A Hidden Life: Malick’s Requiem

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ABSTRACT
The analysis of the narrative strategies in the writing of the script and in the formal finishing of the film A Hidden Life, the tenth feature film by the American director Terrence Malick, allows us to affirm that it is a work that is perfectly coherent with the thematic and stylistic evolution of this filmmaker, which has become more and more focused as a poetic symphony of hymnal character; celebrating that God fills the human being and the world with His Grace while always acknowledging the presence of the mystery of evil, which puts the freedom of the human being to the test to follow the Voice of God that sounds in the conscience.

On Sunday, April 28th, 2019, director Martin Scorsese and actor Robert de Niro sat down on the stage of New York’s Beacon Theatre for a conversation with the audience at the Tribeca Film Festival, an event of which de Niro was one of the founders. Prior to the release of the film The Irishman, the idea was to review Martin Scorsese’s career and discuss some of the keys to his life’s work as a filmmaker. At one point in the conversation, Scorsese revealed that after the release of Silence in 2016 he received a letter from Terrence Malick. As Alex Stedman says in Variety magazine:

"In describing the inspiration behind ‘Silence,’ his 2016 historical drama, Scorsese went in-depth on his relationship with religion. ‘For me, that faith that I was instilled with as a kid – that changes,’ he said. ‘Ultimately, it’s been a long kind of struggle – I’m not finished, of course – but a struggle toward a mature faith, whatever that is.’

Saying ‘Silence’ is about ‘the struggle toward the very essence of faith,’ Scorsese revealed Terrence Malick sent him a letter after he saw the film. In it, Malick asked, ‘What does Christ want from us?’ ‘That’s interesting,’ Scorsese noted. (Stedman 2019)

The anecdote is very significant because when Malick wrote to Scorsese he was immersed in the production of A Hidden Life, his tenth film which keys this article intends to study. This question—‘What does Christ want from us?’—seems essential to
me in order to understand the framework in which the artistic, cultural, social and religious zeal of the Texan director, who is still very active at the age of 76, moves.

*A Hidden Life* tells the story of a love, a love of life and death, of a man and a woman, Franz Jägerstätter and Franziska Schwanninger (Fani), who were married from 1936 to 1943. It is a love story in which the presence of God is constant. Love and trust in God’s Providence determine the behaviour and decisions that will lead young Franz to die at the age of 36, executed by the Nazis for refusing to take up arms in the German military and to take an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler, who, interestingly, was born in the Austrian town of Braunau just 30 km from Sankt Radegund, the Alpine village where the Jägerstätter family lived. In fact, Braunau is the district head of Sankt Radegund (Figure 1).

Franz Jägerstätter was beatified in Linz Cathedral on 26 October 2007. Let us not forget that it was in Linz where Hitler had decided to set up the Führermuseum, designed by the architect Albert Speer, which would house the works of art acquired by Hitler with the proceeds from his book *Mein Kamp* as well as his photographs and the art-pieces that the Nazis confiscated or stole during World War II.

During the Mass of the Beatification celebrated in Linz, Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, Prefect of the Congregation for the Cause of the Saints, and representing Pope Benedict XVI, addressed some final words, before the wife, daughters and other relatives of the beatified layman:

The peculiarity of our Blessed is found in his martyrdom (1943), inserted in the particularly tragic historical context of the period of the Third Reich, during the Second World War. Blessed Franz was a man of our time, a normal man with defects; he even led a rather light and worldly lifestyle for a time. But following his vocation and with God’s grace, he put God’s will above all, arriving, after long interior struggles, at an extraordinary life of Christian witness.

Because of his faith convictions he faced death. His path is a challenge and an encouragement to all Christians, who can follow his example to live their faith with consistency and radical commitment, even to the extreme consequences, if necessary. The blessed and the saints have always given an example of what it means and implies to be Christian, even in some particular, concrete moments of history.

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Figure 1. A HIDDEN LIFE. Photo by Reiner Bajo. © 2019 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation All Rights Reserved.
In a time like ours, in which there is no lack of conditioning and even manipulation of consciences and intelligences, sometimes through deceptive forms that make use of the most advanced modern technologies, the witness of Blessed Franz is a very important example of unwavering courage and of firm and strong coherence.

The words written by Franz Jägerstätter in his last letter to his wife Franziska Schwanniger are moving, especially when he said: ‘I also thank our Saviour that I was able to suffer for him. I trust in your infinite mercy. I hope you’ve forgiven me everything and that you won’t abandon me in my last hour… Keep the commandments and, with God’s grace, we will soon see each other again in heaven’. (Doc. 21, Summ. 187–188)

These words lead us to the essence, because the saints always know how to go to the essential, which here is that ‘serva mandata’, ‘keep the commandments’ (cf. Mt 19:17), with which Jesus responds to those who want to know what they must do to attain eternal life. (Martins 2007)

I reproduce Martins’ words here because they imply the position of the Catholic Church on the behaviour of a Christian who, like others before him, had to trust God. Because Jägerstätter’s behavior resembles that of Christ: ‘The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God’ (1 Corinthians 1:22–23). Jägerstätter’s words are revealing to probe the mystery of the strength hidden in the martyr as a disciple of Christ who walks in the light of the Church and who gives his life for love. In a letter to his wife, Jägerstätter expresses very precisely the key to the mystery of his life and death: he is a man who trusts in God even though he does not always understand His designs.

If I must write… with my hands in chains, I find that much better than if my will were in chains. Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of the Faith and his free will. God gives so much strength that it is possible to bear any suffering…. People worry about the obligations of conscience as they concern my wife and children.

But I cannot believe that, just because one has a wife and children, a man is free to offend God. (Jägerstätter 2009)

A meeting in the Vatican

On Wednesday, December 4, 2019, I had the opportunity to talk with Terence Malick, on the occasion of the screening of the film at the Vatican Film Library, which was celebrating its 60th anniversary. There is no need to underscore something that is well known to all those who have researched the work of this artist: he has only ever given one interview, when he released his first film, Badlands, in 1973.

