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What Does God Hear? Terrence Malick, Voice-Over, and *The Tree of Life*

“You spoke with me from the sky, the trees, before I loved you, believed in you.” Jack’s (Sean Penn) revelation at the end of the creation sequence in *The Tree of Life* (2011) could be an apologetic for all of Terrence Malick’s films, especially considering its delivery in voice-over. Since his first film, 1973’s *Badlands*, Malick has used voice-over in a variety of unconventional ways for a number of different effects. While scholars have often considered the female voice-overs in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* (1978), the role of voice-over has remained largely untreated in his later three films: *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005), and, due to its recent release, *The Tree of Life*. In this article, I will chart how Malick’s use of the voice-over has evolved over his filmography, especially in the twenty years between *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line*. I will argue that the shifts in Malick’s employment of the voice-over have created a unique auditory perspective in *The Tree of Life*, wherein Malick positions the audience in the place of God, able to hear the questions and objections of the soul.

In comparison to Malick’s later films, the voice-over in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* seems to be a rather conventional narrative device, yet Malick’s decision to filter his stories through the voices of young, female narrators subverts typical notions of voice-over narration. Speaking of both Holly’s (Sissy Spacek) and Linda’s (Linda Manz) narration, Joan McGettigan asserts, “The voice-overs serve more to de-stabilize the discourse than to provide the traditional interiority of character narration” (34). Holly’s seemingly detached voice-over should, in the words of Malick, make the audience “always feel there are large portions of her experience she’s not including because she has a strong, if misplaced, sense of propriety” (Malick qtd in Walker 82). Throughout the course of the film, then, Holly’s voice-over works against audience expectations, making it “a disturbing disjunction between sound and image” that highlights

the fallibility and subjectivity of its narrator (McGettigan 35). Here, Malick’s manipulation of the voice-over stands in contrast to the audience’s desire to “embrace the character as principal storyteller” (Kozloff 49). In a similar fashion, Linda’s voice-over in *Days of Heaven* also challenges audience’s expectations, but does so in an even more complex manner than Holly’s, often undermining the narrative presented to us by the camera.

Certainly, *Days of Heaven* stuns visually—winning the Oscar for Best Cinematography that year—but on a narrative level, Linda’s voice-over constantly complicates the images presented by Malick and cinematographer Nestor Almendros. Fluctuating throughout the film, her voice-over expresses a number of different views and serves multiple functions, leading us “to re-evaluate what we see and hear...to become conscious of the narrating agency’s presentation of the diegetic world, and perhaps to become suspicious of it” (McGettigan 38). Sarah Kozloff also points to the self-consciousness of Linda’s voice-over, suggesting that “the audience becomes acutely aware that someone else... is actually presenting both the story and the purported storyteller” (116-17). If this is the case and Malick is using Linda’s voice to make us conscious of his role as the director, then we must ask what he is seeking to accomplish by using the voice-over in this manner. I argue that, as his career lengthens, Malick’s voice-overs build upon this self-awareness of a creator, and ultimately, place the audience in a position of an omniscient *creator*, listening to the transcendent murmurings of the characters.

The voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, and *The Tree of Life* depart from the voice-overs in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* in three significant ways: instead of one voice, we hear multiple perspectives; rather than addressing and often complicating the narrative, the voice-overs contribute to our understanding of the inner state of the



characters; and these voice-overs generally speak from a “timeless present,” not from sometime in the future (Chion 2004, 53). In addition to exploring how these differences form an unusual audio perspective, this discussion can benefit from Michel Chion’s view of the acousmatic sound and the voice-over. For Chion, the voice “instantly sets up a hierarchy of perception” in which the listener “always tries to *localize* and if possible *identify* the voice,” and when the audience is unable to do so, the voice takes on a mystical quality (1999, 5). When the voice of a character whom we have not seen until that certain point in the film comes from off-screen, but remains liable to appear in the visual field at any moment, Chion calls the speaker a “complete acousmètre;” whereas he attaches the term “already visualized acousmètre” to an acousmatic speaker who has been previously visually identified (1999, 21). Interestingly, none of Malick’s films contain a complete acousmètre for their duration, although the later three begin with a complete acousmètre who is quickly visually identified.

