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The Tree of Life (2011)

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The Tree of Life (2011)

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Tree of Life* (2011).

At its premiere in Cannes, some in the audience booed Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*. Film blogs report that during the first week of screenings in American multiplexes, irate patrons got up and left. One grumbling critic got it exactly right: "It feels like Malick made this film for himself, rather than for an audience."

Surely that description applies equally to any visionary artist who breaks and transcends the settled conventions of a medium. The film is not easy entertainment, but for those who welcome an encounter with a brilliant, uncompromising mind and are willing to embrace a dazzling cascade of unexpected images, *The Tree of Life* is enthralling. It is the most intellectually and artistically ambitious film of the 21st century. Understanding this film, getting beyond that dazzled state, requires a second viewing. I have now seen it three times, each with greater satisfaction.

According to the British director Peter Greenaway, film's original ambition was to be a great visual art, but as the narrative element has grown to dominate the medium, even the most creative cinematography has been subordinated to the story. Movies, he laments, have become the art form of the Philistines.

If Greenaway correctly diagnosed the aesthetic crisis of modern film, *The Tree of Life* is the remedy. Malick seems to intend that the extraordinary visuals dominate the first viewing experience, that the audience has time to register the images but not to comprehend, to reflect, or to anticipate. The marketing describes the construction of the film as impressionistic. This might suggest that one impression leads to the next, a sort of free association. But there is nothing free in the associations: every link has been chosen carefully, as has every image. Malick apparently has spent 30 years thinking about this film. And after shooting footage, he devoted another three years editing; five co-editors are acknowledged in the credits. They seem to have invented a poetic rhythm, a visual music, which has more in common with a symphony than with a novel—indeed, the music lifts your soul and sends chills down your spine—and the images carry the creative trajectory.

In the movie, one sees, roughly, a family, the O'Briens, dealing with the death of one of their own. Then, nothing less than a depiction of the creation of the universe and the evolution of life on earth. Next, a troubled boy coming of age in the traditional family where father rules, mother loves, and Oedipus stirs. Finally, a vision of the afterlife.

Many critics describe *The Tree of Life* as a philosophical exploration of the meaning of life; Malick is one of a surprising number of contemporary

filmmakers who began in philosophy. He studied at Harvard with philosopher-humanist and film theorist Stanley Cavell, went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, translated a volume of Heidegger, taught philosophy at M.I.T. before deciding he was not a very good teacher, became a journalist, rewrote screenplays, and eventually became a filmmaker.

Given Malick's background and his film's eschewal of a clear narrative, it's not surprising that some would see *The Tree of Life* as dealing with philosophical questions. Malick, however, begins his film with an epigraph, a passage from the Book of Job that suggests something different: "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?"

The traditional understanding of those lines suggests the humbling of Job, a good man put to a test of faith by a compassionless god. The passage can be understood to represent the essence of Malick's project itself, a dialectic of grand ambition and abject humility. On the one hand, he audaciously depicts creation—we will be there when all the sons of god shout for joy. On the other, he shows us a father, mother, and their three sons, who, like all humanity, inevitably endure profound humbling.

Like the greatest religious art of the Renaissance, Malick's cinematography conveys the presence of God even to nonbelievers.

This is not a philosophical project, posing only questions about the meaning of life. Malick has an answer in his film's exploration and embrace of faith in the compassionless god of Job. He will even show us the afterlife, where an angelic mother who still grieves for her beloved son joyously proclaims to God—"I give him to you, I give you my son"—and finds ecstatic salvation.

That character and the world Malick creates for us belong neither to quotidian reality, nor to the realm of dreams. *The Tree of Life* gives us the spiritual world in which God is present. The mother, played by Jessica Chastain, walks into the woods, and the trees become a cathedral. She points to the sky and tells her child, "That's where God lives." In every scene she is the Madonna. Throughout the film, mother and son whisper to God in voice-overs. Some take these whispers as prayers, though they are not those one finds in prayer books. This is the lonely inner voice of faith that speaks directly to God, or of shaken faith that wants God to demonstrate his presence. The miracle of Malick's cinematography is that, like the greatest religious art of the Renaissance, it conveys the presence of God even to nonbelievers. But Malick and his cinematographer, Emmanuel Lubezki, achieve this in an entirely original way.

Chastain as the mother is eerily beautiful, the embodiment of sacred innocence. Far from the typical Hollywood actress, she has red hair, a pale complexion, and conveys vulnerability. When she asked Malick how he wanted her to play the part, he suggested she visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art and study the paintings of the Virgin Mary. Remember, “I give you my son.” Malick’s instruction is another key to his project. He did not ask or expect her to reveal her character over time as one might in a linear narrative.

