Altars to the Unknown: How Ambiguous Cinema Addresses Life’s Fundamental Uncertainties

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the course of human history, certain fundamental unknowns have plagued our collective understanding: What is our place in the Universe? Why does suffering exist? Is there a god or an afterlife? Great works of art attempt to address (if not answer) these fundamental mysteries. As a medium, cinema has an unmatched power in helping us to process the mysteries of life. By blending sound, images, and the imaginary, filmmakers have the unique ability to immerse their audiences in the cinematic experience. This immersion creates a dialogue; with every shot, frame, or editorial decision, the artist is communicating with his or her audience. A new genre of filmmaking, which I have named ambiguous cinema, seeks to elevate this dialogue into a truly interactive experience. Ambiguous cinema has the capacity to be an extremely powerful cinematic experience. These works act as immersive puzzles that challenge the audience to decode their meanings. Two recent works of ambiguous cinema, Terrence Malick’s The Tree of Life (2011) and Carlos Reygadas’s Post Tenebras Lux (2012), demonstrate the capabilities of the genre. Ambiguous cinema helps us to cope with and process life’s fundamental unknowns, even if we never derive an answer that quells our uncertainty.
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I. Introduction

Throughout the course of human history, certain fundamental unknowns have plagued our collective understanding: What is our place in the Universe? Why does suffering exist? Is there a god or an afterlife? Great works of art attempt to address (if not answer) these fundamental mysteries.

As a medium, cinema has an unmatched power in helping us to process the mysteries of life. By blending sound, images, and the imaginary, filmmakers have the unique ability to immerse their audiences in the cinematic experience. This immersion is one of the medium’s greatest strengths. It creates a dialogue between filmmaker and audience; with every shot, frame, or editorial decision, the artist is communicating with the viewer, allowing him or her to inhabit the filmmaker’s worldview. The greatest films have the potential to serve as a feature length journey through the mind of the artist, as he or she attempts to process the challenging, complex aspects of the human experience.

These exploratory cinematic journeys possess the potential to be greatly cathartic for the viewer. By stimulating the viewer’s emotions, imagination, and intellect, the filmmaker has the ability to unlock an experience of profound recognition and understanding, as the film acts a mirror from which humanity’s most vital uncertainties can be reflected and explored.

In cinematic culture, a certain genre of intellectual, challenging cinema has emerged from around the globe—a genre I will refer to as ambiguous cinema. These works are marked by three distinct characteristics: an unconventional relationship between time and space in the narrative, an atypical editing style and pace, and a
prioritization of visual metaphor over plot. These radical works are full of what Pignocchi dubs “weakly implied meanings,” cinematic gestures whose intentions are not easily attributed or deciphered (2012). For example, in Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* (2011), Malick includes a seemingly random shot of a chair moving on its own. The meaning of this mysterious gesture is intentionally ambiguous, leaving the audience to decode its significance.

The challenges of ambiguous cinema force an interactive dialogue between the audience and the film, as human nature dictates one of two outcomes: either the viewer rejects the film as incoherent and nonsensical, or he or she attempts to solve the challenging exercise of decoding the greater meaning of the ambiguous work and, in doing so, the filmmaker’s intentions. This analytical process is potentially rewarding for many reasons, chief among them the possible simulation of uncertainty that parallels the ambiguous uncertainties of humanity’s fundamental unknowns. By exploring the ways in which ambiguous cinema conjures the abstract emotions and uncertainties of the human condition, the potential therapeutic benefits of audacious, ambiguous cinema emerge.
II. How ambiguous cinema exerts its power

Ambiguous cinema has the potential to stimulate a variety of emotions, from anxiety and uneasiness to pleasure and serenity. The basis for this ability is deeply ingrained in the psychology of the viewer’s experience as a spectator of the film, *i.e.* the cinematic experience. The study of the cinematic experience has long been rooted in psychoanalysis, specifically the work of Jacques Lacan. Lacan, a 20th century French philosopher and psychoanalyst, developed several theories that revolutionized how we understand the cinematic experience, as well as the ways watching a film affects the viewer. In cinema studies, the most important Lacanian concept is the mirror stage, the moment in childhood development when an infant first encounters his or her reflection in a mirror and recognizes the reflection as an extension of the self. This is an extremely profound and significant realization, as the reflection plays a dramatic role in the process of self-formation and identity (the ideal-I). The mirror stage is also significant because it marks the first time a child encounters what Lacan refers to as the Dual Relationship, the conflict between the Real and the Imaginary. The Real, what is tangible, is expressed by the signifier, while the Imaginary, is ephemeral and perceived, the signification. In other words, the child encounters the reflection, the signifier of the Real, and fills in his own signification, his identity, in order to achieve understanding (Johnston 2013).