The Thin Red Line opens with shots of nature accompanied by Private Witt’s (Jim Caviezel) voice-over; Pocahontas’ (Q’orianka Kilcher) voice-over invocation begins *The New World*; and *The Tree of Life* starts with old Jack’s voice-over before his mother’s (Jessica Chastain) takes centre stage. Beginning with a complete acousmètre, the films illustrate the acousmètre’s “omniscience and omnipotence,” as we identify the bodiless voice with “God” and “the Mother” (Chion 1999, 27). However, Malick’s purpose for the voice-over is to undercut the narrative continuity and demonstrate its lack of omniscience, thus he must

quickly “de-acousmatize” the voice. “De-acousmatization,” Chion explains, “results from finally showing the person speaking...at that point the voice loses its virginal-acousmatic powers, and re-enters the realm of human beings” (1999, 23). Within twenty minutes of the onset of each film, Malick de-acousmatizes the voice that opens the film, a significant move when coupled with the shift to multiple voice-overs. Through many, differing voice-overs, Malick reinforces the effect of the de-acousmatization by not giving any character entire control over how the story is presented to the audience. As a result, the singular, controlling perspective of the voice-over in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* is largely abandoned in these later films, as the polyphony of voices only allows a coherent narrative by considering them as parts of a whole.

In fact, the lack of narrative in these films forces us to piece together the story, and in a sense, create the film along with Malick. Chion suggests that an “inner voice” connects the voices in *The Thin Red Line*, and “these voices that are closed to each other at the same time combine into the modulated meditations of a single collective consciousness,” comprising “a single text” that we must decipher (2004, 57). Bilge Ebiri raises a similar point about *The New World*: “One might even wonder if the characters are aware of [their thoughts]; they certainly don’t quite know or understand what they’re trying to express” (Ebiri). In *The Tree of Life*, the shift to narrative incoherence created by the voice-overs is even more pronounced when coupled with the film’s visual, spatial, and temporal jumps, far more jarring than those that occur in either *The Thin Red Line* or

The New World. In this manner, our attempts to make sense of an incoherent narrative force us to engage with the voice-overs, yet the multiple narrators keep us from concentrating on one as the controller of the diegetic world.

Before looking at a few specific examples from *The Tree of Life*, I want to touch on how these voice-overs address the audience. Unlike those in *Badlands* and *Days of*

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Heaven, the voice-overs that permeate these later three films rarely reflect back on the films’ events from any point in the future. Chion suggests the voice-overs in *The Thin Red Line* speak from a “timeless present” mirroring the lack of specificity about how much time has elapsed in each film (2004, 53). This effect is particularly obvious in *The Tree of Life*, as the voice-overs do very little to situate us temporally in the film’s disjointed structure, turning every episode into a moment of the present. Malick not only shows us events outside of our human abilities to see—the creation of the world, extreme close-ups of nature, the end of time—but allows us to hear thoughts and prayers of the past (and future) in the present: we are in God’s territory. Certainly, this reading is but one facet of the film’s interplay between the past, present, and future, owing to the idea of God being outside of time, most famously advanced by C.S. Lewis: “Almost certainly God is not in Time...[it] is always the Present for Him” (167). Additionally, when the characters address God through voice-over, they almost always use the pronoun “you,” further placing us in God’s auditory position as we are directly spoken to by the characters. All of these factors—multiple voices, lack of narration, and atemporality—are emphasized in *The Tree of Life*, combining to make the film’s voice-overs resonate even more forcefully than those in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*.

One of the most striking voice-overs in *The Tree of Life* comes slightly before the mid-point of the film, as the young Jack (Hunter McCracken) is praying; he is kneeling at his bed, struggling to keep his eyes closed, praying in the typical fashion of a twelve year old: “Help me not get dogs in fights. Help me be thankful for everything I’ve got.” Then, his voice-over appears in the mix with the unvoiced question: “Where do you live?” After another snippet of prayer, we cut to a school playground, the camera fluidly weaving through crowds of children, but we still hear Jack’s voice: “Are you watching me?” As we are, quite literally, watching Jack, we can only answer that question in the affirma-