On the other hand, there have been only a couple of public meetings with the director in which cinema was the topic of conversation: one in Italy, in which he spoke about some Italian films from the 1950s that he particularly liked with a small group of spectators attending a screening in a retrospective section of the Venice Film Festival in 1985; the second was an unexpected conversation with the audience attending the Houston Film Festival during the screening of the film Song to Song in 2017. Malick
was accompanied on that occasion by director Richard Linklater—who acted as moderator—and actor Michael Fassbender.

The chance to have a conversation with Terrence Malick was very desirable. The meeting revealed that many of the comments about why Malick prefers not to promote his films with conventional interviews and press conferences do not correspond with the real reason. Malick himself had expressed this after the statements he made in Badlands’ premiere in 1973 (Walker 1975).

But let us return to Rome, December 4, 2019, at four o’clock in the afternoon. After I greeted Malick, introducing myself and telling him about my recent book on his cinema that was published in March 2019, he warmly expressed his gratitude. He wanted to know if I had covered all his work in the book and I said yes (vid. Fijo 2019). When I told him that I had previously dedicated a doctoral thesis to one aspect of the film The Tree of Life (the nature of grace, specifically) he made a gesture of surprise and congratulation (Fijo 2016). He was pleased to learn that I intended to publish a second edition of the book, including an in-depth analysis of A Hidden Life.

In that occasion, Malick wanted to introduce me to the young editor who was with him, Joe Gleason. He told me he hoped I’d like the movie. And he kept greeting other people. Among them were the Spanish professor Pablo Alzola and the Ecuadorian professor and journalist residing in Rome, Andrés Cárdenas Matute. These two encountered Malick by chance at 3:30 p.m. at the security gate located in the left arm of the Colonnade of St. Peter’s Square, on the side of the Borgo Santo Spirito. Alzola, professor at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid, is the author of a doctoral thesis on Malick’s cinema—The Poetic Image of the Home in Terrence Malick’s Cinema (1973–2017)—and the book The Terrence Malick Cinema. The hope of getting home (Alzola 2020). After greeting each other, they walked together to the entrance of the Film Library. Alzola was able to give Malick an off-print of his doctoral thesis and talk with him at length about the film. Upon learning that Cárdenas was Ecuadorian, Malick told him that he remembered the train trip he made to Cochabamba in October 1967 when he travelled with the intention of interview Che Guevara (an interview he was unable to conduct because the Cuban partisan was killed).

At the doors of the Film Library, where he was greeting the small group of people invited to the event, Malick mentioned the impression he had received when reading Franz Jägerstätter’s epistolary, a collection of the letters that the Austrian peasant wrote to his wife starting at the beginning of his difficulties due to his refusal to swear allegiance to Hitler. Although Malick knows German well, he mentioned reading the American edition of Orbis, published in 2009.

Malick was born in 1943, the same year Franz Jägerstätter died. This is a fact that should not go unnoticed about an artist who has always attached great importance to memory, to the importance of remembering what really matters, because memory, lived experience, makes us better. With his tenth film Malick, as in his previous works, achieves an audiovisual story full of beauty that moves people to seek the truth and be filled with good. Malick is not satisfied with catharsis, he prefers metanoia. That’s why he showed his happiness when I told him that in my opinion his films required communion more than mere empathy on the part of the viewer.
I was able to verify this idea in my conversation with him. When I expressed my gratitude for his films—and *A Hidden Life* in particular—where he leaves space for the viewer to serenely reflect on and not just see, but contemplate them as works of art that ask for a lot of attention and empathy, Malick—friendly and satisfied—thanked me by nodding with a smile. When I told him that Robert Bresson would be very happy with a film like *A Hidden Life*, as a courageous vindication of ontological cinema, in which being rather than doing matters, Malick again thanked me for the comment with a gesture of humility when he heard that he was compared to Bresson.

This anecdote illustrates a thesis that I have been maintaining (Fijo 2019, 227) about the cinema of the ‘second Malick’ (the more personal and self-reflective one from *The Tree of Life*)¹: the ontotheological condition of his cinema, which is presented in a certain sense in the manner of an ‘Auto Sacramental’, as defined by Calderón in the ‘loa of *La Segunda esposa y triunfar muriendo*’ (quoted and interpreted by Rull in his magnificent study (Rull 2004, 189).

As in the *Autos Sacramentales*, the music that sounds in *A Hidden Life* helps the viewer to immerse him or herself in the story and in those issues of Sacred Theology that can be paradoxical at first. As in the aforementioned films of the ‘second Malick’, who brings to the cinema experiences of his life, the mystery of the suffering of the innocent is placed in the dramatic centre of the story (Figure 2).

If in *The Tree of Life*, a quote 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?’*) is the backbone of the entire film that Malick dedicates to the memory of his brother Larry, who died tragically in Madrid on September 8, 1968. ‘I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols (Isaiah 42:8). These words are at the heart of *A Hidden Life*: idolatry, worshiping false gods: it is the mortal sin that Frantz Jägerstätter tries to avoid by refusing to swear allegiance and obedience to Hitler. The reaction of Frantz and his wife is biblical: to serve the Lord when everyone abandons Him. The Jägerstätter couple will not be seduced by the injustice of a tyrannical regime waging an unjust war, by a toxic nationalism that despises the weak and feels entitled to take what is not its own. Malick knows the Bible
very well—it is very much present explicitly or implicitly in all his work (Cabissole 2003).

It is a matter that Alzola captures with special acuity:

When he returned from military service, Franz had made a firm decision not to return to the army: he saw the contradiction between swearing allegiance to Hitler and maintaining his Christian faith. The young farmer was convinced that Nazism was a train heading inexorably towards hell. This is what he wrote, recounting a special experience or dream, as he called it, that he had in January 1938: ‘I would like to shout out to everyone on that train: ‘Get off, before the train reaches the final station, even if it costs you your life! I believe that, with that dream or vision, God has shown me that I must make a decision: National Socialist or Catholic’ The film alludes to this dream through a brief voice-over and black and white images of a locomotive in motion. (Alzola 2020, 127)

Jägerstätter is introduced to us as a free man who claims to have no right to act otherwise, as a man, as the father of a family, as a citizen. It is a morally clear-cut approach that will not give way after the interview with the bishop, who receives him through the parish priest of Sankt Radegund (Malick notes in the script that the bishop might think that the Nazis were setting him up, sending Franz to show his resistance to taking the oath of allegiance to Hitler). This is the same attitude that Jägerstätter maintains with the parish priest of his town and with the president of the court that judges him (who, by the way, later commits suicide).