The mirror stage served as a foundational concept for the work of the theoretical community in the 1970s. These theorists and critics, such as Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, expanded the theory of the mirror stage as it pertains to the cinematic experience, specifically the process of spectatorship. Like the infant
staring in the mirror, the spectator has a moment of recognition and attempts to identify with the “reflection” of the screen, placed in a hypersensitive yet powerless state. However, the screen is an imperfect mirror; while the spectator may view the human beings of the film as akin to himself, he is absent from the reflection. Where, then, is the viewer’s presence?

If not present in the screen, the spectator’s only possible point of identification is with the gaze of the camera. As Metz (1977) writes, “the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking at...” (p. 49). The camera’s gaze, the essence of the film’s content, then serves as both the eye and the “I” of the film experience. The hyper-perceptive viewer sees through the camera’s gaze and embodies its identity. Metz echoes this idea, declaring:

I am all-perceiving... because I am entirely on the side of the perceiving instance: absent from the screen, but certainly present in the auditorium, a great eye and ear without which the perceived would have no one to perceive it, the instance, in other words, which constitutes the cinema signifier (it is I who make the film) (p. 48).

In this statement, Metz implies the sense of agency possessed by the viewer within the cinematic experience. Acting as a voyeur, the viewer has total power, able to perceive the subjects of the film anonymously and from an unattainable location, removed from both the time and place of the narrative.

Because the filmmaker is the one who preordains what the content of the camera’s gaze will be, he or she defines the viewer’s identification, determining
what kind of cinematic experience the audience will perceive. However, in the work of the auteurs of ambiguous cinema, the viewer is not all-perceiving. Rather, he or she is limited in the power of his or her gaze. This powerlessness is due to the director’s choice to restrict facts of the narrative to their minimal essentials, and to present the elements of the screen reflection in ambiguous ways. The use of “weakly implied meanings” in the film’s content muddles the perceptions of the viewer, throwing them in a state of uncertainty and confusion. However, the viewer’s options for identification remain solely in the camera’s lens; yet, the meaning of the camera’s gaze is often far from definitive, as the filmmaker may choose to leave space for multiple interpretations or misreadings of his or her ambiguous intentions.

Additionally, the camera can be just as uncertain about the content of the film as the viewer. For instance, in Malick’s *The Tree of Life*, a palpable sense of exploration and curiosity permeates each frame. Nevertheless, a viewer of ambiguous cinema is transported into the worldview of the director and inhabits his or her gaze, tasked with making sense of the confusion and uncertainty. If willing, the viewer becomes seduced and enthralled by the mysteries of the film and is compelled to decode and decipher its meanings.

Oftentimes, ambiguous cinema conjures feelings of anxiety and distress, as is the case with Carlos Reygadas’s very unsettling *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012). In these cases, ambiguous cinema has the potential to act as a form of exposure therapy. Exposure therapy is a common practice for the treatment of anxiety disorders and phobias, and relies on increasing familiarity between the patient and the feared
stimulus. The patient is gradually placed in scenarios of increasing contact with the feared stimulus until the phobia is overcome. For instance, an individual who is afraid of spiders would first be placed in a room with a caged spider. Once the patient has overcome the anxiety produced from that particular scenario, the therapist might increase the stimulus by placing the spider at the opposite end of the room without a cage. Eventually, as the patient becomes more familiar and less afraid of the spider, he or she might be put in total contact with it, in the hope that the phobia has been cured.

Similarly, disturbing works of ambiguous cinema often stimulate feelings of anxiety around uncertainty and abstract feeling. These unsettling films have the potential to familiarize anxious viewers with the cryptic, ambiguous sources of their discomfort, even if these sources are abstract or uneasily named. The viewer is placed in the gaze of the camera, invited to participate in looking at cinematic gestures with weakly implied meanings that produce anxiety and unease. The viewer, hypersensitive to any signifiers of certainty, attempts to decipher the intent of the film, and in the process, becomes more familiar with feelings of doubt and ambiguity, even as these emotions unsettle and disturb them.

In other cases, like Malick’s *The Tree of Life*, ambiguous cinema is driven by pleasure, as the viewer becomes entranced by the beauty and dreamlike nature of the mysterious film. This pleasure is reminiscent of Mihály Csíkszentmihályi’s theorized state of flow, a euphoric happiness attained through an immersive experience, such as viewing a work of ambiguous cinema. Csíkszentmihályi, a positive psychologist who studies the science of happiness, developed the theory of
this mental state of unadulterated pleasure. According to Csíkszentmihályi, flow occurs when an individual achieves a goal through focused attention during an immersive activity, accomplished through the combination of skill and challenge. If the challenge is low, but an individual’s skill is high, only relaxation will occur. Conversely if the individual’s skill level is too low for a particular challenge, only a feeling of anxiety will be achieved. Yet, when a difficult enough challenge is met with satisfactorily high skill, then an individual experiences a state of flow. The difficult nature of ambiguous cinema’s narrative strategies and implied cinematic gestures create a significant challenge in decoding meaning. If the audience has the skill to actively engage in the film, rather than passively watch, flow can be achieved.

