**Palavras-chave:** *A Árvore da Vida*, Deus, fé, símbolo, cinema experimental

**Keywords:** *The Tree of Life*, God, faith, symbol, experimental cinema

### 1. The meaning of life explained in one hundred and thirty nine minutes

Any movie that is simultaneously booed and applauded by an audience composed of fans and demanding critics interests me. Such was the case of *The Tree of Life*, written and directed by Terrence Malick, when it premiered at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival (Smith 15). A contradictory reaction usually means that the movie, regardless its quality, presents something new and possibly disturbing.

In an industry flooded by commercial productions, *The Tree of Life* comes as a surprise, innovating both in technical and narrative terms: for instances, unusual camera angles, showing the world from the point of view of children; special effects recreating the formation of the universe, planet Earth and life; the non-linear narrative, which constantly alternates between reminiscences of the main character's adolescence and his present life as a disenchanted adult; or the gathering of the living and the dead, wandering on a beach, on the shores of time.

This freshness is not gratuitous nor does it sacrifice the plot; instead, it reveals its philosophy and symbolism, and was carefully crafted along several decades. After a period of procrastination, the shooting of *The Tree of Life* began in 2008. When, in an interview granted to *Empire Magazine*, in 2009, the specialist in visual effects Mike Fink let slip that Malick was working on an ambitious project (O'Hara), nobody could predict the magnitude of his undertaking. Indeed, *The Tree of Life* constitutes one of the most experimental movies in the recent history of North American cinema: it encompasses 13.7 billion years of evolution; deals with the intriguing abstract entity *par excellence*, God; and approaches an inescapable

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existential question, both to religious individuals and atheists: what is the meaning of life?

Dealing with such a temporal vastness and complex questions within a time span of one hundred and thirty nine minutes implies enormous challenges, and Malick searched for different technical and narrative solutions. The director resorted to natural symbols in order to represent both the deity and life itself. In their essence, human beings are symbolic animals, as German philosopher Ernst Cassirer argues, in his *Essay on Man: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Culture* (32):

Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with things themselves, man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium. (30)

In fact, it is through symbols that humans relate to reality, concrete or abstract, from sexy underwear to God. Since symbols function as mediators, they approach and connect, in our minds, sacred and telluric elements, mysterious and natural realms.

In *The Tree of Life*, the sun emerges as a representation of God; rivers, lakes and oceans correspond to eternity; and the oak that gives name to the movie constitutes a synecdoche and metaphor for life. In this paper, I meditate upon the central symbol of the movie, the tree of life, analyzing its cinematic and symbolic representation, resorting to several areas, in particular to mythology, psychoanalysis and religion.

## **2. The roots of a symbolic tree**

The North American landscape constitutes a constant presence in Malick's cinematography, serving not only as setting, but mainly as a euphoric element, in stark contrast to human perfidy. In movies such as *Badlands* (1973), the planes of South Dakota and the region of Montana hide the forbidden passion of a serial killer, Kit, and his fifteen-year old girlfriend, Holly, on a crime spree; in *Days of Heaven*, the wheat fields of Texas become the setting for Bill and Abby's love and their illegal schemes; in *The New World* (2005), the landscape evokes a prelapsarian place, explored by Captain John Smith and his lover, Pocahontas.

In the work of Malick, nature constitutes the eternal essence that eludes those who try to grasp it and, occasionally, it provides them with an opportunity for redemption. Debating the significance of landscape in Malick's movies, James Morrison argues:

For many artists, a turn to elemental imagery marks a return to fundamental things, a stripping away of inessentials. For Malick, the essential is as much part of a complex as any other idea. Stripping away only reveals further notions for contemplation, and Malick's images, in one or other dimensions, are nodes of thought. (Morrison e Schur 111)

Contrarily to what occurs in the movies I mentioned, in *The Tree of Life* nature is represented both collectively, through forests, mountains, rivers, lakes and oceans, as individually, by an impressive tree, standing on the fertile soil of the O'Brien family's garden. It is an oak weighing 65,000 pounds, which, according to a local paper, was transplanted from a property in the outskirts of Smithville (Hagerty 1A and 2A).

In most of the scenes, this tree is shot from a low angle, which makes it appear even more powerful; and the sun rays, a divine symbol, shine through branches and leaves. This oak encapsulates two dimensions: on one side, it represents life, and on the other side, it is a natural altar or a sacred area, where the O'Briens, particularly the mother and Jack, communicate with God and pose their questions and meditations.

