

## Article

# “What Is This Love That Loves Us?”: Terrence Malick’s *To the Wonder* as a Phenomenology of Love

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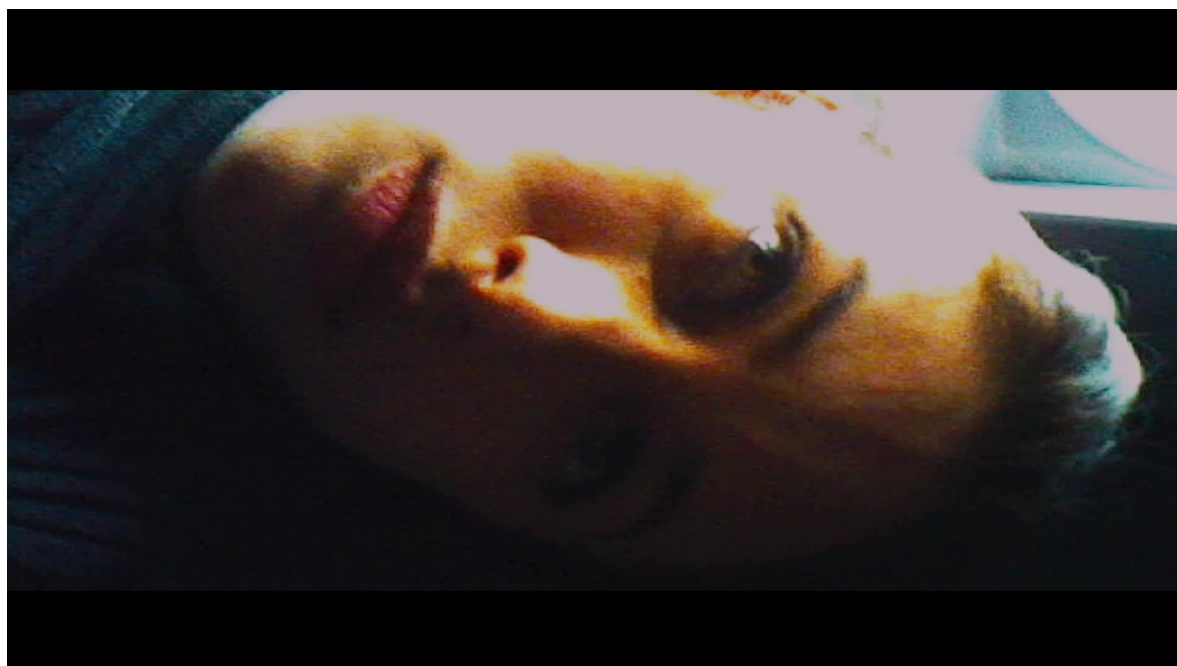
Academic Editor: Joseph Kickasola

Received: 31 March 2016; Accepted: 8 June 2016; Published: 20 June 2016

**Abstract:** Terrence Malick’s *To the Wonder* (2013) considers the relationship of Divine Love with the individual soul, and its corresponding relationships to the other as neighbor. In this article, I analyze the congruency of Malick’s form and content by correlating the relationship of his dynamic, existential filmmaking style with the film’s phenomenologically constructed plotline. Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of givenness and Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love* contribute to my analysis, aiding our understanding of love’s sheer gratuity and sacrificial labor, amid inevitable idolatry and despondency, in *To the Wonder*’s intersecting narratives. While Marion helps us comprehend the affective qualities of “saturated phenomena” in the film’s formal dimensions, Kierkegaard elucidates the film’s many iterations of love. Malick aesthetically demonstrates the reciprocity of love and the experience of wonder as contingent operations, making *To the Wonder* a cinematic phenomenology of the fractured yet indissoluble dimensions of love.

**Keywords:** film; Terrence Malick; *To the Wonder*; phenomenology; Jean-Luc Marion; Kierkegaard

## 1. Introduction



Terrence Malick's film *To the Wonder* (2013) begins with a black screen and the word "Newborn."<sup>1</sup> Shot on a digital handheld camera, our first images appear as shaky, unclear and discolored, giving us the appearance of pedestrian immediacy. We see what appears to be lovers, documenting themselves on a train, their destination unknown to us. Almost a dream, the playful moments are reminiscent of François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962) in their carefree, even idealized romance. Where are we in the course of this couple's history? Is this a memory or a reverie? If this is the lovers' iconic visit to Mont Saint-Michel, how might we consider this opening scene critical as a recurring motif in both the film and their relationship?

In this film, through two parallel stories, Malick considers the relationship of Divine Love with the individual soul, and its corresponding relationships to the other as neighbor. In this essay, I first demonstrate the congruency of Malick's form and content by correlating the relationship of his existential filmmaking style with the film's phenomenologically constructed plotline. Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of givenness and Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* will then contribute to my analysis of *To the Wonder*, informing and substantiating the dynamic relationship between the way the film is made and what the film concerns. Both philosophers help aid our understanding of love's sheer gratuity and sacrificial labor, amid the inevitable idolatry and despondency in *To the Wonder*'s intersecting narratives. While Marion helps us comprehend the affective qualities of "saturated phenomena" in the film's formal dimensions, Kierkegaard elucidates the film's many iterations of love. As we shall see, *To the Wonder* is itself—in both form and content—a cinematic phenomenology of the fractured yet indissoluble dimensions of love.