Csíkszentmihályi (1990) characterizes opportunities for flow by six criteria. First, the activity should involve intense concentration on the present moment. Secondly, the individual should actively seek to combine his or her actions with an awareness of what is occurring. Additionally, the activity should allow for a loss of self-consciousness or insecurity. The individual should also possess a feeling of personal control over the activity. Also, the subjective experience of time should be absent from the individual’s concerns—the feeling of time “flying by.” Finally, the activity should engender a native state of reward or accomplishment. If these six requirements are met, the individual achieves flow.

These principles are extremely compatible with the process of decoding ambiguous cinema; its immersive, challenging nature is a natural opportunity to achieve the flow state. By applying Metz’s cinematic analysis of Lacanian theory, a
relationship between the principles of flow and the cinematic experience becomes apparent.

As the viewer submits himself to the cinematic experience, he will natively become aware of the present moment (what is being projected), due to his own identification and enthrallment with the screen image. Ambiguous cinema only intensifies this desire for complete awareness, as each new scene offers the possibility of a new clue in deciphering the meaning of the film. If able to disappear into the dark anonymity of the theater and lose oneself in the search for meaning, the self-conscious ego will be discarded; the viewer opts to focus on the content of the film rather than his self-awareness or insecurities.

Yet, the “imperfect” nature of the screen mirror ensures that the viewer remains somewhat distinct from the cinematic image, even though it attracts him. This estrangement safeguards the viewer’s sense of control and agency. Separate from the activity of the film, he is always free to get up and leave the theater.

A truly analytic observer will remain aware of the film’s gestures and narrative, will be able to merge the passive activity of watching with the active process of inquiry and analysis. This amalgamation of active observation distracts the viewer from perceiving the passage of time. And, if able to derive some source of meaning or fulfillment from the ambiguous work, a feeling of reward will be experienced—the gratification of solving the filmic puzzle.

Ambiguous cinema’s latent ability to work as an exposure therapy, its potential for flow, and film’s transportive, transformational gaze grant ambiguous cinema its power. By exploring two works of ambiguous cinema, we can determine
the further ways in which this genre seeks to revolutionize the cinematic experience and help audiences to cope with the uncertain, ambiguous world in which they live.
III. *The Tree of Life*: Malick’s cinematic call to prayer

Terrence Malick, one of contemporary cinema’s most reclusive (and most underrated) geniuses, has crafted a unique niche in the cinematic landscape. Through his amalgamation of voice-over, a constantly moving camera, and micro-scenes (each usually lasting less than a minute), Malick has pioneered a cinematic style unlike any other filmmaker working today, a modernist cinema that explores the nature of being, identity, and relationships. His reclusive tendencies, like his refusal to participate in interviews or his reluctance to be photographed publically, complement the fundamentally ambiguous nature of his work; he intends for his films to speak for themselves, and for his audience to derive meaning entirely on their own. In his fifth feature, *The Tree of Life*, Malick confronts the most ambitious subject matter ever attempted on film—the origins of the Universe and man’s place within it.

*Passengers on the unknown journey*

*The Tree of Life* is fundamentally a film about searching: searching for answers, searching for peace, and searching for God. Malick often follows his characters as they wander through their physical environments, situating his fluid camera directly behind them, as if we are invited to be passengers in their search for meaning and understanding. What it is that they are looking for, or what they hope to find, is often left ambiguous, as the audience is left in a similar state of unknowing. At one point we hear a voice whisper, “Find me.” Here, Malick is
asserting the challenge of the film: If one is willing to follow his mysterious journey through the history of the Universe, some sort of understanding or peace is attainable. However, it must be searched for in order to be found. The voyage is far from easy; Malick’s fluid camerawork is an ever-present reminder that we, as an audience, may never find sure footing.

In one sequence, the camera follows several aquatic organisms, from pre-historic fish to slithering snakes, as they rapidly swim to the surface of their aquatic environs in an attempt to transverse the limits of their perception or understanding. Not long after, a dreamlike image of a child’s bedroom appears, submerged in water. One boy emerges and escapes through a doorway, into the luminous air above the surface. Aided by his frequent collaborator, cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, Malick depicts an almost liquiform world in *The Tree of Life*, one in which the camera effortlessly glides throughout the diegetic environment. The effect is a floating aura that flows through each entity of the mise-en-scène, from the household curtains to the neighborhood children, whose movements are granted a mystery and power. Like the objects he captures on film, Malick’s intentions float just within reach, longing to be captured and deciphered by the audience’s intellect, or admired by the eyes of the viewer, which are repeatedly entranced by the visual mysteries of the frame. If as Metz would argue, the audience is forced to identify with the filmic gaze of the camera, then we, like the boy in the submerged bedroom, swim through
Malick’s mellifluous world. One gets the impression that the answers to *The Tree of Life*’s mysteries lie just beyond the surface of our perceptions, waiting to be discovered and explored. In this way, Malick is working from a purely intuitive place; his mix of beautiful images and sounds flows into the viewer’s unconscious, creating an emotional, complex cinematic experience.