ive. With god-like omniscience we have seen him grow up, and, over the remainder of the film, we will see some of the darkest moments of his young life—secret, shameful moments that no one else experiences. If this question had been voiced in the diegetic dialogue, its power to make us identify with our act of spectatorship would have been lost. Instead, the voice-over’s acousmatic qualities compel us to seriously consider the question in relation to the perspective Malick has given us as the audience. Jack’s next remarks reveal even more: “I want to know what you are. I want to see what you see.” His inner voice carries these thoughts to us—the unseen, all-seeing audience—forcing us to contemplate exactly who we are and what we have seen up until this point in the film. By giving us god-like attributes, Mal-



ick seems to be suggesting that the way we respond to Jack’s questioning is, in some minute way, representative of God’s character in the film: silent, creative and, ultimately, compassionate. We are not capable of speaking into the diegetic world, nor can we offer answers to Jack or any of the other characters. We are silent, as God is silent. Jack, however, wants more than just knowledge—he wants to see what we see.

Of course, what we have seen, what we see, and what we will see constitutes a vital part of who we are as the audience, and our participation in this process directly reflects the creative aspect of Malick’s God. As I mentioned ear-



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lier, the lack of narration in Malick's films turns us into co-creators of the narrative of the film, and the same process unfolds in *The Tree of Life*, allowing us to experience that facet of God's nature through witnessing the Creation of the world. The Creation sequence, possibly the most visually arresting sequence in the film, is understandably perplexing, encompassing nearly a half hour of screen time in a complete hijacking of the narrative. Approaching this sequence with our position as God and the power of the voice-over in mind, however, allows us to better understand how Malick uses this sequence to engage us with divine issues. The voice of the mother begins the sequence, asking a series of questions related to the death of Jack's brother: "Lord, why? Where were you? Did you know? Who are we to you?" With the burgeoning world being formed in front of our eyes, these questions come to us in the present, giving us the impression of being outside of time, hearing one thing while seeing another. Her final statement in this section of voice-over is practically an accusation—"Answer me." Though God remains silent, by framing the sequence with these words, Malick poses creation itself as the answer.

Also, by not providing a verbal answer from God, alluded to by the film's epigraph from the Book of Job—"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?...When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (38:4, 7)—Malick makes it clear that it is God's prerogative to provide or withhold explanation for earthly tragedies.

As God's silence continues, the mother changes her stance in the next voice-over and asks us for something other than answers; she pleads, "Hear us." As he did when Jack was praying, Malick has conflated our role with God's, but here the effect is more powerful because we have the ability to grant her request. We will spend the rest of the film hearing what these characters are saying, hypothetically listening as God would. With these two words, Malick has given us a function that we can fulfill and, more importantly, asserted that God's main role is listening, not speaking. Due to our ability to hear the characters and empathize with them, Malick is giving us a glimpse into his conception of God's interaction with the world. One voice-over in particular, near the end of this film, illustrates this as we hear the father's (Brad Pitt) only voice-over, a startling admission of his faults and failures: "I wanted to be loved because I was great...The glory around us, trees and birds. I lived in shame. I dishonoured it all and didn't notice the glory. A foolish man." Here we are granted insight into this man's broken life, usually hidden behind the façade he presents to the exterior world, by listening to his confession. Although true revelation in *The Tree of Life* can come from seeing,



more often it comes from listening, as this moment demonstrates.

In most films dealing explicitly with matters of God and faith, the characters are often waiting for God's voice to enter into their lives, trying to figure out what God might be saying. *The Tree of Life* takes a different approach, giving us the other side of the conversation, using the voice-over to place us in the position of God. Although *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* achieve moments of transcendence, they remain temporally conventional, their voice-overs more often connected to what is seen on the screen, not quite reaching the heights of *The Tree of Life*. Intertwined with dazzling visuals, *The Tree of Life's* voice-overs give us a taste of omniscience due to their unique qualities, revealing Malick's perception of God. By conflating our perspective with God's, Malick posits that God listens first and perhaps does not speak or intrude on the universe—a silent yet compassionate creator. In this manner, we are able to empathize with the characters through hearing, while we grasp the bigger picture through seeing. It seems to me that Malick's cinematic approach to issues of religion and God effectively portrays the ambiguity and complexity involved in any form of religious belief without pandering to the audience. In his characters' search for salvation, Malick does not censor their questions or address their suffering with cliché platitudes; instead, he amplifies their objections and voices by letting us hear the cries of their souls, to which we can offer no respite. While *The Tree of Life* is a film about characters searching for and questioning the divine, the

voice-overs ultimately suggest another, just as important question: what does God hear?

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