## 2. Memory, Experience, and Form: Malick as a Student of the French New Wave

Malick invites his viewers into a non-linear storyline, attesting to memory's witness of love, revealing its giftedness over time. Malick's painterly cinematography and bare-boned script further underscores the film's phenomenological layers by engaging our own participation, calling us to mentally reassemble the film's structure. The film is not merely a meditation on philosophical concepts but an experiential image of love itself.

As a phenomenological filmmaker, Malick's *modus operandi* is inherited from several key contributions in the history of cinema, especially *cinéma vérité* techniques from the French New Wave film directors François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. *Cinéma vérité* is a style of documentary filmmaking that incorporates improvisational camera use and sees the filmmaker as a participant-observer in filming the reality at hand.<sup>2</sup> The French New Wave directors made the intimate, hand-held camera famous as part of their distinctive style in the 1960s. Capturing life "as it happens" while maintaining aspects of unedited dialogue enhance this style's verisimilitude towards everyday life [2].

Malick continually subverts standard filmmaking methods by abandoning an established script, as well as pre-rehearsed takes. Olga Kurylenko relates that Malick's normative screenplay for the film was a handful of scribbled lines given the very morning of filming on location [3]. Malick gives his cast a kind of syllabus with required reading for the roles, creating a robust foundation for imagining each of the characters (which included *Anna Karenina*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, *Madame Bovary* and *The Moviegoer*). Producer Nicolas Gonda explained that these texts established "a common vernacular on the set that's not about technique, but emotion—a shared memory" for the cast [4]. Thus, Malick requires his actors to improvise, exploring land and space with the texts that they have read, as a kind of phenomenological exercise in discovering their characters *as they film*.

<sup>1</sup> This opening frame is identical to the opening of Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), sharing the same opening line, and a black screen with the viewer opening their eyes onto the world.

<sup>2</sup> In his *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze insists that the intention or aim of *cinéma vérité* is "not to achieve a real as it would exist independently of the image, but to achieve a before and after as they coexist with the image, as they are inseparable from the image. This is what direct cinema must mean, to the point where it is a component of all cinema: to achieve the direct presentation of time" ([1], p. 38).



In addition, *cinéma vérité* frequently includes uncast people from filming on-location, as is the case in *To the Wonder*. While in Bartlesville Oklahoma, Malick filmed actor Javier Bardem (“Father Quintana”) talking with local people in retirement homes, neighborhoods, prisons, and hospitals. Utilizing *cinéma vérité* techniques, Malick blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction filmmaking, particularly in this second, prominent storyline in *To the Wonder* (that of a priest struggling with his ministry among the poor and broken in his community, which happen to share the same town in which the central couple of the film lives). This is a particularly phenomenological approach to filmmaking because Malick’s camera enters into human experience, documenting “unscripted” happenings. His lens draws our eye to the “thisness” or “thatness”, particularity, and specificity. Essentially, he is allowing us to take in and absorb “the given,” bearing witness to life: in both its tragedy and glory—and to do so with gratitude. The protagonists’ questions, doubts and joys become our own, making Malick’s characters universal paradigms of ourselves. No character in *To the Wonder* has a given name until the credits, de-particularizing them in a sense—thinking alongside Private Witt from the *Thin Red Line*: “Maybe all men got one big soul everybody’s a part of, all faces are the same man” [5].

In an interview with the American Society of Cinematographers, Emmanuel Lubezki expressed that Malick wanted him to act like a documentary filmmaker “using unconventional methods to tell a normal story” by filming things that “happen accidentally [in front of them] and capturing them before they disappear” [6]. Lubezki’s use of 35mm film and wide-angle lenses have a painterly quality, magnifying and highlighting the human figure amidst the landscape. Often filming at daybreak or sunset, Lubezki captures light transfiguring everything it illuminates. From the swirl of lace curtains and bed sheets, the swish of skirts in the prairie grass, the harmony between the intricacies of microscopic and the macrocosmic, Malick’s camera never fails to capture the luscious textures of the ordinary. As a phenomenological auteur, the rich process of inductive filmmaking harbors an openness to unscripted happenings. This method itself is hospitable to wonder because it has not created limits on what the film can become.

We also see the influence of *cinéma vérité* in Malick’s unorthodox directorial methods, wherein he shoots miles of footage to document improvised moments, observing genuine human emotions. His camera watches what happens, taking stock of the minor and the mundane, drawing attention to particularity through capturing pauses, surprises, mistakes. In a cast interview, actress Olga Kurylenko (“Marina”) relates that Malick does not “paint” while filming, but gathers an entire palette of colors [7]. The “painting” happens in the editing room, as he and his team of editors discard the extra footage

and find the narrative within the spontaneously curated vignettes. *Tree of Life* contributing editor T.J. Volgare explains that Malick orchestrates his team of editors based on their sensibilities in how they splice scenes together, making Malick's films a series of "consecutive miracles" by collectively telling a coherent narrative [8]. Malick allows his creative editors the opportunity to play with the givenness of the visual content as an experimental lab for the discovery of cinematic sublimity. Unlike other film auteurs, who carefully shadow their production team to painful detail in each cut, Malick collaborates with his editors to intuitively extract "saturated phenomena" frame by exquisite frame.<sup>3</sup> Like sculpture, excess is carved away to find the form within.