One such image is the mysterious golden light, which opens the film and recurs throughout its duration. Is this the manifestation of the divine that our characters are searching for? Clearly, Malick intends for the audience to question its significance each time it appears throughout this meditation on faith. In one scene, the mother (an angelic presence embodied by Jessica Chastain) gracefully spins while carrying her infant son, stopping to point towards the heavens to declare, “That’s where God lives!” Malick never concretely identifies a god or divinity in the film, and though *The Tree of Life* is sternly committed to exploring the uncertainties of existence, Malick also celebrates the known quantities of the universe, namely its immense beauty. Yet, a muted sense of bewilderment and contemplation permeates each frame of magnificent splendor, giving *The Tree of Life* a unique, spiritual quality, which critic Roger Ebert described as, “a form of prayer... [that] created within me a spiritual awareness, and made me more alert to the awe of existence” (2011).
The film opens with an epigraph that echoes our characters’ search for meaning. Taken from the Old Testament, it reads, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?... When the morning stars stand together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” Taken from a crucial section of the Book of Job, this quotation encapsulates the central conflict of the film: how does man endure suffering and pain when he knows so little about his own existence in the Universe? This conflict, between the uncertainty of life and the pain of death, forms the narrative tension of the film, as Malick sets off on a cinematic journey through the voyage of time.

Throughout *The Tree of Life*, Malick shifts between macro- and micro-scale to depict each significant step in the developmental lineage that will ultimately result in the life of one boy, Jack (whose young version is played by Hunter McCraken). In this sense, *The Tree of Life* is just as much a *bildungsroman* of the universe as it is of the boy at its center. The titular tree is present throughout the film, planted near the home of the O’Briens in the early years of Jack’s childhood. His mother whispers, “You will be grown before that tree is tall.” This growth marks the only real narrative plot in *The Tree of Life*, as Malick is much more interested in depicting the emotional journey of a man searching for meaning, rather than charting details or specifics. Hence, Malick leaves expository minutiae absent. As an audience, we know little about the adult Jack’s relationship with his family, his job, or even the name of his brother, whose life and death are so central to the film.

Even though he has little interest in narrative details, Malick still chooses to focus his study of existence through the lens of a single family. To begin his
exploration of existential history, he starts the story at the domestic scale, a middle-aged man and woman, the O'Briens (Brad Pitt and Jessica Chastain), grief stricken by the news of their son's untimely death. Like the biblical Job, the family must endure the suffering accompanied by the loss of their son. While the reason for his death remains mysterious—Malick implies some sort of military conflict has claimed his life—the grief produced by the event remains a palpable presence throughout the film. The son, a gift of beauty and joy for his parents, has been taken away, leaving them adrift in a puzzling state of confusion and sorrow. In a single shot, Malick shows the dying tree, whose derelict wooden treehouse is enclosed by a vacant absence of leaves. The life of the son, like childhood, has come to an end. Here, Malick reminds us that the beauty of nature and its grace can easily be lost, and the grief for this beauty is immeasurably painful.

Next, Malick takes us to the present, through a fast paced-haze of steel, glass, and machinery. Jack (now played by Sean Penn), the oldest son, is still rattled by the death of his brother, alienated from the modern world he finds himself in. Distressed, he flashes back to happier times with his brother as they grow and play amongst the verdant landscapes of small-town Texas. These scenes play like memories, moments of childhood innocence that can be both lovely and disturbing, like the shots of the boys playing through beautiful clouds of pesticide or wrestling through the gorgeous landscapes of wheat and grass.

Our wandering journey through the origin of the Universe then begins, as Malick catapults the narrative back billions of years to the Big Bang. In a poetic ballet of creation, the planet is violently shaken into being in a crash of fire and ash.
Along with the formation of the mountains and the oceans, Malick uses a series of lyrical vignettes to demonstrate the evolution of complex emotions. First, a lone red jellyfish swims among its pale counterparts, isolated from the others because of its difference. Next, a massive amphibious dinosaur languidly stares into its bleeding wound, undoubtedly contemplating its own mortality. Finally, in an extended sequence, an herbivorous dinosaur is attacked by a raptor. The more feral beast demonstrates his own power by crushing the dinosaur's head, perhaps the first gesture of willful aggression and domination in the history of the planet.