In Jägerstätter’s own words, written in a letter to his wife before he died, we can see the conviction that in the fulfilment of God’s law, summarized in the Decalogue, there is happiness, that is, an achieved life where a man fulfils the purpose for which he was created. It is significant that in the previous days of his execution Jägerstätter wrote a catechism for children. His martyrdom shows the uniqueness of the grace that is

Figure 2. A HIDDEN LIFE. Photo by Reiner Bajo. © 2019 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation All Rights Reserved.
granted to him in sensing that God will use his behaviour for the benefit of his family, his country, the Church and the entire world.

Malick had already shown himself to be affable and cordial in greeting those attending the event at the entrance to the building, thanking them for the time they were going to spend on the film. When we entered the screening room, there was a brief welcome by Paolo Ruffini, Prefect of the Dicastery of Communications, who said:

We thank Terrence Malick for being here and sharing this moment with us. The narrative of the film is at the same time beautiful and terrible, and it is a challenge because we are brought to face our souls, our consciences, our fears, our forgetfulness and our avoidance of responsibilities. This narrative overturns the rhetoric of heroism, because it tells of a hidden hero, in a film which speaks of love, of consistency, of death and resurrection. It tells of how important it is to keep our memories and tell them with such beauty. (Lattanzio 2019)

When Ruffini finished speaking and invited Malick to take the floor, the American director made a gesture of surprise, but immediately approached and using the microphone offered to him, thanked the attendees for their presence and introduced the members of his team who had accompanied him and were present in the room: the editor Josh Gleason, the producers Dario Bergesio and Elizabeth Bentley, and his personal assistant, Carmen. Malik’s remarks were very brief, he just wished us to enjoy the film as much as he had enjoyed shooting it.

The Italian producer Bergesio immediately announced that at the end of the screening, Malick would individually answer any questions or comments we would like to make. And so it was. At the end, after the applause of the audience, who had attended almost three hours of screening, refreshments were served and Malick stood in the front row of the room talking to everyone who approached him. Among other things, Malick said:

Franz is a martyr, because he chose to be faithful to his conscience, as his father-in-law says in the film, better to be a victim of injustice than to perpetrate an injustice. It’s a film that I’ve wanted to tell for a long time, I learned about it thanks to a historical friend of mine who wrote its story, even in Austria nobody knew about it, it only came out in the 1970s, many years after his death. What the Nazis say in the film was about to happen: you will die, your family will suffer but no one will notice.

She is as martyr as he is: it was wonderful to read the letters that were written while he was in prison, we have included some of them in the film, but certainly not all, and I invite you to read them. She gave support to him to the last, despite the pain.

We’ve just finished shooting, I’m very happy. A few days ago, we finished shooting in the Jordan desert, a multicultural film with a cast that includes Middle Eastern actors, a German crew, and also Italian artists in the costume and set design department (costume designer Carlo Poggioli and set designer Stefano Maria Ortolani). Now I go back to Texas to edit the film, it will take at least a year because we have a lot of material. Since when you shoot digitally you end up with a lot more images, my favourite moment of the production is editing; there is no longer the pressure of the set, the uncertainty of the weather on the shoot. I’m very happy to be here at the end of this long journey, I’d like to stay more in Rome. Tomorrow morning, we have an early plane that will take us to Austin. (Ugolini 2019)
Before saying goodbye to Malick, inside the projection room of the Vatican Film Library, I told him that there was something I would like to tell him but that I thought I would be moved by it and I didn’t want to put him in an embarrassing situation. That’s why I wrote it down on a piece of paper as soon as I finished watching the film.

Smiling, Malick, discovering the folded paper in my hand. He asked me if what I wanted to say was written on that paper. I said yes. With an affable gesture, he asked me for the paper, put his hand on my shoulder, and kept the paper in his outer suit pocket, patting it twice. He looked me in the eye and said: I’ll read it, thank you very much. In that note you could read: ‘With your previous films you have made me a better film critic, a better researcher, a better university professor of Audiovisual Narrative, a better person. With this film, you have also made me a better Christian.

I find Malick’s delicacy at the time remarkable: he didn’t read the paper in public so as not to make me uncomfortable.

An Austrian farmer

Franz Jägerstätter was born on 20 May 1907 in Sankt Radegund, a small alpine village in Upper Austria, 50 kilometres northwest of Salzburg, very close to the German border. 30 kilometres northeast of Sankt Radegund is Braunau am Inn, the place where Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) was born. When he came to power in Germany in 1933, he built his resting place in Obersalzberg, 70 kilometres southeast of Sankt Radegund.

Franz was the son of Franz Bachmeier and Rosalie Huber. An illegitimate child, Franz was raised by his maternal grandmother. When his father died in World War I, he was adopted by his mother’s husband, Heinrich Jägerstätter, who gave him his surname. In 1931, he took over the family farm due to his stepfather’s illness. Previously, in 1930, he had worked in the metallurgical industry in Eisenerz, a mining town in the province of Styria, 220 km from Sankt Radegund.

A fan of motorcycles, he bought one, and he arrived to his village causing admiration when he arrived in his village, because it was the first one seen there. Of an impulsive nature, he had a few fights. In 1933, Hildegard Auer, a maid living in Sankt Radegund gave birth a little girl. It was widely considered that Franz was the father.

In 1936, Franz marries Franziska Schwaninger. They visit Rome on their honey-moon trip. They have three daughters: Rosalia (1937), Maria (1938) and Aloisia (1940). When a consultation is held on the union of Austria and Germany, Franz is the only inhabitant of Sankt Radegund who opposes it. Always reluctant to join the German army, he firmly maintains, but without boasting or making speeches, his disagreement with Nazi ideology and the conviction that Germany has waged an unjust war (Figure 3).

After receiving basic military training in Austria, he was allowed to return home. In 1943, at the age of 35, he was called up. When he refused to take the oath of allegiance to Hitler he was arrested and imprisoned. He remained in prison awaiting trial, first in Linz and then in Berlin. Franz was tried for insubordination by a military tribunal which sentenced him to death on July 6, 1943.
He was detained from March to May 1943 in the military prison in Linz; then transferred to a prison in Brandenburg, awaiting execution of his sentence. With patience and serenity, he endured vexations that tried to break his will. They also tempted him to take the oath and go home. He was allowed to write letters to his wife. In them, he manifested the pain caused by the suffering of his wife and daughters and asked for forgiveness for it. Franz was guillotined in Brandenburg-Gorden prison on August 9, 1943.

