

Todd A. Comer

Defiance College

November 9, 2012

Presented at the annual conference of the Midwest Modern Language Association

“Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life*: Grace and the General Economy”

Like a butterfly, Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* is delicate, slight, and gorgeous. But it is also difficult and challenging; or, as my mother put it recently, “it kind of makes my head dizzy.” The film appears to tell the story of the gender dynamics of a family in the 1950's. The father and mother of three boys are stereotypical figures for masculinity and femininity, and the film on one level provide a critique of masculine control, and a privileging of a certain feminine being.

But this simple summary does an injustice to the complexity of Malick's project, as he willfully engages in a number of infuriating practices: His film includes a lengthy “cosmic segment” (akin to that in *2001: A Space Odyssey*) in which the birth and death of the universe are retold on the macro and micro level; the film includes lengthy and inexplicable segments of solitary desert wandering as well as communal gathering on the edge of an ocean; the film denies linearity; the film is shot from extreme angles, and, to a great extent, with hand-held cameras; and, finally, possibly the main event of the film, the traumatic death of one of the sons, happens off camera and is never fully explained. *Tree of Life* is disorienting and, yet, its power, at least for me, rests in this disorientation.

This much is clear: the film is a problem movie. It sets up a problem and takes pains to delineate the problem and suggest an answer, both in form and content. The problem includes, in part, gender differences. Mrs. O'Brien embodies a lightness of touch, a joy, and acceptance of the world; Mr. O'Brien embodies strength, determination, and a persistent desire to master the world, and his three sons, so that they will not repeat his own mistakes. However, Malick's film does not leave the problem at the level of masculine violence. Early in the film, this gendered problem is reframed in terms of "nature" and "grace." In a voiceover Mrs. O'Brien, Malick's embodiment of grace, signals the conflict in the clearest terms:

Grace doesn't try to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked; accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself and 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.

Clearly, Malick's film uses this slender story of gender conflict to get at larger theological issues. There is an essential tension in the film between the particular and the universal. And one gets the sense, in the end, that the O'Brien narrative is merely a particular embodiment—and *not*, incidentally, a very particular embodiment insofar as that minimalist narrative already smacks of the archetypal—for Malick's universalizing argument. (Many people find the film unwatchable as it is; I suspect that the film without its use of the O'Brien family as a concretion of its concepts would be inescapably dull.)

While Mrs. O'Brien is full of grace and play, Mr. O'Brien, faced with business setbacks and a loss of control, increasingly places demands on his family. Eventually, he loses his position and, much later, his son. In a moving scene, Mr. O'Brien describes to his son Jake how he tithed and never missed a day of work, and how it all came to naught. He describes, in this moment of failure-induced reflection, how he "dishonored" reality in the way he was living and did not notice its "glory". The film, clearly, on one level allows us to read this all through the conceptual world of Christianity, though Malick's representation of God—an ambiguous, mobile splotch of light and color—denies such a reductive reading.

In a Christian reading, what we have in *Tree of Life* is a meditation on the concepts of grace and works. Ultimately, such a reading appears to suggest that we cannot save ourselves, or, at a larger level, free ourselves from the contingencies of history. The film opens with a passage from *Job* (38:4): "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?" The reference to *Job* foregrounds the utter contingency of the Christian story, in which evil may befall good people just as readily as evil people. To read the movie within this context amounts to recognizing that humans are too finite to master the complexity of God and the world and to try to do so removes us from the one thing we *can* have--a transient pleasure in the world around us.

* * * * *

Due to the complexity and the cosmic scope of Malick's film, I'd like to move this discussion to a different theoretical framework, one developed by Derrida and George Bataille on the "restricted" (nature) and "general" economy (grace). Derrida describes a

restricted economy in the following manner: “To stay alive, to maintain oneself in life, to work, to defer pleasure, to limit stakes, to have *respect* for death at the every moment when one looks *directly* at it—such is the servile conviction of mastery and of the entire history it makes possible” (255). Everything and every encounter in such an economy must be used to support and bolster the self; such an economy is endlessly limiting, creating monadic selves who only think they encounter the world.

The *general economy*, by contrast, requires one “[t]o rush headlong into death pure and simple . . . [and] risk the absolute loss of meaning, in the extent to which meaning necessarily traverses the truth of the master and of self-consciousness. One risks losing the effect and profit of meaning which were the very *stakes* one hoped *to win*.” A general economy is one that does not economize, does not use every conflict to raise the self to a higher level. It is an economy which hemorrhages, which operates at a loss. Security, certainty, a stable *sense* of the self are lost. But pleasure and a connection to the world are gained as the borders and limits of the self are dissolved.

How does one engage in a “general economy”? Trauma, yes, and professional failure may place one in such an economy. These are obvious answers, appropriate responses to the particular world of the O’Brien family. It would seem, however, that the film suggests a more complex answer to this question for its viewers. We do have a clear picture of *human* economizing and its limitations: surely, Mr. O’Brien experiences the world as one interminable struggle, a conflict that exists for him to master. All of his energy is involved in an economy that augments the self, deferring pleasure in nature, in his children, or in his

spouse, because immediate pleasure amounts to a risk, an unstable opening onto the general economy, risking meaning and “self-consciousness”.