The final movement of this powerful sequence is the creation of a single child, Jack. Using an extended close-up shot that recalls Barthes' “The Face of Garbo,” Malick chooses to fill the screen with Jack's infantile, luminous face. By choosing to end his abstract, puzzling discourse on the history of the universe with a single-shot of a human baby, Malick employs the power of the cinematic image to engender identification; we become attached to this boy, and join him as he questions his own existence. This feeling of companionship is only intensified by the audience's own feelings of uncertainty about the ambiguous film. As we ponder the nature of Malick’s cinematic puzzle, we continue to observe a young boy's attempts to navigate the puzzling nature of his own place in the world.
The films of Terence Malick utilize very short “micro-scenes,” usually lasting no longer than a minute. The use of these short segments underscores Malick’s prioritization of the image to communicate information and emotion rather than dialogue (in fact, the most significant pieces of spoken information we receive come from extra-diegetic voice-overs). In one significant micro-scene, Malick depicts the beginnings of Jack’s questioning of his surroundings. Situated peacefully in his crib, the infant Jack stares at a reflective piece of light against his bedroom wall. The child begins his first attempts to make sense of the universe that surrounds him, an endeavor that will persist to frustrate him for the rest of his life. The light purposefully evokes the golden, divine aura that opens the film. For Malick, inquiry into the natural world and one’s surroundings inevitably leads to the divine, and *The Tree of Life* is certainly an example of such a spiritually fruitful examination.

Malick continually depicts moments of overwhelming spirituality or otherworldliness throughout Jack’s life. These cinematic gestures are beguiling and enthralling, as Malick challenges the viewer to look past the literal. For example, in a mystical dance that defies gravity, Jack’s mother, imbued with an angelic grace, floats amongst the titular tree. Similarly, Malick’s camera, constant in its motion, floats past numerous doorways, ascends ladders, and passes through wooded forests. By combining these mysterious images with orchestrations of classical opera, Malick supplants a sense of grace throughout the film, even as his mysterious
gestures confound his audience. This grace propels the filmic journey forward; the audience is too overwhelmed by beauty to distrust that an intention behind the ambiguous lens is present. In other words, Malick’s sure-handedness and the bold-faced confidence of his ambiguous gestures produce a sense of intentional purpose at the foundation of the enigmatic narrative.

*The Tree of Life*’s ambiguity also stems from the opacity of the film’s characters. Instead of providing detail about the characters of the film, Malick trusts that the performances of the actors will make the O’Briens feel real and authentic. Malick’s ambition is not to tell a specific tale about one American family. Rather, *The Tree of Life* aims to be a universal tale about the creation of all humanity. As Malick writes in the preface of the first draft of the film’s screenplay, “The ‘I’ who speaks in this story is not the author. Rather, he hopes that you might see yourself in this ‘I’ and understand the story as your own” (2007). By making them obtuse and archetypal, the characters are imbued with a mythic, allegorical quality, while the audience is free to submit as much of themselves into their interpretation of the film, allowing for self-awareness and reflection.

Consequently, we know very little about Jack or the rest of his family. In fact, neither Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien, nor their two younger sons, are given first names. Instead, Malick crafts the mother and father as two oppositional, archetypal forces, dual powers that extend beyond the simple masculine/feminine dichotomy. First suggested through voice-over at the beginning of the film, the mother instructs the audience:
...There were two ways through life—the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you’ll follow. Nature only wants to please itself... To have its own way. Grace doesn’t try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries... No one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.

The father, Mr. O'Brien (Brad Pitt) represents nature, the dominant position in the household. He is often enraged by the misbehavior of the children, enforcing his domain through punishment. The mother is grace, angelic and unconditionally loving.

Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien inhabit the house without much interaction, each parenting the children in their own way—the father through stern order, the mother through joyful play. Yet, like the asteroid that strikes the planet during the creation of the universe sequence, the orbits of these two powerful forces do collide. In one scene, the father suppresses the mother’s anger after she becomes enraged when he overreacts at the misbehavior of the children. The father physically holds her down as she beams with angry resistance. She inevitably calms and begins to wring out a dishwashing rag, a symbol of her domestic role. While these oppositional forces seem incompatible, each is needed to produce life, to give birth to Jack. Like the violent, intense creation of the universe, humanity is the product of a jarring collision of two oppositional forces, one’s parents.

As his mother instructs, Jack must choose between nature and grace. He agonizes throughout the remainder of the film, between loving his father despite his aggressive ways (the way of grace), and asserting dominance over his brother (the
way of nature). In a scene reminiscent of the dinosaurs earlier in the film, Jack wrestles his brother to the ground, holding him down until he is finally able to escape Jack’s grasp. As the film nears its conclusion, the O’Briens move out of their family home; Jack stares longingly at the house as the family drives away, suggesting his maturation has been left inside the house in which he has grown up. We return to the present, where a grown Jack remains just as confused as when he was a boy. To Malick, the way of nature and the way of grace continually wrestle within us, and our search for a way to find peace between these two impulses is a life-long struggle.