The oak constitutes a symbol of Genesis and of the enduring human, animal and vegetable life (Michaels 89). In mythic terms, the tree represents the cosmic integration, since its roots hide in the substrata (symbolically, the underworld), the trunk is visible in the world, and the branches open to the sky. According to anthropologist Brian Molineaux, numerous legends portray a tree as a sacred element: in Scandinavian mythology, Yggdrasil, a giant ash tree, unites the cosmos, draws water from the fountains and offers it to the Gods; in the southern regions of Africa, the Herero people believe a tree, Omum-borombonga, originated the first humans and the cattle they depend upon to survive; in the paintings that decorate Egyptian tombs, the tree of life, planting next to the fountain of youth, are common motifs; even in scientific speech, more precisely in *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin represents the human evolution as a tree (Molyneaux 90-91).

In Malick's movie, the meaning of trees in general and of the oak in particular should be understood in the context of Christianity. In the *Book of Revelation*, life is a tree possessing healing properties:

(...) the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

Thus, in Christianity, the tree of life represents human innocence before the fall and the love of God, two aspects Malick systematically explores in this movie through images, soundtrack and plot, as I will later demonstrate.

Furthermore, the oak and other trees constitute a recurring element, a motif, essential to connect and unify a radically fragmented narrative in terms of time (there are constant flashbacks); place (from the suburbs of Waco to Houston, from Houston to a utopic recreation of paradise); and points of view (Jack as an adolescent, Jack in adulthood, Mrs. O'Brien, etc.).

It is 1956, in the garden of a suburban house, three brothers, eleven-year old Jack, nine-year old RL and six-year old Steve, their parents and their dog, Shep, play. It is a bucolic scene permeated with domestic joy, almost Edenic. Mrs. O'Brien admires the sun rays through the branches of the oak and, directing herself to God, promises: "I will be true to you, whatever comes". The soundtrack, an excerpt of "Lacrimosa", by Polish movie score composer Zbigniew Preisner, and thirty other pieces from Brahms, Mahler or Bach, reinforces the tree as a symbol of life and of creation. Thus, the oak becomes a natural temple, where characters talk to God, presenting their doubts, problems and hurts, and strengthen their relationship with the Almighty.

As a trial of faith, in the next scene a Western Union mailman delivers a telegram informing her of the death of middle son RL, at nineteen. Mr. O'Brien is informed while he is at the airport, where he works as an engineer. Even though the noisy place starkly contrasts with his quiet home, the scenery is almost identical: the sun sets on the trees, symbolizing simultaneously the end of the day and the epilogue of life.

The scene changes to the present day and to an urban landscape, Houston, where Jack, the eldest son, now works as an architect. Once again, there is a tree, the central motif, being transplanted to the front area of a building, fiercely competing against the forest of skyscrapers erected by humans. The script reads:

The buildings hem him [Jack] round like the trees of a wild forest. A false nature, a universe of death. A sightless world, roofed over, shut off from things above. A world that would exclude the transcendent, that says: I am, and there is nothing else. A world without love. This is a new death, death of spirit, extinction of the soul. Man has shut himself in. (Malick, *Script* 9)

Jack became a wealthy and successful architect, admired by his peers. However, he is also a traumatized person, angry at a world that, according to him, has gone to the dogs. His cynicism constitutes the direct result both from his strenuous relation with his father and the suffering caused by RL's premature death, which the tree, a symbol of lost childhood, evokes.

However, Jack faces tragedy with bitter doubts that he confesses to God, in soliloquies, next to the old oak. These questions were first raised in childhood, when he saw the death of a little boy, drowned in the communal pool: “[God,] you let a boy die. You let anything happen. Why should I be good if you aren’t?” (Malick 10). Later, traumatized by the death of RL, he asks again, “How did I lose you, wandered, forgot you?” (Malick 10). Such meditations do not question or deny the existence of God, but His mysterious ways. For instances, Jack asks: “Who are you that took him? You smash what is most dear — send flies to wounds you might have healed. Who can hinder you?” (Malick 10).

Similarly, his mother walks among the trees and, in an introspective conversation with God, wonders, “Was I false to you” (Malick 3); “Who are we to you? Answer me. We cry to you. Hear us” or “Lord, why? Where were you?” (Malick 3). These words echo, intertextually, a step from the Book of Job, which appears at the beginning of the movie: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38: 4, 7).