Juxtaposed against this particular human representation is, literally, a universe of decentered and decentering cosmic action. It was Bataille who first wrote about the “general economy” and, for him, it was the sun which provides its best example:

... The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy—wealth—without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving . . . In former times value was given to unproductive glory, whereas in our day it is measured in terms of production: precedence is given to energy acquisition over energy expenditure. Glory itself is justified by the consequence of a glorious deed in the sphere of utility. But, dominated though it is by practical judgment and Christian morality, the archaic sensibility is still alive. (*The Accursed Share* 29)

Bataille begins his *The Accursed Share* by outlining the problem of human economics. Humans, he says, faced with an economic problem, simplify and limit the range of the problem confronting them, as if a world of infinite causes and effects can be denied by a mental construction. Humans always limit their thinking of economics, when, in fact, energy cannot be contained, but effortlessly crosses human borders. Humans, rather than being in control of energy, are rather part of a greater, cosmic movement of energy that makes them subject to its own movement (21). Despite the human tendency to place its own being and its own thinking at the summit of creation, inevitably, “[human] activity,” he writes, “pursues the useless and infinite fulfillment of the universe.”

And Malick's film give us this universe: He shows us volcanic eruptions, and the steamy rush of lava meeting ocean. He shows us the cold movement of planets in space, and light, splotches of brilliance stirred and refracted through the heterogeneous vacuum of space: star dust, and gasses aglow with light. He shows us dinosaurs, even an instance of dinosauric grace, and the senseless meteoric destruction of our tyrannical ancestors. And he shows us life on the micro level, on the level of cells, and tissue. Nowhere do we see a consciousness reigning in all of this energy, rationally limiting it, and constructing a self, or economizing over each conflict. All we see are gorgeous images of energy wasted, beautifully wasted.

Confronted with such a limitless panorama, Lyotard's work on the sublime is appropriate, for two reasons: For Lyotard, showing forth the unrepresentable—as Malick's film surely does—is, in fact, an attack on bourgeois economics, which desires sensible works of art that can be easily assimilated, reinforcing in a restricted fashion, the public's own identity. Secondly, following his version of the sublime, we feel *pleasure* in Malick's limited representation of the limitless universe, yet *pain* that we finite humans may not adequately represent it. This inadequacy is crucial because a restricted economy is grounded in an encounter with the world—indeed an encounter that is *always* at hand—and yet also immediately elided as humans spatially or ontologically remove themselves from the world in order to economize on that encounter. To be able to remove one's self from the world, however illusory that removal is, requires the ability to assimilate the world. Faced with the universe, the infinite, this assimilation hesitates and falls flat, undermining the restricted economy and moving the "self" into a general economy.

It is no surprise that humans abstract out of their economic equations their own infinite connection to the world: At stake for each of us in this question is pain, identity, and control. So humans struggle on, blind to the sublime impossibility of the particularizing frameworks they create.

For the viewer, the juxtaposition of the human with the cosmic relativizes the former. We see how very limited human economizing is in light of such destructive and constructive energy. Mr. O'Brien—hyper aware of his neighbor's lawn and money—puts his son to work pulling weeds. Bataille—who writes specifically of the exuberance of nature—would find this laughable. From the standpoint of the individual, this closely bordered economic being, a world of lack, is self-evident and such individuals are anxious to fill that need. If we can only invert that thinking and realize that each of us is in a world of vast, indeterminable energy and that, there is, in fact, no lack, human being and existence would change dramatically. This difference is perhaps best synopsisized by a hypothetical person, living within an easy walk, of Niagara Falls, who complains that he cannot afford to pay for a movie ticket: The world is full of energy and such glory that we are awash in it (cinema, in fact, pales by comparison), and it is only a peculiar kind of human blindness that cannot see what is omnipresent.

But at what cost do we ignore the abundance around us? A restricted economy creates a surplus of energy that must be dealt with. For Bataille, such a surplus of energy, if not intentionally dissipated, leads to violence, to, specifically, World War II (23). In Malick's film, war also erupts between father and son Jack, as O'Brien tries to economize off the back of his son—that is, as O'Brien's excess, frustrated energy is not dissipated to the

outside, but internalized into a pissing contest. Mrs. O'Brien, by contrast, dances, floats, and plays with her children with such exuberance and abandon, that her surplus is cast off easily, and ethically as she communes with the world around her.

Malick's film is an affront to all economizing and all sense-making. Throughout *Tree of Life*, Jack and others, confused by trauma or the complexity of the world ask reflective questions:

Who are you, Jack asks, of God or the void?

Where were you when my brother died?

There is seemingly no response. Such words appear to be lost in the void. But, no, there is an answer. The entire universe responds to our loss and to our sense-making—even to the ragged sense-making of this essay. There is no void, nor loss. Rather, there is glory, an abundance of energy and life that gives us being and asks for nothing in return.