What does it mean in a film for the images to carry the story? Malick's visual leitmotifs span his oeuvre as a consistent iconographical language, internally referential and signature in style. Beyond Malick's normative visual language of light and water, *To the Wonder*'s point-of-view celebrates the torso, with many shots beginning below the eyes near the cheekbones, stretching down to the hips, outlining silhouettes of the shoulders and the waist. There is something striking in film about protagonists lacking a face when we are given alternative appendages as a kind of sublimated portrait. Hands, too, star in this film as expressive instruments, Bergmanesque in their existential gravitas. This method of editing showcases the affective qualities of his distilled images as self-giving poetry. Consequently, *To the Wonder*'s cinematographic power reaches far beyond symbolic iconography.



French New Wave influences are also present in Malick's use of voice-overs, internal monologues, and elliptical editing. The French directors first utilized voice-over in films as an aid to narration, whereas Malick employs it as the very backbone of his script. Drawing upon Malick's philosophical background as a Heidegger scholar and translator, some have diagnosed the voice-over motif as Malick's employment of the interior, self-reflexive search of a being-towards-death [9]. Indeed, this method informs Malick's inductive process of making film and the ways in which the film facilitates the character's self-awareness. By borrowing the voice-over, Malick reinvents it, not merely for narration but as a stream-of-conscious articulation of memory. Like Truffaut and Godard, the internal monologue also acts to connect between the jump-cuts, orienting the viewer in the process of visual recollection.

<sup>3</sup> By referring to "saturated phenomena", I am employing phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion's lexicon and will unpack the term as it relates to Malick's film in later sections of the essay.



Indeed, Malick employs jump-cuts and elliptical editing techniques to nurture film “consciousness” through visual patterns that resemble memory. In Spencer Shaw’s *Film Consciousness from Phenomenology to Deleuze*, he explains: “Film consciousness works by breaking down predictable time patterns and representational markers traditional narratives use” [10]. Cinema is not merely mimetic by attempting to replicate reality, but rather emulates the way consciousness functions in its memory and perception of existence. Malick has approached something like film consciousness in the way he has constructed *To the Wonder* as a museum of memory, where we journey down its meandering passageways of recollection alongside its characters, reanimating that which is locked away and forgotten. Malick’s form is not sequential, giving us impressions, moods, snippets of events rather than comprehensive episodic storytelling. We feel jerked around in the film as we attempt to orient ourselves in proximity to the characters and their relationships, yet the form expresses the underlying elusiveness of love’s presence.

Memory is in fact, not chronological and linear, but rather circular and mimetic. Just like Malick’s signature golden hour light sinking ever so quickly beneath the horizon, *To the Wonder* is choppy and fragmented, evoking life’s transiency and ephemerality. Unlike the meditative Tarkovsky-esque shots in his earlier films (*The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, *The Tree of Life*), we are not provided with the luxury of savoring the warmth and beauty of these images before they are gone. Malick deploys this method of editing to show us how our perceptions of reality are a collection of evanescent flashes, disappearing almost as soon as they are registered. Nevertheless, memory works to show us how these “radiant zigzag becomings” narrate our lives as afterimages—visual impressions reborn in the soul, informing our consciousness of present circumstances.<sup>4</sup> Malick’s visual poetics feed the life of memory, resurrecting what is harbored deep within the consciousness of his characters, reanimating their past within the present. In *Confessions*, St. Augustine of Hippo refers to soul as the locus and palace of memory “where there are the treasures of innumerable images of all kinds of objects” [11]. It is the home of emotions, hopes, dreams, sensations—the location of a person’s collective experiences.



By beginning, revisiting and ending *To the Wonder* around a singular memory at Mont Saint-Michel (nicknamed, La Merveille, “The Wonder”), Malick provides us with a visual schema of *exitus et reditus* (the exit and return), thematically facilitating a trope on emanation from St. Thomas Aquinas that

<sup>4</sup> Malick referred to the film as the “radiant zigzag becoming” before he finalized the title as *To the Wonder* [7].

all things come from and return to God [12]. For Aquinas, God is the sources of all love; brings all creation into being through love and sustains it; ultimately creation returns and finding its home in love, who is God. It should be no surprise that Malick's motif of love originates with mythopoetic heights in Eden—the cloistered garden of a monastery—before its plummeting fall. Though Malick shows throughout the entire film that the human pursuit of love is fractured, selfish and distempered, his recurring trope of “the wonder” reminds us that the tide of grace is always flowing in—even in his very last frame. The end, which very well might be the beginning, cyclically punctuates the plotline via the couple's memory. Did this event ever happen at all? Or was it a seaside mirage, a dream of the possible, an icon of what their love could *become*?