Raised to the altars

On 26 October 2007, the 100th anniversary of his birth, Franz Jägerstätter was beatified in Linz Cathedral, at a Mass presided over by Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, as a legacy by appointment of Pope Benedict XVI. Franz’s wife and four daughters attended the event.

Franz Jägerstätter undergoes a remarkable change as a result of his marriage to Franziska Schwaninger. The marriage is characterized by living a deep Christian life, without doing anything extraordinary. The couple frequently comes to receive the Eucharist. Franz offers to take material care of the village church, acting as sacristan. The daily reading of Sacred Scripture allows him to support his arguments regarding conscientious objection in a clear and simple manner (Figure 4).

Fr. Karobath, the pastor of Sankt Radegund, when Frantz was called up in 1943, said: ‘I was speechless because I had the best arguments. We wanted him to give up, but he always resisted by quoting the Scriptures.’ Also the Catholic priest who attended to him in prison before the execution, Father Jochmann, a few years later told some nuns
the words of Franz Jägerstätter that impressed him: ‘I have everything, I have the Holy Scriptures, and I don’t need anything’ (Putz 2007).

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Dominican and Archbishop of Vienna, on the occasion of the beatification of Franz Jägerstätter, said: ‘To consider martyrdom as a participation in the eschatological fight against the forces of power was not simply a delirious fantasy of the Early Church. A figure as limpid as the martyr Franz Jägerstätter, a peasant from Austria, allows us to understand how current this conception is. His frank testimony, which led him to refuse military service in Hitler’s Reich army, reveals the forces that fight each other here.

‘Issues of sacred theology …’

Terrence Malick’s tenth film came out of the fascination that the American director felt when reading the letters that the Austrian martyr, beatified by Benedict XVI in 2007, wrote to his wife Franziska. This is what Malick himself told me, advising me again to read the entire epistolary, because the film only includes some fragments.

This is a work in which Malick handles a poetic and rhetorical language, close to those he used in Badlands, Days of Heaven and The New World: the linear construction of the story avoids the temporal deconstruction so characteristic in his other films, and which is so pronounced in The Tree of Life, To The Wonder, Knight of Cups and Song to Song.

The delay, the serene and contemplative way of showing the everyday life of the Jägerstätters in Sankt Radegund in the first act of A Hidden Life is very noticeable and encapsulates Malick’s clear desire to manage the tempo of a story of peaceful happiness, before giving way to the conflict that will take over the film in the second and dramatic act. This second act is heralded by the documentary images of The Triumph of The Will (Riefenstahl 1934) showing Hitler at the apotheosis of Nuremberg, entering as a
god in the annual celebration of national-socialist power, orchestrated and shot in an impressive way by Leni Riefenstahl, priestess of a pagan cult that presages the Moloch/Baal described by the biblical texts as a bloodthirsty cult. The fact that the film begins in black and white, and we hear the ambient sound of an outdoor place where you can hear the birds singing, the sound of wind and the rain falling among the trees, is a narrative decision that Malick has practiced before (it is an opening along the lines of the one used in The New World): the peaceful world suffers the wounds of sin, of moral evil committed by men. We saw it before in Badlands, Days of Heaven, The Thin Red Line, The New World, The Tree of Life, To the Wonder, Knight of Cups and Voyage of Time.

The love of the Jägerstätters—who are living through their 'Days of Heaven'—is shown in scenes of hard work and effort in the labour of farmers. Work, raising children, caring for the elderly mother and Fani’s single sister all make very ordinary days when God’s presence fills everything. Deus meus et omnia! You might imagine Franz and Fani exclaiming.

There is a harmony, a peace that is present in the fields, in heaven and on earth. The representation of the four elements (earth, water, wind and fire) is very beautiful, with a poetic resonance underlined by the sound of the world interwoven with the music. This is a constant in the portrait of res extensa, considered in the Cartesian way in interrelation with the res cogitans and all that Malick has been doing in his work (Figure 5).

In this light, A Hidden Life is a purified expression of Malick’s awareness of the imprint that sin leaves on both the physical and spiritual worlds, something very much in evidence in the philosophical tradition that underlies Catholic theology. A recent book, on the keys to the thought of Spanish philosopher Leonardo Polo (1926–2013) when confronting the study of theology, is extraordinarily useful for a better understanding of Malick’s film (Sellés 2019). Juan Fernando Sellés, professor at the University of Navarre and a disciple of Polo, emphasizes the uniqueness of his teacher by postulating that the most appropriate path to access theology from philosophy is not that of metaphysics but, rather, that of transcendental anthropology.

Figure 5. A HIDDEN LIFE. Photo by Reiner Bajo. © 2019 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation All Rights Reserved.
It seems to me that this Spanish philosopher hermeneutic—based on its very original theory of knowledge, on its distinction between man and person and on the distinction between natural and supernatural theology (Seals 2019, 39–48)—is very valuable for approaching a film like *A Hidden Life*. In this film Malick approaches the story of a man from a fourfold perspective: the husband and father of a family, the member of a community (in this case a small town); the member of a country (the motherland is called several times in the film), the member of the Church (a society that has a double status as a divine institution composed of men).

In the love story that the film tells (because it seems clear that Malick places the love of Frantz and Fani Jägerstätter as the core of his film poem) being is more important than doing because Malick is an ontological and transcendent filmmaker. In this film he speaks more than in any previous one about human love as a participation of divine love.

More precisely, in his last five films, Malick shows himself as an ontological filmmaker who questions the meaning of life, love, the suffering of the innocent, and death accepted as an expiatory sacrifice for the sins of the world. I used the concept of Onto-Theology in my first monograph on Malick’s films to refer to an ontology not only open to transcendence but penetrated to its very core by Divine Providence, that is, the loving care with which God takes care of all created things and in a special way of men. Participation in grace, according to the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, conceived as a gift that the human being receives and to which he can freely correspond, is presented—according to my interpretation—as a pillar of capital importance in the construction of the dramatic developments of the ‘second Malick.’ The aforementioned Polo defines a person as a being capable of receiving grace.