Rather than end the film at this cathartic moment, Malick continues further into the voyage of time. This progression is announced through another voice-over, as Jack intones, “Keep us. Guide us. To the end of time.” We see Jack wander through the desert, as he follows a mysterious woman draped in burgundy (an angel?) through a wooden frame. Then, accompanied by a swelling aria, a hazy explosion of light consumes the earth.

Next begins a cryptic array of images: young and adult Jack walking through the rocky dessert, a woman reaching into a grave, women passing a flame in a procession of candles, a bride in a lit doorway, linen covered bodies amongst a
peaceful field. Finally, Jack arrives on a mysterious beach, surrounded on both sides by waves. There, he encounters his mother and father, who appear as they did in the 1950s, and his deceased brother, still a child. His mother embraces him; Jack grasps his father’s shoulder, the same shoulder he rested on as an infant. Mrs. O’Brien encounters the young brother, and is instantly overjoyed. The mother and father share a passionate kiss. Soon, the women in burgundy embrace the mother, as she peacefully whispers, “I give you my son.” The mother, who begins the film overwhelmed with grief, has finally found peace. Malick ends the film with the mysterious light, a reminder of this divine body’s eternal presence.

This confusing coda to an ambiguous film filled with weakly implied meanings further emphasizes Malick’s quest for God in the film. He chooses to end his ambitious film with images of heaven, or the afterlife, presenting them in a series of mysterious images. Like his use of character, Malick prioritizes emotional catharsis over understandable detail. We do not understand what this heaven is, or what it means. We only understand that after death, the O’Briens are reunited in peaceful communion. The sequence does not follow any logical understanding of time, as each character appears at incongruous ages with Jack. Yet, the love between them is palpable, and as an audience, we are healed by their emotional, yet mysterious, reunion. As the mother intones, “The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by.” Love remains constant throughout time, resisting even the destruction of the known universe.

_The Tree of Life_ is a challenging, cryptic piece of cinema. Malick’s film is full of puzzling, incomprehensible cinematic gestures, from floating mothers to
underwater bedrooms, but the reclusive filmmaker asserts one certainty—the eternal presence of love. This romantic optimism establishes *The Tree of Life* as an essential work of ambiguous cinema. Love, a reflection of the divine, is a palpable force that will guide us through our search for meaning and quests for certainty. Even if the film fails to provide literal answers to the fundamental unknowns of humanity, *The Tree of Life* is an effective vehicle for an audience to work through their feelings of uncertainty, doubt, and grief. As a work of audacious, ambiguous cinema, Malick’s elliptical film provides a cinematic space to ponder our questions, and its hopeful, cathartic ending is a reminder that despite the limits of human understanding, there exists a capacity to love and be loved, a force stronger than the colossal movements of the cosmos, the vigor of time, or our own uncertainty.
IV. Reygadas’s *Post Tenebras Lux*: An ambiguous, cinematic nightmare

Mexican filmmaker Carlos Reygadas stunned audiences at the Cannes Film Festival when he unleashed his wildly enigmatic *Post Tenebras Lux* in 2012, just one year after the same festival premiered *The Tree of Life*. *Post Tenebras Lux* shares a common narrative strategy with Malick’s film, the use of a single family to explore intangible elements of the human experience. However, as its name would suggest (its translation from the Latin meaning, “after darkness, light”), Reygadas’s film is a much darker exploration of what it means to be living in the world that surrounds us. While Malick imbues the natural world with a magical splendor, Reygadas depicts an environment that is naturally hostile and dangerous to its inhabitants. Malick celebrates the trees; Reygadas slashes them to the ground.

*Post Tenebras Lux* also relies on supernatural elements; however, instead of Malick’s quest for communion with a shimmering divinity, *Post Tenebras Lux* contains a literal depiction of a glowing demon, who stalks the house of a sleeping family. By all accounts, *Post Tenebras Lux* is a nightmarish work full of ominous dread. Yet, by using the elliptical methods of ambiguous cinema, Reygadas creates an immersive, yet puzzling, cinematic experience, one that forces his audience to acknowledge and accept that darkness in the world exists.

*Post Tenebras Lux* adheres to ambiguous cinema’s trademark use of elliptical editing, as the progression from scene to scene does not reflect a logical chronology.
The children’s age provides our only indication for if we are in the past, present, or future, and even then a clear order of events or plot is not easily decipherable. Rather, Reygadas presents oblique moments in the lives of an upper class family, who dare to live in a rural Mexican town far away from their bourgeois upbringing.