### 3. Malick's Saturated Phenomena: Jean-Luc Marion on “Visual Excess”

We have considered the finesse Malick has employed in structuring his films, but *why* is the way they are composed so important as it pertains to their “givenness”? What are the affective qualities of “saturated phenomena” that Malick seems so intent on capturing?<sup>5</sup> Philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, who originated the term in question, intimates complex realities that border the unintelligible in his study of art and revelation. Our discussion may be enhanced if we envisage Malick's filmmaking methods, especially in regards to his utilization of the New Wave techniques as enfolded examples of Marion's concepts. Perhaps this is Malick's attempt to incarnate Marion's theory of saturated phenomena via the medium of celluloid. As a phenomenologist-turned-film auteur, it seems quite plausible that Malick expresses intricate philosophical concepts by means of cinematic form, in his attempt to *show* rather than tell.

Marion's *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* provides an elegant account of “the given” by first establishing “that which gives itself, does not show itself *necessarily*.” [15]. He explains that revelation is a hidden dimension of saturated phenomena, revealed within a kind of event. Such an event is the experience between presences; beings-in-time, these moments that Malick's characters live into and show us. They appear unannounced, even caught off guard, a wonder. Marion explains that revelation is, indeed, a dimension of ordinary phenomena as it pertains to paradox or saturated phenomena ([15], p. 29). Directorial methods that experiment with structural possibilities and artful parameters generate the cinematic space where saturated phenomena might show itself, revealing what cannot be easily seen amid experiential excess.

Marion elaborates: “the [film] opens infinitely more than its frontal spectacle . . . it is always to be reseen and to come to be seen, precisely because it contains a quasi-unbearable intensity...and is inaccessible to a solitary look” ([15], p. 72). This occurs when artistic intention cannot be reached by mere intuition, because the work *exceeds* the artists' comprehension, making it analogous to mystical theology.<sup>6</sup> Malick's unscripted happenings between his actors and their environment are examples of such excess. These filmed moments are not necessarily reproducible per se, or rather not *re-enactable*. However, once the event is recorded on film it is identical when replayed ad infinitum. What then, does Marion infer when he suggests that art continues to “show itself” over time if film is, in fact, reproduction?

<sup>5</sup> In his review of Marion's *Erotic Phenomena*, John Caputo offers a distilled summery of saturated phenomena: “the idea that there are phenomena of such overwhelming givenness or overflowing fulfillment that the intentional acts aimed at these phenomena are overrun, flooded—or saturated” [13]. In the *Visible and the Revealed*, Marion sketches more definitive components of “saturated phenomena” and how he employs it within his hermeneutical analysis of “the given” [14]. He argues that religion complicates and enhances the spectrum of phenomenology's possibilities, following from Kant that “possibility results explicitly from the condition of experience” ([14], p. 19). Phenomenology circumvents reason by means of intuition because “intuition is sufficient for the phenomena to justify its right to appear without any other reason” ([14], p. 21). What I am positing in this essay is that Malick captures multivalent layers of the human experience in his filming process by means of his intuitive camera lens—intuition that apprehends such ‘saturated phenomena’ or givenness as it is revealed in time.

<sup>6</sup> Such a theology, beyond articulation, is central to apophatic theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius (5–6th C.E.), expressed within the paradox that God can be known only as not being known.

Here we find ourselves amidst a contentious scholarly debate regarding the nature of film itself. Is the medium of film “mechanical reproduction” as various materialists have claimed, borrowing language from Walter Benjamin [16]? Or, is it as Malick’s academic mentor Stanley Cavell argues “a succession of automatic world projections” possessing a dimension of ontological realism [17]? For materialists, automatic projection removes the human agent from act of creation: “by making reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” ([17], p. 521). In contrast, Cavell following from Andre Bazin’s “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” insists that there is an “unseen world” or “aesthetic realism” beyond film’s photographic reproducibility and automation. This is not “likeness” or verisimilitude, but rather subsists “the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it” ([17], p. 23). The “inescapable mechanization” of film, Cavell states, is “satisfying once and for all in its very essence, our obsession with realism” ([17], p. 20).

If we concur with materialists’ critique, Marion’s claim that art is indefinitely open to givenness, or “giving itself to us” presents a potential problem, since replaying the film will not provide additional content from its first screening ([17], p. 34). However, if we find Cavell’s ontology of film more compelling, we might find a shared affirmation from Marion that the ability to view the world through art helps us become reconciled with it.<sup>7</sup> The genius of the artist, Marion relates, is in resisting the force or impact of givenness revealing itself to the artist, and transmitting it to a viable media that will convey such givenness: “the [auteur] renders visible as a phenomenon what no one has ever seen before, because he or she manages, being the first to do that every time, to resist the given enough for it to show *itself*—and then in a phenomenon accessible to all” ([18], p. 51).