Mrs. O’Brien wrestles with the exact same questions and issues that, for several centuries, disturbed Christians: how can there be Evil, if God is the supreme being? How can God allow the suffering of those who have faith? The entire movie consists in this spiritual journey, a search for enlightenment or solace, near God or the nature that represents His creation.

In one of the most visually striking scenes of *The Tree of Life*, Jack meets his dead brother, his parents and other individuals who played a significant role in his life, on an imaginary beach, representing paradise or eternity. Reinforcing the tree as a symbol of life and creation, Jack states: “You spoke to me through her. You spoke to me through the sky, the trees. Before I knew I loved you, believed in you” (Malick 5). The woman he is referring to is Mrs. O’Brien, his mother. To understand the meaning of this epiphany, it is important to recall the lesson that, at the beginning of movie, the nuns teach Mrs. O’Brien and that, now, Jack also learns:

There are two ways through life: the way of Nature, and the way of Grace. You have to choose which one you’ll follow. Grace doesn’t try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. And love is smiling through all things. (Malick 1)

In the end of the movie, both the reconciliation with his father, an authoritarian patriarch, after several years of conflict, and the acceptance of God’s mysterious ways allow Jack

to, finally, mourn.

### 3. The Joy of playing against the rules

Malick's art and technique reveal a director who is not afraid to take risks and to bet on an allegorical and experimental style, sometimes subverting rules. As Chris Wisniewski so perfectly summarizes:

Those rambling philosophical voiceovers; the placid images of nature, offering quiet contrast to the evil deeds of men; the stunning cinematography, often achieved with natural light; the striking use of music — here is a filmmaker with a clear sensibility and aesthetic who makes narrative films that are neither literary nor theatrical, in the sense of foregrounding dialogue, event, or character, but are instead principally cinematic, movies that suggest narrative, emotion and idea through image and sound. (Wisniewski)

*The Tree of Life* is a rather ambitious movie, and it is true that, sometimes, when abstract becomes emptiness, and apparently profound thoughts turn out to be mumbo-jumbo, Malick succumbs under the weight of grandiosity. However, even when he fails, he proves that cinema also aspires to be poetry.

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### **Abstract**

Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* (2011) constitutes an exception in a market flooded with commercial cinematic productions. Its experimental nature is best revealed by non-linear narrative, breathtaking images of the origins of the universe, and a creative approach to an old theme: what is the meaning of life? When middle-aged architect Jack O'Brien sees a tree being planted in front of a building, he meditates upon his childhood and adolescence, in Waco, Texas, during the fifties. Several aspects of his social and family life, such as the relationship with a strict father, representing "nature", and a gentle mother, symbolizing "grace"; his experiments with sexuality and violence; his father's struggle to overcome failure; his mother's anguish in face of the loss of a child. This journey from innocence to childhood prompts several questions regarding the meaning of life, the relevance of faith and forgiveness. In this paper, I reflect on the central symbol of the movie, the "tree of life", analyzing its cinematic representation; its symbolic, oneiric and religious meanings; and how it congregates the fragments of the narrative and its protagonists. For that purpose, I resort to mythology, anthropology and religion.

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### 1. O significado da vida explicado em cento e trinta e nove minutos

Qualquer filme que seja simultaneamente pateado e aplaudido por uma plateia de fãs bem informados e críticos exigentes me interessa. Foi esse o caso de *The Tree of Life*, escrito e dirigido por Terrence Malick, quando se estreou no Festival de Cinema de Cannes, em 2011 (Smith 15). Uma recepção tão contraditória costuma significar que a película, independentemente da sua qualidade, apresenta algo de novo e possivelmente perturbador.

Numa indústria inundada por produções cinemáticas comerciais, *The Tree of Life* constitui uma surpresa, inovando, tanto em termos técnicos como narrativos: ângulos de câmara invulgares mostram o mundo do ponto de vista de uma criança de classe média, que habita um bairro suburbano em Waco, Texas; os efeitos especiais recriando a formação do universo, do planeta Terra e da vida; a não linearidade da narrativa, que alterna constantemente entre memórias da adolescência do protagonista, Jake, e a sua vida atual como adulto desencantado e perdido; a convivência entre mortos e vivos, na mesma cena, vagueando numa praia, nas margens do tempo.