*Post Tenebras Lux* is a film about the clash of elemental forces: civilization against nature, husband opposing wife, an indigenous community versus the bourgeois elite, innocence surrounded by darkness. The dichotomous nature of the film is best represented by the hectic rugby match in the final scene, which unfolds on a field similar to a field that recurs throughout the film. Reygadas uses a muted filter to decolorize the image, except for the vibrant blue and red jerseys of the players, who shove and tackle each other in a passionate display of aggression. Like this sporting clash, *Post Tenebras Lux* presents a world bursting with primal conflict. Just as Jack in *The Tree of Life* must choose between the way of nature and the way of grace, Rut and Eleazar (played by Reygadas’s young children), grow in the midst of dark energies which battle for their souls. In one scene, Eleazar waits patiently for his great-grandmother to give him his Christmas money, a gift he waited in line with his other cousins to receive in a ludicrous ritual of bourgeois decadence. Here, Reygadas suggests that either force, the primal energies of nature or the hedonistic compulsions of modern civilization, have the power to corrupt the innocence and purity of the children.
Reygadas begins the film with an image of a lone child, Rut, stranded in a
gloomy field, as calamitous thunder crackles
in the background. Reygadas stays on the child
for several excruciating minutes as day shifts
to night, creating an atmosphere of tension
and despair. Additionally, he chooses to
overlay the camera lens with a kaleidoscopic
blur, altering our perception of the image. The effect is a continual questioning of
what we are seeing—is this a real experience, or merely a dream? Our
interpretation is further confounded when, later in the film, Rut’s mother, Natalia
(Nathalia Acevedo) questions if she has been dreaming of animals.

The rest of the *Post Tenebras Lux* plays in similar shades of dream-like
perception. For instance, an older boy and girl (perhaps a grown Rut and Eleazar) go
hunting with a mysterious man. As an audience, we are constantly in a state of
disorientation, as Reygadas flashes between the present, the past, and the future.
This results in an impressionistic glimpse of the family’s dark environment, one that
they never comfortably assimilate with. At one point, the patriarch (Juan, played by
Adolfo Jiménez Castro) takes his family to a seedy bar in the area near his house. A
drunken dark-skinned Mexican confronts him, cryptically shouting, “Mexicans are
stupid shits? That’s your opinion, right, whittie?” Juan, who is a Mexican of European
decent, responds, “We are just as Mexican as you.” Here, Reygadas subtly betrays the
underlying conflict at the center of the narrative—the socioeconomic disparities of
modern day Mexico, and the cultural divide this inequality produces. That thread
continues until Juan is shot by his handyman/house worker El Siete (Willebaldo Torres), after Juan discovers El Siete stealing electronics from the family household.

However, Reygadas fails to make *Post Tenebras Lux* a polemic, didactic cinematic experience. Instead, he opts to create an esoteric, obtrusive film, in the hope that a universal audience will be able to identify with his dream-like gaze. Thus, the characters are often framed as victims or casualties of the strange world they inhabit, like Rut in the opening sequence or Juan, weak and feeble due to his gunshot wound. In this sense, Reygadas aims for audience recognition of the character’s turmoil, an emotional appeal that supports the simulation of a strange alienation from the natural world.

Unlike in *The Tree of Life*, the bonds of family are not enough to combat this dark force, as we see Juan alienate his wife through his broken communication and inner demons. Juan is no stranger to the darkness inside himself; after he savagely beats one of the family’s dogs, he tells his wife, “I always hurt the ones I love; you have to help me with that.” Not soon after, Reygadas depicts a dog savagely gnawing at a cadaverous bone, a visual metaphor for the destructive relationships in the family. Later, Juan berates Natalia when he begins to feel that she is no longer interested in having sex with him, as the bellowing thunder returns. This auditory inclusion suggests that Juan is becoming more and more like the natural darkness that surrounds him, and Reygadas holds on a medium-shot of Natalia as she receives his scorn. As an audience, we must bear the disdain that she is experiencing.
This spousal alienation is echoed when El Siete encounters his estranged wife, Samantha, who has left him because of his abusive behavior. El Siete hugs the woman, but she remains immune to his pleas for reconciliation. Once again, both spouses have been disconnected from each other at the hands of the husband’s malevolent behavior. Similar to Natalia, Reygadas shoots Samantha in a beguiling medium shot, and allows the camera to linger on her detached face, stimulating a feeling of discomfort and confusion.

Such strange alienation forces El Siete to commit suicide; however, Reygadas chooses a most grotesque method for El Siete’s self-inflicted death. He retreats to a field that recalls where Rut was lost and the boys play rugby, and, using only his hands, wrenches his head free from his body. Blood sprays onto the grass, until a storm begins to fall. The blood, mixed with rain, seeps into the ground, and Reygadas shows a cow sipping from the pinkish puddle. El Siete, through his grotesque suicide, has finally achieved some sort of connection, literally consumed by the darkness of the natural world.