If this is the case, we discover that there are three tiers to this debate—the world the film generates, the givenness of artistic materials (including actors) and the givenness of the film’s projection and reception, or re-viewing by the audience. Malick’s phenomenological awareness attends to this triad of givenness, not merely in his filmmaking structure but also through his film’s internal story, and subsequent public release subject to viewers’ interpretation. Displaying yet another layer of the film’s complexity, Malick’s visible in excess extends beyond the frame into the very lives of *To the Wonder*’s characters, wherein we see an existential account of love’s presence and absence. Malick shows us that we are all capable of experiencing crushing loss with the possibility for despair, with or without the beloved. Though love’s absence plays a significant role in the film’s twin narratives, Malick’s subtle antidote, inhabiting life’s uncertainties, comes from Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, instructing us in charity beyond our tendencies towards despondency.

#### 4. To the Wonder’s Narrative as Kierkegaard’s Works of Love

In this obscure tale on love and its many forms, saturated phenomena shows itself through the human presence of the neighbor—the one nearest to us. Father Quintana’s homilies, bearing deep resonance with Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, are concise theological meditations on love that pepper the film. In his first sermon, he discusses human and divine love:

There is a love that is like a stream that goes dry when rain no longer feeds it. But there is a love, that is like a spring coming up from the earth. The first is human love and the second is divine love and has its source above. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the Church and give his life for her. He does not find her lovely—he makes her lovely. But there is a grace that comes in such a marriage.

<sup>7</sup> Marion makes a more concrete case for this theory in his *Crossing the Visible* where he considers specific paintings or art movements in art that support his claims: “The painter [and filmmaker], with each painting, adds yet another phenomenon to the indefinite flow of the visible. They complete the world, precisely because they do not imitate nature. They deepen a seam or a fault line, in the night of the inapparent, in order to extract, lovingly or more often by force, with strokes and patches of color, blocks of the visible. With the painting, the painter like the alchemist, makes visible what without them would have remained definitively invisible” [18].

Father Quintana alludes to Ephesians 5:25, perhaps the appointed text from that day's lectionary. Yet he stands at the altar of his fairly empty congregation, cleaning his glasses as he recites these words, quite distant from the solemnity of his sermon. We see the troubled face of Marina as a parishioner as she listens to his message, perhaps assessing the distance between her relationship with Neil and this higher call of sacrificial love. In this scene we realize that the homily affects both the priest and Marina, as the source of love's stream has seemingly gone dry for them both.

Father Quintana's exhortation to embody unchanging love is derived from Kierkegaard's central axiom in *Works of Love*: "Christian love abides and for that very reason, it is. It must be believed and it must be lived" [19]. Yet this maxim that Kierkegaard calls our duty is really an impossible standard. Circumventing Kantian duty, Kierkegaard's term encompasses the inaccessible law of love—the command of Christ: "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>8</sup> Amy Laura Hall suggests in her *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love* that the "irreparable fracture running through our love" chooses *eros* over charity and is unable to love the other unselfishly, save for "God's radical grace" [20]. Hall insists that once we understand this high call towards the other, we refuse to submit: "we are freed to the extent that we remain in perpetual relation to the one who truly fulfills such a law, the same one by whose work we become beholden to God" ([20], p. 6).

To love the neighbor is the only safeguard from self-deception and wrongly ordered self-love. We regret to admit that we are incapable of loving our neighbor, certainly due to self-interest. However, this is how Kierkegaard distinguishes what makes a relationship uniquely Christian: "Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person—God—a person, that is, that God is the middle term . . . To love God is to love oneself truly; to help another person to love God is to love another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved."<sup>9</sup> Calling God the "middle term" in this equation of love, Kierkegaard denotes our inability to truly love a person devoid of loving God. In this way, the mediated process of loving the neighbor is our training in charity, as Kierkegaard scholar M. Jamie Ferreira reaffirms, "transforming our own love of God" [21].

Kierkegaard insists that works of love bear fruitfulness, particularly seen in this film through the *commitment* of love. Malick underscores human longing—for the other, for God—and the inherent hesitancy for commitment at the cost of damaging the neighbor in the process. In the beginning of the film, we observe Marina and Neil's (Ben Affleck) relationship in France—their contagious enthusiasm as playful lovers in an uncontaminated Arcadia. They have the quintessential romance in Paris, gallivanting from the Pantheon and the Pont-des-arts bridge, to the Jardin de Luxembourg and the medieval Cluny museum. In the Cluny, Marina's shadow lingers above the "sight" tapestry from the Lady and the Unicorn tapestry series, one of six concerning the five allegories of the senses. The unicorn sees itself in the mirror held by the lady, paralleling Marina's own introspection. The final tapestry, *mon seul desire* (my sole desire), symbolizes love rightly ordering the senses and desires.

<sup>8</sup> For Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, duty is the primary maxim in ethics, a categorical imperative, or moral obligation of self-governance in society. Unlike Kierkegaard, Kant's duty is divorced from a religious narrative or embodied practices that contextualize and rationalize such moral imperatives.

<sup>9</sup> He continues: "However beautiful a relationship of love has been between two people or among many, however complete all their desire and all their bliss have been for themselves in mutual sacrifice and devotion, even though everyone has praised this relationship—if God and the relationship with God have been omitted, then this, in the Christian sense, has not been love but a mutually enchanting defraudation of love ([19], p. 107).