Franz Jägerstätter loves with a unique love. The objects of his love include God, his wife, his children, his neighbours, his countrymen, the members of the church as a community of followers of Jesus Christ. Returning to the anthropology of Polo, we should not forget that for the Spanish philosopher the person does not exist but rather coexists. In this sense, the quote from Eliot that appears at the end of the film, just after Malick’s credit as director and screenwriter appears is a perfect colouring of the film:

... for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistorical acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

(Eliot 2011)

Those words of Eliot take on a much deeper meaning than that in the novel *Midlemarch*. The hidden life of Franz (and, of course, that of Fani, ‘as martyr as he’) is fruitful for his family, his people, his nation, the Church, which is universal in itself. Malick returns again and again in the film to images in which the grain of wheat, the harvest, the oven and finally the bread have a very prominent presence and narrative relevance. It is a metaphor that ties in with a long Christian tradition that comes from the Apostolic Fathers, and which has in the Epistle to the Romans of Saint Ignatius of Antioch a purified expression:

I am corresponding with all the churches and biding them all realize that I am voluntarily dying for God—if, that is, you do not interfere. I plead with you, do not do me an unseasonable kindness. Let me be fodder for wild beasts—that is how I can get to
God. I am God’s wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts to make a pure loaf for Christ. I would rather that you fawn on the beasts so that they may be my tomb and no scrap of my body be left. Thus, when I have fallen asleep, I shall be a burden to no one. Then I shall be a real disciple of Jesus Christ when the world sees my body no more. Pray Christ for me that by these means I may become God’s sacrifice. I do not give you orders like Peter and Paul. They were apostles: I am a convict. They were at liberty: I am still a slave. But if I suffer, I shall be emancipated by Jesus Christ; and united to him, I shall rise to freedom. (Ignatius of Antioch 2019)

The similarities between the martyrdom of Frantz Jägerstätter and that of Ignatius of Antioch perceived in this text are evident, at the behavioural level and in the way both are expressed in epistolary format when they see the moment of their death coming.

The story of A Hidden Life, the script written by Malick, is based on the fragments of an epistolary in which a man and a woman talk to each other. Malick paraphrases some of the sentences used in the letters as direct appeals to God, snippets of prayer, of Franz and Fani’s intimate dialogue with God.

Production strategies to building an audiovisual cathedral

In Malick’s cinema, as in any other auteur’s, the decisions in the three stages of production determine the final result that we can see on the screen. In this film, Malick shot for 8 weeks in July and August 2016. This is very significant because the film was seen for the first time in the official section of the Cannes Film Festival on May 19, 2019. Almost 3 years of post-production, something that is not new in his way of working and editing his films.

In South Tyrol Italy, the team spent 24 days shooting the country scenes. They finished with a few days in Sankt Radegund, where the scenes were filmed showing the Jägerstätter’s bedroom, where Malick got the express permission of Franz and Fani’s daughters to work. Two weeks were dedicated to the prison scenes, in Zittau and Berlin. Production designer Sebastian Krawinkel comments about the location work he carefully carried out:

> We scouted some of the locations together a year in advance in order to see them in the right season. For almost a year I had a weekly dialogue with Terry about which sets he would need and which locations and references he liked. It was scary to be inside the real courtroom where the Nazis sentenced so many to death. (2019)

Krawinkel refers to the location of the film’s climax, shot at the Third Reich Berlin court trial scene in Schoenberg in Kammergericht building.

George Widmer, the film’s director of photography, had worked as a cameraman and Steadicam operator on all five of Malick’s previous films. This time, digital cameras were used: a Red Epic Dragon with Zeiss Master Prime and Ultra Prime 8 R Lenses; and a Red Epic-W Helium with Zeiss Master Prime and Ultra Prime 8 R Lenses for winter scenes. Widmer describes his work:

> Terry and I have a long history of collaboration. As a camera and Steadicam operator on the previous films, I was already involved in Terry’s thoughts, which made it easy for me to apply the rules of how to use the camera for framing and movements and how to light and how to deal with daylight. (2019) (Figure 6)
The choice of this model of digital camera is due to its small size and easy portability and a very versatile range of lenses, which makes for a small film crew, which worked as usual in Malick’s cinema without using added artificial light. The filming at characteristic luminous moments (the so-called purple hour, at sunset and dawn) in the Malick cinema gives the film a very unique tone that contributes to this already well-known phenomenon: you only have to see a few shots of a Malick’s film to know that it is his work. Because of this the seven elements of the images (space, line, shape, tone, colour, movement and rhythm (Block 2008) perceived in the film correspond to the Malickian canon in his previous films. Widmer has worked with a script that is much more linear than that of previous films, but we can see in his way of working the possibilities that the filmed images offer to the editors.

Malick’s photographic canon allows the tempo of the film to be set with a use of the voice-over that, being much less asynchronous than in previous films, can be misleading. It should not be forgotten that Malick is using scraps of the letters between Franz and Fani and therefore the voice-overs should not be interpreted as an accidental recourse by Malick to the words of the main characters of the story. The words of Frantz and Fani are, in my opinion, the essence of the story (Figure 7).

In that sense, the balance in the film between diegetic and extra-diegetic dialogues makes the passage of time in the film more marked by the inner drama than by external events. This is a common resource in Malick’s ontological cinema where being is more important than actions. Franz and Fani’s Passion, their Road to Calvary (as

Figure 6. Director of Photography Joerg Widmer on the set of A HIDDEN LIFE. Photo by Reiner Bajo. © 2019 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation All Rights Reserved.
Nathaniel Peters sees it in his article in *First Things* entitled *A Hidden Life: The Story of a Marriage* (Peters 2019) follows a *tempo* more sacred than profane, a liturgical *tempo*. So it should come as no surprise that in some reviews of the film, such as Brody’s in *The New Yorker* Brody (2019) it is referred to as Malick’s ‘*furiously lyrical transcendental style*’: 

> It is Malick’s extreme and original approach, in his past decade of work, to experience and observation that has led to his furiously lyrical transcendental style. The present-tense-based dramatizations that, when they involve Malick’s own life and his own places, people, and activities, have been so comprehensively challenging, prove, in ‘*A Hidden Life,’* vague, impersonal, and complacent.