*Post Tenebras Lux* is a nightmarish depiction of modern life, one in which humanity succumbs to its own darkness. In *Post Tenebras Lux*, the evil in our nature
(and the evil of nature) is constantly present, always ready to enter our doors and intrude upon our humanity. Reygadas’s film is an opportunity to acknowledge this possibility, and therefore accept evil’s continued existence in the world we inhabit.
IV. Conclusion: The therapeutic potential of ambiguous cinema

As a specialized form of art therapy, film watching has been an established psychotherapeutic technique for many years. A recent survey of licensed psychologists indicated that 67% have used or currently use film for clinical purposes (Lampropulos et al., 2004). Practitioners of cinema therapy endorse its multiple benefits: its ability to nurture the patient-physician relationship over a mutual interest in film and its basis in a widely accessible and common medium (Fleming and Bohnel, 2009). When viewed as a supplemental aspect of treatment, cinema therapy can foster an investment in recovery for the patient as an extracurricular avenue for success outside of typical treatment. The prescription of film viewing can also be seen as a reward for a patient’s obedience to the therapeutic relationship between patient and therapist (Yazici et al., 2013).

Cinema therapy has conventionally been used as an additional treatment, prescribed over and above traditional psychoanalytic methods. Traditionally, this practice entails the therapist selecting a film whose narrative has a certain literal relationship to the problems of the patient. For example, a patient who is battling terminal cancer could be assigned *50/50* (2011), a comedy in which the protagonist (played by Joseph Gordon Levitt) struggles to integrate his cancer diagnosis and treatment with the rest of his life. This literal approach to cinema therapy provides a model framework for the patient’s life experience, and offers the patient a tool to process their psychological discomfort or trauma at a distance.

However, this approach, which relies on a 1:1 correlation between cinematic narrative and the patient’s life story, limits the possibilities of treating more abstract
emotional struggles and restricts the healing benefits of cinema. Ambiguous cinema has the capability of eliminating these limitations, providing in-depth cathartic experiences that foster an understanding of the abstract emotional subject matter of the films. Perhaps counter-intuitively, ambiguous cinema crafts more personal relationships between the work of art and the patient, as he or she must use their own capacities for imagination and empathy to decipher the meaning of the film, despite the film's content seeming to have little connection with the patient's biographical situation. With great investment comes great reward, and the patient has the potential to attain agency and self-empowerment through mastering his or her skills of interpretation and analysis. These skills can in turn become useful when the patient encounters scenarios that force him or her to interpret and analyze their own behavior, a skill that can allow the patient to make peace with their uncertainty and heal their own destructive behaviors (self-relations psychotherapy).

Cinema therapy, especially therapy that utilizes ambiguous cinema, relies on interpreting uncertain meanings and decoding abstract metaphors, as the patient attempts to conquer the doubt and confusion accompanied by the unpredictable outcome of the cinematic experience. This analysis of potential meaning and interpretation of metaphors has traditionally been a hallmark of psychoanalytic practice, and allows the patient to view his or her experience from a distance and restructure the cognitive function in their brain so that healing may take place. This is no different in cinema therapy. As discussed in the cases of The Tree of Life and Post Tenebras Lux, works of ambiguous cinema are deep-rooted in abstract
cinematic experiences, relying on complex metaphors, which if decoded, allow the viewer to derive meaning.

Cinema therapy relies heavily on metaphor as a way to reach the patient, as Fleming and Bohnel (2009) note, the treatment “is going right to the heart of emotional processes rather than talking cognitively to the left brain, having it decoded, encoding it, transferring it to the other side of the brain, and then repeating the entire process again” (p. 643). Because ambiguous cinema combines complex, challenging storytelling with an immersive sensory experience, ambiguous films can serve as an analytical, interpretive framework to process both uncertainty and the abstract emotional forces in our lives. Therefore, ambiguous cinema offers us the opportunity to process and heal through a cathartic, immersive cinematic experience.

By combining analytical context with catharsis, cinema therapy has the potential to be significantly useful for patients. However, prescribed films need not be restricted to those of traditional, linear narratives, as in conventional models of cinema therapy. In fact, cinema therapy using ambiguous cinema acts as a more visceral, engaging therapeutic experience, forcing the viewer or patient to make his or her own conclusions about the meaning of the work.

Ambiguous cinema grants us the tools to process the uncertainties of life and our own abstract emotions. Through his depiction of the known universe and the continual search for meaning in *The Tree of Life*, Terrence Malick allows us to find comfort in our wandering through the bonds we share with those who walk with us on the journey. With *Post Tenebras Lux*, Carlos Reygadas illuminates the dark
elements of human nature and the natural world, providing the audience a visible representation of the evil inside and around us. Because of Lacanian identification, these ambiguous works provide viewers a reflection of their own emotional experience mirrored on the cinematic screen. If able to recognize this reflection, a cathartic experience of depth, complexity, and empathy for self can be achieved, resulting in patient empowerment, emotional catharsis, and a greater understanding of abstract emotions.
Bibliography