The drive is overcast and chilly to Mont Saint-Michel, Malick's mimetic trope within the film. A bit of rain falls as they pass by the empty baptismal font, entering the church. The "Prelude" to Wagner's *Parsifal* begins as Marina and Neil clasp hands in the rose garden within the medieval hamlet monastery.<sup>10</sup> The lovers dance along the passage of land between sanctuary and sea, its liminal space acting as a paradigm for the film. Here the couple experiences the givenness of the other: "Love makes us one. Two. One. I in you, you in me." But their bliss is brief before the high tide begins to cover the land bridge back to shore. Can their love withstand the inevitable waters of life's complexities without commitment?

We begin to see Neil emotionally pull away when they arrive in America just as Marina, a new immigrant, craves his attention most. Her naïveté and appreciation of the open Oklahoma fields and vibrant sunsets only mask her anxiety. "If you love me," she states, "I need nothing else." Her insecurities from past relationships surface as Neil fails to commit to her on a deeper level. They speak little. Fear ensues as a silent dread lives with them. Desiring to empathize with Marina, we criticize her childish instability, animalistic behavior and disturbing psychological state. Certainly there are echoes to Pocahontas in her ideation of John Smith from Malick's *The New World* (2005), idolizing him as the source of her identity.

We see a mirroring between Neil's occupation as a toxicologist in a land ravaged by fracking and the corrosive state of his relationship with Marina since arriving in Oklahoma. Neil visits families affected by the presence of lead and cadmium in the soil, which have caused permanent health damage in the community. The sickness of the land parallels the toxicity of their relationship. Their internal state of emotional flux is reflected in Marina and Neil's unpacked home. Boxes remain throughout the house, partly full, suitcases open. Walls and rooms remain bare, with minimal furniture. What prevents

<sup>10</sup> A tangential but fascinating symbolic component of the film is aligned with this piece of music. *Parsifal* is Marina's theme and it recurs (like the memory of Mont Saint-Michel) as a leitmotif in the film amidst key points (*i.e.*, during Marina's affair). Wagner's opera harkens back to the 12th century medieval romance *Perceval*, or the story of the Fisher King and the quest for the Holy Grail by Chrétien de Troyes. In his account, the Fisher King resides over barren land and has a sickly father in need of healing, only made possible by the grail. The concept of agrarian fertility and sterility in medieval culture was connected to the virility of the ruler, as a king was "espoused" to the land. Consider the possible loose parallel yet rich symbolic resonance to Neil's occupation as a toxicologist seeking to help the environmental health of the land and community of Bartlesville mirroring the fecundity and absence in his relationship with Marina.

this couple from creating a hospitable residency? Malick's silent images of the couple are pregnant with anxiety, an erosion of their earlier romance.



Marina asks: "What is this love that loves? That comes from nowhere. From all around. The sky. You cloud. You love me too." Her musings consider that we have been loved first that so we might love back—whether towards the divine or the human. The image of the moving river is reminiscent of the tide at Mont Saint-Michel. Now the tide has washed in on their relationship and there is no land to stand on, no promise of a deeper commitment. Both narratives of the couple and the priest show an unquenchable yearning. Marina longs for a loyal relationship, of which she has no surety. Father Quintana's meager church attendance strains his already wafer-thin faith. Marina approaches Quintana after Mass to confess that she is out of communion with the Church.

At this point we begin to see Father Quintana's own anxiety: "Intensely I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. Exhausted. Will you be like a stream that dries up?" Malick shows us the distance between the external circumstances and the internal reality of the characters. It seems ironic that the priest, the pastoral servant of God, is the figure in the film wrestling with doubt and emotional paralysis. Malick unveils our own expectations of the characters, portraying their deep humanity and unavoidable skepticism. Father Quintana's house calls subsist in a community wrought with poverty and drug abuse. Damage is everywhere. His monologue of desperation gropes towards an absent presence, givenness that has not yet shown itself: "Everywhere you're present. And still I can't see you. You're within me. Around me. And I have no experience of you. Not as I once did. Why don't I hold on to what I've found? My heart is cold. Hard."<sup>11</sup>

When Marina returns to Paris due to an expired visa, she discovers a city of shadows and loneliness without the light of love. The harsh urban suffocation is juxtaposed to Neil's romance with his childhood friend Jane (Rachel McAdams). Their rendezvous amidst the wispy golden hayfields resurrect moments from *Days of Heaven*, the marshes of the *Thin Red Line* and the mythic sense of virginal land in *The New World*. The painterly frames capture the autumnal palette of rusts and olives,

<sup>11</sup> Here, Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* informs Father Quintana's anxiety. *Dasein* is self-aware of its own existence in the world, being-for-itself, its transience and being-towards-death. However, Steven Rybin, in his *Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film* suggests that Malick's films are not merely visual extensions of Heidegger's *Dasein*, because we do not see Quintana's anxiety end in despair ([22], p. 102).

golds and camels in the heard of bison, horse stables and saffron skirts swirling in the gale. Jane's desire to marry Neil pushes him away. Many of the camera angles portray his back or feature an over-the-shoulder-silhouette, illustrating his evasive persona. "I have no faith," he tells her, adding to his already allusive screen presence. Neil is reluctant to bind himself to either woman, yet both Marina and Jane seem to be completely taken by him. Here Malick shows us life's possibility for loving more than one person at the same time and the ensuing complexities, even jealousies, which follow.