Esta frescura não é gratuita, nem sacrifica o enredo; antes revela o seu potencial, filosofia e simbolismo, e foi cuidadosamente engendrada ao longo de décadas. Após um período de procrastinação, as filmagens de *The Tree of Life* principiaram, em 2008. Quando, numa entrevista concedida ao *Empire Magazine*, em 2009, o especialista em efeitos visuais Mike Fink deixou escapar que Malick se encontrava a trabalhar num projeto ambicioso (O'Hara), ninguém podia imaginar a verdadeira magnitude do seu trabalho. *The Tree of Life* constitui um dos filmes mais ousados da história recente do cinema: engloba milhões de anos de evolução; lida com a mais intrigante entidade abstrata, Deus; e aborda uma questão existencial inescapável tanto para indivíduos religiosos como para ateus: qual é o significado da vida? Por inerência, o que



justificou a morte, por exemplo, de RL, o irmão de Jake?

Lidar com uma vastidão temporal e espacial tão grande e com questões tão complexas em apenas cento e trinta e nove minutos implica vários desafios, e Malick procurou soluções técnicas e narrativas. Sem surpresa, o realizador recorreu a símbolos naturais para representar tanto a divindade como a própria vida. Na sua essência, o ser humano é um animal simbólico, afirmou o filósofo alemão Ernst Cassirer, no popular *Essay on Man: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Human Culture* (32):

Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with things themselves, man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium. (30)

Efetivamente, é através dos símbolos que os humanos se relacionam com a totalidade, concreta ou abstrata, desde a roupa interior sensual até Deus. E porque os símbolos funcionam como mediadores, permitem também aproximar, na imaginação humana, o sagrado e os elementos telúricos, o misterioso e o natural.

Em *The Tree of Life*, o sol surge como representação de deus, os rios, os lagos e o oceano correspondem ao cosmos e, sobretudo, o carvalho que dá nome ao filme, constitui uma sinédoque, metáfora e evocação da vida. Neste artigo, reflito acerca do símbolo central do filme, a árvore da vida, analisando a sua representação cinemática e simbólica. O meu objetivo é proporcionar uma compreensão mais profunda da árvore da vida, essencial para capturar o significado deste filme. Para tanto, recorro a diversas abordagens e áreas: mitológica, psicanalítica e religiosa.

## **2. As raízes de uma árvore simbólica**

A paisagem norte-americana constitui uma presença constante nos filmes de Malick, servindo não apenas como cenário, mas sobretudo como elemento simbólico e eufórico, que contrasta com a perfídia humana. Em películas como *Badlands* (1973), as planícies de South Dakota e a região de Montana ocultam a paixão proibida entre um assassino em série, Kit, e a sua namorada de quinze anos, Holly; em *Days of Heaven* (1978), os campos de trigo do Texas servem de cenário para o amor de Bill e Abby e os seus esquemas ilegais; em *The New World* (2005), a paisagem evoca uma terra pristina, explorada pelo Capitão John Smith e a sua amada, Pocahontas.

No trabalho de Malick, a natureza constitui a eterna essência que ilude aqueles que tentam compreendê-la mas, ao mesmo tempo, proporciona-lhes uma oportunidade de redenção. Debatendo a importância da paisagem, James Morrison afirma:

Elemental imagery infuses Malick's work: earth, air, fire, water (...) For many artists, a turn to elemental imagery marks a return to fundamental things, a stripping away of inessentials. For Malick, the essential is as much part of a complex as any other idea. Stripping away only reveals further notions for contemplation, and Malick's images, in one or other dimensions, are nodes of thought. (Morrison e Schur 111)

Contrariamente ao que sucede nos filmes que referi, em *The Tree of Life*, a natureza surge representada tanto coletivamente, através de florestas, montanhas, rios, lagos e oceanos, como individualmente, por intermédio de uma imponente árvore, que se ergue na terra fértil do quintal da família O'Brien. Trata-se de um carvalho com 65 mil libras de peso, que, segundo um periódico local, foi transplantada de uma propriedade nos arredores de Smithville (Hagerty 1A e 2A).

Na maioria das cenas, esta árvore é mostrada num ângulo de baixo para cima, o que a faz parecer ainda mais poderosa, tal como as personagens a veem; a luz solar, símbolo divino, projeta-se por entre os ramos e folhas. Ao longo do filme, este carvalho assume duas dimensões significativas: por um lado, representa a vida; por outro, serve como um altar natural ou zona sagrada onde os O'Briens, em particular a mãe e Jack, comunicam com Deus, colocando questões e meditando.

