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'To the Wonder' reveals the yearning to feel life

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NCR Today

When writer/director Terrence Malick's latest cinematic painting, "To the Wonder," unfolds, Neil (Ben Affleck) and Marina (Olga Kurylenko) playfully cross the causeway to Mont Saint-Michel in France at low tide. They visit the old monastery. Neil says nothing, but Marina reflects on love and wonders what will come next.

They go from France to Oklahoma with Marina's daughter, Tatiana (Tatiana Chiline). The house is new, empty and though almost sterile, filled with light. Marina and Tatiana begin to adapt, but Marina feels imprisoned despite the vast prairies surrounding her. There are few neighbors, and she cannot go anywhere.

The local priest, Father Quintana (Javier Bardem), makes his rounds, struggling to find meaning in his calling. Meanwhile, Neil meets up with an old girlfriend, Jane (Rachel McAdams), and Marina's loneliness increases.

As far as a plot goes, "To the Wonder" does not tell a story as much as present a cast, place them in a situation with minimal dialogue, and allow the audience to fill in the vast spaces that stretch out beyond. Voiceovers that reveal the inner uncertainties of life, love and commitment aid this experience.

The similarities in style between "To the Wonder," Malick's 2011 film "The Tree of Life" and his 2005 film "The New World" are obvious: the deliberate gaze of the camera and the unhurried, almost sluggish pace of the characters' discernment can create a sense of spiritual anxiety and lead the audience to feel what the characters could be feeling. Like he did in his 1998 "The Thin Red Line," Malick wants to probe the metaphysical by asking what it means "to be" and to consider the choices before us. Malick is not in a hurry and though the visuals in "To the Wonder" are not as vivid and startling as those in "The Tree of Life," the sacramental style, if you will, of the cinematography continually juxtaposes images that reveal

the inner reality of the characters. Malick's last films consider the reality that human freedom continually pushes up against limits that, depending on the choices and responses of the characters, can mean disconnectedness, isolation, imprisonment, regret or a surrender to grace with the freedom and love that brings people together.

"To the Wonder" is not a film crowds will run to see. But if you have the time and the desire to "be with" a master filmmaker and his art, you will encounter the transcendent grace that flows from a film that takes its time to consider the meaning and the wonder of it all. The life-size question for those who love to consider film and theology is: Who is God for Terrence Malick? I feel a doctoral dissertation coming on because you cannot just walk away from Malick's films if you have ever wondered about God and the meaning of life.

SIGNIS, the world Catholic association for communication, gave its highest award to this film in 2011 at the Venice Film Festival. The judges' description reflects the film well:

"Technically rich and poetic in storytelling, 'To the Wonder' is a stand-alone film which celebrates the mysteries of beauty, truth and love. It is a story of individuals who move through life with intense passion. At times, their passion gives way to desolation, making them acutely aware of their own weaknesses and limitations. Their experiences shed insight about the universal meaning of the joys and struggles of life. The film's rich composition, textured direction, and its use of light bring together elements of divinity and humanity ultimately creating a sacramental experience which reveals God's gift of unconditional love."

Film critic Roger Ebert reviewed "To the Wonder" days before he died April 4. It was his final encounter with cinema and his insights prove that "To the Wonder" is so much more than a movie.

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