Marina returns from France to wed Neil in a civil ceremony on promise of a green card. Though they have married in the eyes of the state, there is no giving of the self to the other. In a homily immediately following the wedding, Marina hears Father Quintana preach, knowing that the sacrament is missing from their legal union: "Awaken the love, the divine presence which sleeps in each man, each woman. Answer that which is of God in every woman and every man. Know each other in that love that never changes, which is not like a cloud in the sky gone by afternoon." Quintana's homily is paraphrased from Kierkegaard, who reminds us: "Love is a matter of conscience and thus is not a matter of drives and inclination, or a matter of feeling, or a matter of intellectual calculation ([19], p. 143).

The turning point in Neil and Marina's relationship seems to come with a visit to a medical center and the OBGYN asks if they would be open to having children, following the removal of Marina's IUD. Could this gesture of openness be a pivotal decision towards what their relationship might *become*? What is Malick asking us to consider about openness? Kierkegaard's directive that love bears fruit is intrinsically tied to the wonder of givenness. Is givenness merely the literal interpretation of having children? Or is it even perhaps the potential openness for an entire physiological transformation that occurs in pregnancy, in order to host another life that Neil cannot understand? Can the couple even extend openness and trust to each other without having children?

Marina and Neil marry in a church, swearing their "constant faith of abiding love." Their intimacy grows, as they give themselves each other. Malick is apt to show us that even the sacrament of marriage for Marina does not tidily resolve her anxieties. Her unhappiness leads to unfaithfulness, instigating an affair with a man of no significance. Neil's disbelief of her affair leads him to file for divorce. We are caught off guard by her adultery and dissatisfied with the lack of information Malick provides. How can Marina throw away so flippantly what she has finally received? Perhaps Malick shows us the burden of our *raison d'être* being fundamentally centered on a person only, which can only result in failure.

Yet Father Quintana too has to practice the very homilies he gives his parishioners. “Love is not only a feeling, it is a duty. You shall love. It is a command. You feel that it has died? It is perhaps waiting to be transformed into something higher.” Malick shows us our humanity in our inability to keep the law of love. He does not give us perfect characters that make the best decisions because we are always in a state of *becoming*, which cannot be scripted. Amy Laura Hall relates “that the virtue most closely aligned to love, for Kierkegaard is humility: a sense of our original, potential and actual transgression and of our indebtedness to God” ([20], p. 4).

We witness Father Quintana’s priestly visits, observing his hesitancy and his pessimism. He delivers Eucharist to the prisoners crowded in stalls within sterile concrete buildings, craving human touch; his faith is not strengthened by what he sees. As he approaches the house of a meth user, her leathery skin gaunt on her skeletal frame, she calls out: “You gonna open that bible and preach to me?” Quintana cries out in Jobian manner: “Why do you turn your back? All I see is destruction. Ruin. Failure.” Here, Malick’s use of *cinéma vérité* casting has an immediate impact on the viewers. These are real people, not actors, taken up into the larger narrative of *To the Wonder*. Through Quintana, Malick is extending questions of theodicy beyond the film into our own encounters with a broken world. The realization that these people are *actually* suffering is haunting. Malick does not make them spectacles, but rather forms our vision to see them as “icons,” as Marion uniquely defines them.



Again, Marion is helpful in thinking about the given, through the distinction of seeing the person—either by participation or objectification. Part of seeing is managing how much givenness the viewer receives in the “event” or experience with the other person. This, in turn, develops into admiration which can be “idolatrous” or “iconic”. For Marion, the human face is a unique axis of revelation as it bears the significance of God’s face in the Incarnation, making every human face a potential icon.<sup>12</sup> The face’s irreducibility beholds God in the immanent present to the neighbor, regardless if the viewer’s gaze is ordered to perceive it. For Marion, the icon, is the *unforeseen*. It reveals the excess that cannot be seen through the visible. Malick’s phenomenological approach to filmmaking

<sup>12</sup> “The face, saturated phenomena according to modality, accomplishes the phenomenological operation of the call more, perhaps than any other phenomenon (saturated or not): it happens (event), without cause or reason (incident/ accident), when it decides so (arrival) and imposes the point of view from which to see it (anamorphosis) as a *fait accompli*. That is why what imposes its call must be defined not only as the other person of ethics (Levinas), but more radically as the icon” ([15], p. 118).



is evident here as the *unforeseen* givenness of the Bartlesville townspeople become the very answer to Quintana's search.