O carvalho constitui um símbolo da génese e da perenidade da vida humana, animal e vegetal (Michaels 89). Em termos míticos, a árvore representa a integração cósmica, porque as suas raízes se encontram no submundo, o tronco no mundo e os ramos abertos ao céu. Segundo o antropólogo Brian Molyneaux, numerosas lendas consideram a árvore como um elemento sagrado: na mitologia escandinava, o Yggdrasil, um freixo imponente, atrai a água das fontes e oferece-a aos deuses que vivem nos ramos; os hereros da África Austral acreditam que uma árvore, Omum-Borombonga, originou os primeiros seres humanos e o gado de que dependem para sobreviver; nas pinturas que decoram os túmulos egípcios, a árvore sagrada e a fonte da vida constituem motivos frequentes; mesmo no discurso científico, mais precisamente em *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin compara a evolução humana à árvore da vida, sendo cada ramo uma espécie (Molyneaux 90-91).

No filme de Malick, o significado das árvores em geral e do carvalho em particular, deve ser compreendido no contexto do Cristianismo. No Livro da Revelação, a vida é representada

como uma árvore com propriedades curativas:

(...) the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

No Cristianismo, a árvore da vida representa a inocência antes da queda e o amor de Deus, um aspeto que Malick sistematicamente explora no filme em análise, através de imagens, som e enredo, como mais tarde demonstrarei.

Para além disso, o carvalho e outras árvores constituem um elemento recorrente, um motivo, essencial para ligar e dar coesão a uma narrativa radicalmente fragmentada em termos de tempo (há analepses constantes); de lugar (desde os subúrbios de Waco a Houston, e de Houston até uma recriação utópica do paraíso); e de pontos de vista (Jack em criança, Jack na adultícia, Mrs. O'Brien, etc.).

É 1956 e no jardim da casa suburbana, ao redor da árvore, brincam três irmãos, Jack, de 11 anos, RL, de nove e Steve, de seis, o seu pai, os seus pais, e o cão, Shep. É uma cena bucólica, imbuída de felicidade doméstica, quase edénica. Mrs. O'Brien admira os raios de sol entre os ramos do carvalho e, dirigindo-se a Deus, promete: "I'll be true to you, whatever comes". A música de fundo, um excerto de "Lacrimosa", do compositor polaco de temas para filmes Zbigniew Preisner, reforça a árvore como um símbolo da vida e da criação, em geral. O carvalho torna-se, pois, um templo natural, onde as personagens falam com Deus, expondo as suas dúvidas, problemas e dores, e reforçam a sua relação com o Todo-poderoso.

Como um desafio divino, um teste à fé de Mrs. O'Brien, a cena seguinte mostra um carteiro da Western Union a entregar-lhe um telegrama comunicando a morte do filho do meio, RL, aos dezanove anos. As causas da morte não são referidas, nem isso é importante para o enredo. O pai de RL recebe a notícia no aeroporto, onde é engenheiro, e fica devastado pela notícia. Embora o local ruidoso contraste vivamente com o seu lar plácido, o cenário é idêntico: o sol desce sobre as árvores, simbolizando o fim do dia e o epílogo da vida.

A cena muda para a atualidade e para um cenário urbano, Houston, onde Jack, o filho mais velho, trabalha como arquiteto. Mais uma vez surge uma árvore, o símbolo central, a ser transplantada para a área central de um edifício, competindo orgulhosamente com a floresta de arranha-céus erguida pelos humanos. Como se lê no guião:

The buildings hem him [Jack] round like the trees of a wild forest. A

false nature, a universe of death. A sightless world, roofed over, shut off from things above. A world that would exclude the transcendent, that says: I am, and there is nothing else. A world without love. This is a new death, death of spirit, extinction of the soul. Man has shut himself in. He must find a way out. He must journey through time, from the outward and external to the heart of creation. (Malick *Script* 9)

Jack é um homem rico, um arquiteto de sucesso, admirado pelos seus pares. Contudo, é também um indivíduo desencantado com um mundo que, segundo ele, está entregue aos cães. O seu cinismo constitui o resultado direto quer da difícil relação com pai, que do sofrimento causado pela morte prematura de RL, que a árvore transplantada, símbolo da infância perdida, evoca.