I don’t agree with Brody’s judgment, but I understand his position on the film, because I know well the tools Brody uses as a film critic and his cultural and anthropological framework. From my point of view, as an academic but also as a professional film critic for more than two decades, I insist on the film’s physical condition (Associated Press film critic Jake Coyle titles his 2019 review (Coyle 2019): ‘In Malick’s ‘*A Hidden Life,’* a hymn of defiance’) as an Auto sacramental in which Malick resorts to a gestural liturgy that is characteristic of the sacraments of the Catholic Church that are defined as efficacious signs of grace (Coyle 2019). Signs. And the signs (a hug, hands that rise to the sky, a gaze that is recollected, and the way of embracing an infant or playing with children) become powerful transmitters of that graceful nature that I spoke about at length in my doctoral thesis. The material is tied to the spiritual in a film that achieves what was already achieved in an outstanding way in *The Tree of Life, To the Wonder* and *Knight of Cups*: the gestures acquire an epiphanic character because they facilitate access to the sacred, to the mystery of the economy of Salvation. I am
referring to the kiss that the Italian prisoner gives to Franz before he is executed, when both are waiting to be brought before the executioner.

Something similar happened in *The Tree of Life* (2011) when the Mother (Jessica Chastain) offers her son (Laramie Eppler) on the beach as Eucharistic Woman surrounded by angels. Or in *To the Wonder* (2012) when Marina (Olga Kurylenko) gets a flash of light on her face as she walks through a marsh in the final scene of the film. In *Knight of Cups* (2015), when Rick hugs his father and finds a peace he never had before. The Spirit blows where and when it wants: just remember the *metanoia* of Faye’s character (Ronney Mara) when she unexpectedly asks God’s forgiveness for her sins at a gas station before her father (Brady Coleman) in *Song to Song* (2017).

**A sacred music**

It is well known that music is a fundamental part of the *auto sacramental*. Malick is a well-known music lover who takes a decisive role in the music played in his films. His involvement is always great and in some cases generates misunderstandings, like that with the composer James Horner, author of the music of *The Thin Red Line*.

In *A Hidden Life*, Malick again returns to a highly regarded and experienced composer, James Newton Howard: a 69-year-old Californian musician well known for his work on eight of M. Knight Shyamalan’s thirteen film releases: *The Sixth Sense* [1999], *Unbreakable* [2000], *Signs* [2002], *The Village* [2004], *Lady in The Water* [2006], *The Happening* [2008], *The Last Airbender* [2010] and *After Earth* [2013].

About the work with Malick, the composer says:

> One of the early ideas Terry brought to me, was to incorporate sounds he had captured during production such as church bells from the villages, cow and sheep bells, the saw mill, sounds from the prison, and scythes in the fields. I took many of those sounds and processed them into musical elements that are woven throughout the score. I wrote very loosely to picture, but we were able to establish the key thematic material and sonic identity of the score. As we moved forward, we chose to work mostly scene by scene where I would write something that he would react to, and then he would often mould the edit to what I had done. I chose to focus on the emotional journeys and crises of conscience of the characters—writing music to reflect their story. (Howard 2019)

In Howard’s considerations, one constant can be seen in Malick’s work: the desire to create a musical flow that helps the film to run like a river, with a continuity in which the music acts as a stream of water through which shots run, which are mounted with great precision but which could turn out to be unconnected in the hands of another director because they jump like the water that drives a river depending on the slope and width of the riverbed (*Figure 8*).

Howard joined Malick and his crew when they were working in Houston (Malick’s home town now, after living in Paris for twenty years) after the shooting was over. What Howard says about the way he works is significant in terms of Malick’s post-production times and the way he uses extra-detective music in his films:

> After meeting with Terry at my studio in Los Angeles, I flew to Austin and met with his team to watch a cut of the film. We worked primarily between March and May of 2018 and recorded everything in early June at Abbey Road Studios in London. I felt the
orchestra was best to reflect the vistas of St. Radegund. The solo violin throughout the film embodies the connection between our two main characters—performed by the violinist James Ehnes. (2019)

Howard’s music fills a part of the film, the rest contains a selection of themes from great masters of music that contribute to define a sound space, a clearly sacred space, cathedral. In this sense, Professor Juan Orellana (Audiovisual Narrative Professor at the San Pablo CEU University in Madrid and director of the Film Department of the Spanish Episcopal Conference) told me that Malick had made a cathedral for a saint unknown in Spain (Orellana 2020). My response was that the film is indeed a cathedral, but like all cathedrals, it stands in honour of God, who is the architect of all holiness. You don’t build a cathedral to celebrate a man. Cathedrals glorify God and have as their central element the altar, on which Christ’s redemptive sacrifice, the Mass, is renewed.

* A Hidden Life is truly a cathedral and everything in the film has a liturgical dimension, of sacred rite, of requiem. The music shrouds and accompanies the actions, the movements of some of the characters who represent a divine drama starring men, saints and sinners, victims and executioners. It’s the *auto sacramental* we referred to earlier.

The presence of pieces of music by the Germans Johan Sebastian Bach (1665–1750) and Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827), the German-British Georg Friedrich Handel (1685–1759), Austro-Hungarian Bohemian Antonin Dvořák (1841–1904), Henryk Górecki from Poland (1933–2010), Aaron Gilhuis from the United States, Arsenije Jovanovic from Serbia (1932), Wojciech Kilar from Poland (1932–2013), David
Parsons from New Zealand, Arvo Pärt from Estonia (1935) and Alfred Schnittke from Russia (1934–1998) is very thought-provoking. All the composers cited share a dimension of religious transcendence or at least are intensely transcendent in the pieces Malick selects.