Quintana does not experience God in a numinous rupture, but through a handicapped parishioner. It is in the common actions that he finds Christ showing himself from within the faces of the poor and the broken. Quintana finds compassion as he visits them, seeing the Eucharist at work in all things—all faces. Walking the streets of Osage County, he prays the breastplate of St. Patrick: "Where are you leading me? Teach us where to seek you. Christ before me. Christ behind me. Christ in me. Christ beneath me. Christ above me. Christ on my right. Christ on my left. Christ in the heart." This prayer is the center of the hymn "I Bind Unto Myself Today," commonly sung as the entrance chant in the ordination to the diaconate and the priesthood liturgy. When Quintana prays the breastplate of St. Patrick, he is both remembering and renewing the vows he made at his ordination to the priesthood, his sacrament of Holy Orders to the Church.

How Malick's characters see each other is critical to the Eucharistic ethic of love in the film. On one hand, Malick shows us the danger of the lovers' idolatry insofar as the beloved is transubstantiated into a god, expecting love to be a salvific answer, ending in heartbreak. Conversely, we see Father Quintana revive his vocational fervor because his faithful labor towards an impoverished diocese affords him the opportunity to witness his community's iconicity, healing his vision of humanity, and ultimately his perception of God. Both Kierkegaard and Marion help us find God as the "middle term" for loving the neighbor, through the neighbor's very face. While Kierkegaard contends that without God we are unable to truly love at all—lover, neighbor, ourselves; Marion specifically ascribes the locus of the "middle term" to the human face. Here Malick's parallel narratives finally intersect: the capacity for loving another is made possible because the face is the image of God. The quest for love, for God, the source of human longing is ultimately mitigated in the unforeseen givenness of the other. Malick's film illustrates this saturated phenomena of wonder when commitment and humility serve the alterity of the neighbor—be it lover or stranger.

The last lines of the film articulate Father Quintana's renewed desire to love in this manner: "Let our lives be such a reflection that people see you. Shine through us. Show us how to seek you. We were made to see you. Love that loves us: Thank you." In this prayer, we witness the prismatic nature of the human soul, refracting love for the other *as* other. Similarly, Marion relates that we are able to witness wonder by the lens of charity, "which gives itself and only allows itself to be seen by those who love it . . . to see the world as gift and to see a human being as both himself and a gift is, Kierkegaard would say to see rightly" ([21], p. 230).

## 5. Conclusions

Through the phenomenological dynamics of the cinema, Malick synthesizes our discussion of Marion and Kierkegaard. He cinematically demonstrates the contingent operations of giving/receiving love and encountering wonder, and, so, attempts to convert our vision to his, probing and capturing the phenomenological complexities of givenness in front of our very eyes.

And yet, some are undecided if Malick actually succeeds with his phenomenological project.<sup>13</sup> A common criticism of Malick's recent films is they find his narrative form unconvincing, pronouncing his elusive characters as underdeveloped sketches rather than disclosed subjects. Regardless, I am convinced that his intuitive artistic risks are daring and admirable. If he falters here, it is certainly not for lack of authenticity or anemic vision.

Perhaps this perceived weakness is an unexpected strength. How can celluloid best pictorialize humanity's simultaneous fragility and inextinguishable yearning for hope? Malick's phenomenological style portrays these binaries in tension, holding together the fractured and the possible in ever-shifting

<sup>13</sup> Such as J.R. Jones from the Chicago Reader: "There's a little too much wonder and not quite enough story in this middling effort from Terrence Malick" [23].

relation. Even his finale does not present tidy exits or definitive conclusions, but offers us the opportunity to engage the human struggle for meaning anew. As a final consideration, we might observe how Malick focuses this engagement through sacramental framing, transfiguring moments through cinema's expressive power.

Malick punctuates the film with the sacraments, which bear witness to the commitment of love amid the uncertain. The film even acts as a kind of visual meditation on the rosary's luminous mysteries: confession is heard in backyards and bedsides, Eucharist is dispensed from sanctuary to prison, marriage is performed both civically and ecclesiastically, last rites are administered in the hospital. Transfiguration happens quietly as grace implements works of love. Malick does not obviate their liturgical performances; in fact, he catechizes us as viewers to identify what he has curated for us to behold. It is here, in the tension between fragmentation and covenant that givenness strains for disclosure.

Within these frames, Malick has us experience celluloid's immanence in sacramental terms: that is, structure as well as spontaneity, exhibiting the elements of ritual, tradition, surprise, accident, and indeed, revelation. Cinema's ability to cause transformation via the medium itself serves here as a kind of inscape that captures love's many manifestations. Malick's film leads us through a liturgy of luminous mysteries, returning at the end of its visual prayer to the beginning of the first mystery: baptismal waters which encase the narrative. This circular form echoes a critical theme of reciprocity, inherent in a phenomenology of love.



Thus, it is unsurprising that we find the image of Mont Saint-Michel in the film's final frame. Tidal waters are twofold in their baptismal significance. First, they symbolize the sacramental rite of initiation into Christian faith, reenacted at the Holy Water font, ceremonially memorializing each ecclesial entrance and exit. Second, the incessantly emerging and receding waters surrounding Mont Saint-Michel both expose and conceal the land bridge, providing an analog of autonomy and communion with the church. Malick's closing projection evokes love's perpetual exitus et reditus, at a monastery entitled, of all things, La Merveille—the Wonder. This visual trope is his story's nexus, recapitulating memory's witness to wonder, resuscitated in hope.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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