Jack não encara a tragédia com uma atitude antirreligiosa, mas sim com dúvidas amargas que confessa a Deus, em monólogos, junto ao velho carvalho ou a outras árvores. Estas questões já vinham da infância, quando observara um rapazinho morrer afogado na piscina comunal, e perguntara: “[God,] you let a boy die. You let anything happen. Why should I be good if you aren’t?” (Malick 10). Mais tarde, traumatizado pela morte de RL, estas perguntas regressam: “How did I lose you, wandered, forgot you?” (Malick 10). Tais reflexões não questionam a existência de uma divindade, mas sim os seus caminhos misteriosos, que permitiram a morte do irmão. Por exemplo, Jake pergunta: “Who are you that took him? You smash what is most dear — send flies to wounds you might have healed. Who can hinder you?” (Malick 10); ou “You whom I met in the woods and on the hills, whom first in her eyes we knew — how shall I name you?” (Malick 10).

Similarmente, a mãe caminha entre as árvores e, numa conversa introspetiva ou com Deus, pergunta “Was I false to you” (Malick 3); ou “Who are we to you? Answer me. We cry to you. Hear us” ou “Lord, why? Where were you?” (Malick 3). Estas palavras ecoam, intertextualmente, um passo do Livro de Job que surge no início do filme: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38: 4, 7).

Mrs. O’Brien, ela própria mãe e, portanto, fonte de vida, debate-se com as mesmas questões e problemas que, ao longo dos séculos, inúmeros cristãos colocaram: como pode haver mal, sendo Deus o ser supremo? E como pode Deus permitir o sofrimento dos fiéis? O filme consiste nesta viagem espiritual, em busca de esclarecimentos ou de algum consolo, junto a Deus e à natureza que representa a sua criação.

Numa das cenas visualmente mais impressionantes de *The Tree of Life*, Jack encontra o irmão falecido, a família e outros indivíduos que desempenharam um papel significativo na

sua vida, numa praia imaginária, símbolo do paraíso ou a eternidade. Reforçando a árvore como símbolo da vida e da criação, Jack afirma: “You spoke to me through her. You spoke to me through the sky, the trees. Before I knew I loved you, believed in you” (Malick 5). A mulher a que se refere é a mãe. Para se compreender o significado desta epifania, é necessário lembrar a lição que, no início do filme, as freiras tinham transmitido a Mrs. O’Brien e que, agora, Jack também aprende:

There are two ways through life: the way of Nature, and the way of Grace. You have to choose which one you’ll follow. Grace doesn’t try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. And love is smiling through all things. (Malick 1)

O amor dos vivos e dos mortos, a reencontro com o pai, após anos de conflito, e a aceitação os mistérios intrínsecos aos modos de Deus, levam Jack a fazer, por fim, o luto do irmão.

### **3. Kubick meets Fellini**

A arte e a técnica de Malick revelam um realizador que não receia correr riscos e aposta num estilo distinto, jogando, por vezes, contra as regras. Como afirma Chris Wisniewski:

Those rambling philosophical voiceovers; the placid images of nature, offering quiet contrast to the evil deeds of men; the stunning cinematography, often achieved with natural light; the striking use of music — here is a filmmaker with a clear sensibility and aesthetic who makes narrative films that are neither literary nor theatrical, in the sense of foregrounding dialogue, event, or character, but are instead principally cinematic, movies that suggest narrative, emotion and idea through image and sound. (Wisniewski)

O filme *The Tree of Life* é ambicioso, talvez demasiado, e é verdade que, por vezes, quando o abstrato se torna vazio e as meditações repetitivas, Malick sucumbe ao peso da grandiosidade. No entanto, mesmo quando falha, mostra que o cinema também aspira a ser poesia.

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### Abstract

Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* (2011) constitutes an exception in a market flooded with commercial cinematic productions. Its experimental nature is best revealed by non-linear narrative, breathtaking images of the origins of the universe, and a creative approach to an old theme: what is the meaning of life? When middle-aged architect Jack O'Brien sees a tree being planted in front of a building, he meditates upon his childhood and adolescence, in Waco, Texas, during the fifties. Several aspects of his social and family life, such as the relationship with a strict father, representing "nature", and a gentle mother, symbolizing "grace"; his experiments with sexuality and violence; his father's struggle to overcome failure; his mother's anguish in face of the loss of a child. This journey from innocence to childhood prompts several questions regarding the meaning of life, the relevance of faith and forgiveness. In this paper, I reflect on

the central symbol of the movie, the “tree of life”, analyzing its cinematic representation; its symbolic, oneiric and religious meanings; and how it congregates the fragments of the narrative and its protagonists. For that purpose, I resort to mythology, anthropology and religion.