It goes without saying that Malick is a music lover and the level of intentionality in the use of music to enhance the dramatic meaning of his films is very high. This was noted by music critic Alex Ross, who pointed out Malick’s brilliant use of a famous piece by Wagner in the opening sequence of the film *The New World* (2005):

Malick’s deployment of the *Rheingold* prelude in *The New World* is possibly the most idiomatic use of Wagner in cinema history. (Ross 2012)

Malick’s musical selection, which is added to the music composed by Howard, has a striking cohesion as the composers chosen marked by a Christian religious sense or at least by an intense transcendent sense as in the case of three of the living musicians: Gilhuis, Parsons and Pärt.4

Malick holds Estonian Arvo Pärt in great esteem, and has used his music in five films. The musician was born in 1935 and he and his music are present in quite a number of other films as well. Representative of sacred minimalism, Pärt is close to musicians like Gorecki and Tavener. He believes that his music is similar to the light that passes through a prism: music can have a slightly different meaning in each listener, creating a spectrum of musical experiences, similar to the rainbow. In December 2011, Pärt was appointed a member of the Pontifical Council for Culture by Pope Benedict XVI. It is very interesting to read this excerpt from Pärt’s biography, which is available on the Arvo Pärt Center website:5

After his last and most dramatic collage piece *Credo* (1968), Pärt withdrew for almost eight years. In 1976, after intensive study of Gregorian chant, the Notre Dame School and classic vocal polyphony, he emerged with a new and highly original musical language which he called tintinnabuli (tintinnabulum – Latin for ‘little bell’) and which has defined his work up to today.

Tintinnabuli first appeared in a short piano piece *Für Alina* (1976), a subsequent rush of new works included *Fratres*, *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* and *Tabula rasa* (1977), which remain among his most highly regarded.

In 1980 Arvo Pärt was urged by public authorities to leave the country. He and his family settled first in Vienna and then West Berlin. Important works like *Passio*, *Te Deum*, *Miserere*, *Lamentate*, *Symphonie No. 4*, Adam’s Lament, and numerous choral works have been created ever since and have been performed worldwide.

His ‘musical Credo’ is rooted in the Christian tradition, and since the Word (Logos) plays a vital and even structural role in Pärt’s compositional process, both his orchestral and vocal works are mostly based on liturgical texts. Pärt’s oeuvre is rich and versatile, including many large-scale compositions for choir and orchestra, four symphonies and works for soloists and orchestra, as well as numerous choral pieces and chamber music.

The bells are of great importance in the dramatic development of *A Hidden Life*. Frantz is responsible for the care of the village church. One of his tasks is ringing the bells, whose sound spreads throughout the valley. The sound of the church bells marks the hour of the Angelus, and the call to Mass. When news of Frantz’s execution is
received, one of his friends rings the bells. In this way, Malick uses very conscientiously that ‘new and highly original musical language which he [Pärt] called tintinnabuli (tin-tinnabulum – Latin for ‘little bell’) and which has defined his work up to today’.

A remarkable case is the Serbian Arsenije Jovanovic, whose music is featured in Malick’s last six films. It is a music penetrated by the sensibility of orthodox Christianity that lives the mystery in a very peculiar way, different from the Christianity of the Latin rite.

Related to the music in this film, the sound of the human voice is blended with the sound of nature (the famous four elements, so present in Malick’s films: water, earth, wind and fire) and with the sound of things created by man (a bell, the engine of a vehicle, the noise made by a sickle when cutting barley). The resulting flow helps to reinforce the fundamental principles of the visual identity in Malick’s films in which Mexican Emmanuel Lubezki was director of photography. Widmer’s work, always in line with Lubezki’s precedents, has allowed the visual identity of the film to include the characteristics of Malick’s cinema in his portraits of graceful nature inhabited by human beings who challenge the viewer, a viewer who seeks with them the meaning of life, through communion, not always through empathy (Figure 9).

Malick’s effort to reproduce in the film’s pressbook (Searchlight Pictures 2019)—with the express permission of Orbis Books—an extensive text from Jim Forest’s introduction to the book which collects Frantz Jägerstätter’s letters from prison, edited by Erna Putz, is understandable. Forest writes, concluding his account of the Austrian martyr’s life:

Franz Jägerstätter was a solitary witness. He died with no expectation that his sacrifice would make any difference to anyone. He knew that, for his neighbours, the refusal of army service was incomprehensible—an act of folly, a sin against his family, his community, and even his church, which had called on no one to refuse military service. Franz knew that, beyond his family and community, his death would go entirely unnoticed and have no impact on the Nazi movement or hasten the end of the war. He would soon be forgotten. Who would remember or care about the anti-Nazi gesture of an uneducated farmer? He would be just one more filed-away name among many
thousands who were tried and executed with bureaucratic indifference during the Nazi era. (Forest 2009)

Malick’s film approaches the love of Franz and Fani, their communion with Jesus Christ, with whom they identify themselves to death and death on a cross, drinking the chalice of their passion to the dregs. The Texan director does this with a markedly liturgical performance, a requiem mass that is structured on fragments of the epistolary correspondence between the spouses, that avoids explanations because poetry is not explained in a footnote. A Hidden Life brings to light, once again, but perhaps most emphatically in Malick’s filmography, God’s peculiar way of caring for His favourite creatures, Sons in the Son. That loving care that we know as Providence and that amazes Malick, who repeatedly exclaims in his films: All things shining!

Movies

- A Hidden Life. Directed by Terrence Malick. Cast: Valerie Pachner August Diehl. 2019.
- After Earth. Directed by M. Knight Shyamalan. Cast: Jaden Smith. 2013.
- Badlands. Directed by Terrence Malick. Cast: Sissy Spacek Martin Sheen. 1973.
- Days of Heaven. Directed by Terence Malick. Cast: Richard Gere. 1978.
- Knight of Cups. Directed by Terrence Malick. Cast: Cate Blanchett, Chistian Bale. 2015.
- Lady in The Water. Directed by M. Knight Shyamalan. Cast: Bryce Dallas Howard. 2006.
- Silence. Directed by Martin Scorsese. Cast: Andrew Garfield. 2016.
- Sings. Directed by M. Knight Shyamalan. Cast: Mel Gibson. 2002.
- Song to Song. Directed by Terrence Malick. Cast: Rooney Mara Ryan Gosling. 2017.
- The Happening. Directed by M. Knight Shyamalan. Cast: Mark Whalberg. 2008.
- The Irishman. Directed by Martin Scorsese. Cast: Robert De Niro. 2019.
- The Last Airbender. Directed by M. Knight Shyamalan. Cast: Noah Ringer. 2010.
- The New World. Directed by Terrence Malick. Cast: Q’orianka Kilcher, Colin Farrell. 2005.
- The Sixth Sense. Directed by M. Knight Shyamalan. Cast: Bruce Willis. 1999.
- The Thin Red Line. Directed by Terrence Malick. Cast: Jim Caviezel, Sean Penn.1998.
- The Tree of Life. Directed by Terrence Malick. Cast: Jessica Chastain, Brad Pitt. 2011.
- The Village. Directed by M. Knight Shyamalan. Cast: Bryce Dallas Howard. 2004.
- To The Wonder. Directed by Terrence Malick. Cast: Ben Affleck, Olga Kurylenko. 2012.
- Triumph des Willens. Directed by Leni Riefenstahl. 1934.
- Unbreakable. Directed by M. Knight Shyamalan. Cast: Bruce Willis. 2000
- Voyage of Time: Life’s Journey. Directed by Terrence Malick. Cast: Cate Blanchett. 2016.

Notes

1. The reflective tone of Malick’s filmography (nine feature films released before 2019), from The Tree of Life in particular as a finished expression of Malick’s second group of six feature films (The New World, 2005; The Tree of Life, 2011; To the Wonder, 2012; Knight of Cups, 2015; Voyage of Time; Life’s Journey, 2016; Song to Song, 2017), responds to a desire to transcend, to go beyond the narrative itself considered, as a discursive container of actions.

   In that group of five films that we have called the cycle of grace, Malick’s cinema, unlike the way of proceeding of the first Heidegger, looks for man, but not as a path to being, but as a person, as be participated according to the approaches of the Catholic ontotheology. An ontotheology that intensely dominates Malick’s personal trilogy with an intense autobiographical and catharchic-expiatory tone formed by The Tree of Life, To the
Wonder and Knight of Cups' (Fijo 2019, 227).

El tono reflexivo de la filmografía de Malick (nueve largometrajes estrenados hasta 2019), de El Árbol de la Vida en particular como expresión acabada del segundo grupo de seis largometrajes de Malick (El Nuevo Mundo, 2005; El Árbol de la Vida, 2011; To The Wonder, 2012; Knight of Cups, 2015; Voyage of Time: Life’s Journey, 2016; Song to Song, 2017), responde a un afán de trascender, de ir más allá del relato en sí mismo considerado, como narración discursiva contenedora de acciones.

En ese grupo de cinco películas que hemos llamado el ciclo de la gracia, el cine de Malick, a diferencia del modo de proceder del primer Heidegger, busca al hombre, pero no como un camino de acceso al ser, sino como una persona, como ser participado según los planteamientos de la ontoteología católica. Una ontoteología que domina intensamente la trilogía personal de Malick con intenso tono autobiográfico y catárquico-expiatorio formada por El Árbol de la Vida, To The Wonder y Knight of Cups. (Fijo 2019, 227)

2.

Sermons
put into verse, in idea
representable, issues
of Sacred Theology
that don’t reach my reasons
to explain or understand,
and the rejoicing provides
to the applause of this day

(Author’s translation)

3. James Newton Howard. A Hidden Life. Original Motion Picture Soundtrack. Themes composed by Howard, with length indication.

- To Hidden Life (2:50)
- Return (2:41)
- Indoctrination (2:12)
- Morality in Darkness (3:13)
- Love and Suffering (7:44)
- Hope (2:30)
- Descent (6:25)
- Knotted (3:39)
- There Will Be No Mysteries (4:42)

4. Musical pieces that appear in the credits of the film A Hidden Life:

- Johan Sebastian Bach. St. Matthew Passion BWV 244 Kommt, ihr Tochter
- Ludwig van Beethoven. Symphony No. 9 in D minor, op. 125
- Georg Friedrich Händel. Israel In Egypt, HWV 54: And Believed The Lord (Chorus)
Antonin Dvorak. Czech Suite.
Henryk Górecki. Kleines Requiem for a Polka.
Henryk Górecki. Symphony No. 3, Op. 36
Aaron Gilhuis. Inside The Walls.
Arsenije Jovanovic. Approaching. Concerto Grosso Balkanico. The Little Faust.
Wojciech Kilar. Agnus Dei.
David Parsons. Dorje Ling.
Arvo Pärt. Sarah was ninety years old.
Arvo Pärt. Tabula Rasa
Alfred Schnittke. Psalms of Repentance.

5. Arvo Pärt Biography. Arvo Pärt Centre. https://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part/biography/ (last access: 1.1.2020)
6. Arsenije Jovanovic’s themes in Terrence Malick’s films:

- 2018. A Hidden Life (writer and performer: “Approaching” Concerto Grosso Balkanico. The Little Faust)
- 2017. Song to Song (performer: “Searching for a Serene Sphere”, “Tamni Damari”, “Magma Psalm”, “Approaching”)/(writer: “Searching for a Serene Sphere!”, “Tamni Damari”, “Magma Psalm”, “Approaching”)
- 2016. Voyage of Time: Life’s Journey (Documentary) (performer: “Tombstones Along the Roadside”) / (writer: “Tombstones Along the Roadside”)
- 2015. Knight of Cups (performer: “Sogno Di Un Automobile”, “Searching for a Serene Sphere”, “In Search of Galiola”, “Prophecy of a Village Kremna”, “Approaching”, “Farewell Mix from an Old Fridge Before It Sank into the Sea”) / (writer: “Sogno Di Un Automobile”, “Searching for a Serene Sphere”, “In Search of Galiola”, “Prophecy of a Village Kremna”, “Approaching”, “Farewell Mix from an Old Fridge Before It Sank into the Sea”)
- 2012. To the Wonder (performer: “Prophecy of the Village Kremna”)/(writer: “Prophecy of the Village Kremna”)
- 2011. The Tree of Life (performer: “Faunophonias Balkanica”, “Approaching”, “Sound Testament of Mount Athos”, “Ma Maison”) / (producer: “Faunophonias Balkanica”, “Approaching”, “Sound Testament of Mount Athos”, “Ma Maison”) / (writer: “Faunophonias Balkanica”, “Approaching”, “Sound Testament of Mount Athos”, “Ma Maison”)
- 1998. The Thin Red Line (performer: “The Prophecy from the Village of Kremnus”)

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