Early in the film Chastain’s character speaks of the way of nature and the way of grace. The way of nature is Hobbesian self-interest—it only cares for itself. The way of grace is selflessness, love, and forgiveness. Then a letter arrives telling her that her nineteen-year-old son is dead. That is her test of faith, which culminates in her ecstatic gift to God.

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The Tree of Life is perhaps Malick’s meditation on his own life: an account of his struggle for faith in Job’s compassionless god.

Malick is both reclusive and secretive. He never allows interviews, he refuses public appearances, avoids appearing on television, being photographed, and saying anything about his private life, though enough is known to suggest that this film is deeply autobiographical. Like Jack O’Brien—the film’s main

character, played in his youth by Hunter McCracken and in adulthood by Sean Penn—Malick is the oldest of three brothers. A younger brother Larry, like the film's R.L. (Laramie Eppler), played classical guitar. Larry studied with Andrés Segovia in Spain and committed suicide as a young man. The third brother was severely burned in a fiery car crash and scarred for life. In the film one of Jack's friends bears the scars of a burn across the side of his scalp. The camera repeatedly comes to rest on that scar, asking Jack's question, "God, how could you let that happen."

The O'Briens are not identical to the Malicks. Malick's father was of Lebanese descent, a geologist who became an executive at Phillips Petroleum. As Mr. O'Brien, Brad Pitt astonishes. Who would have thought that Pitt might be one of the most talented actors of his generation? Actors have apparently long known of Malick's ability to bring out the best in them. Still, Pitt's character, like Chastain's, is an archetype, not a psychologically nuanced individual who evolves over time. One might think of them not as actual people, but as ones who exist in their son's memory of his childhood. Jack's early childhood, in the same way, is presented as the product of his memories, the experience of childhood from the child's point of view. Malick does this as well as it has ever been done in film.

Malick's depiction of Jack's coming of age has much in common with Freud's description of the Oedipus complex and superego formation. It may be set

in 1950s Waco, Texas, but this family's dynamics were known in circa-1900 Vienna. Young Jack is at war with his father. Jack contemplates killing him and he calls on God to do it for him. God is the alternative father-authority with whom he struggles. Why does this omnipotent and omniscient god let a child die; let a child be burned; let a man, seen limping across a street, be crippled? Jack is painfully alone in the world. God is not watching over him.

Jack, the most psychologically real character in the film, likely is Malick's memory of himself.

Malick shows us a church service in which the priest warns that the congregation cannot expect god's help or protection. In his rebellion against his father and his disappointment in god, Jack tests the limits of his rage torturing animals and his brother, the beloved guitar-playing R.L. Jack seems to be moving along the path to delinquency and bullying, what the neo-Freudians would describe as a negative identity, a rebellious, cruel personality that emerges from crisis and confusion. His erotic longing for his mother is displaced onto a neighbor, whom he peeps on. Later he watches her drive away in her car. He enters her home, rummages through her bureau, pauses over her jewelry, and steals her slip. We see him lay it out on her bed as if some fantasy is to be fulfilled, and suddenly he is running frantically along the riverside with the stolen slip in his hand. He hides it under a piece of wood, thinks better of it, and sets it in

the river to be carried away by the current. As though to remind us of the true object of Jack's lust, Malick then shows us the boy watching his mother walk through the house in her nightgown. The wish for the tyrannical father's death, the erotic desire for the saintly mother, the sadism toward the younger brother are palpable. Freud could not ask for anything more, and then Malick gives us Freud's resolution of the Oedipus complex: identification with the father. "I'm more like you than her," Jack tells him.

Jack's coming of age is the most linear sequence in the film, but the future haunts the present in Malick's rendering. All this takes place chronologically before R.L.'s death at nineteen, which we learn about at the beginning of the film. And the grown-up Jack will be forever troubled by his struggle with his father and his treatment of his brother. If Pitt gives a superb performance, then one must say that McCracken as young Jack is spectacular; this has to be among the greatest performances in living memory. He does not look like an actor playing a part; he is young Jack. His cruelty to R.L., a touching performance in its own right, tests our sympathy. He is the most psychologically real character in the film, and, most likely, he is Malick's memory of himself.

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It should be emphasized that in *The Tree of Life* and in his previous four films Malick never depicts contemporary reality. Even Sean Penn's Jack, a contemporary figure, who talks to his father on a cell phone, lives in a home as futuristic and austere as the skyscraper in which he works. Perhaps this is one of Malick's ways of keeping us suspended in the world of the spiritual. There are also scenes of the adult Jack wandering in the wilderness—a troubled man, a tortured soul. And finally. Jack walks in the shallows of an ocean. We are in the afterlife, and Jack is reunited with the brothers of his memory, including himself. His mother gives her son to god, and Jack falls to his knees in humility, kissing the feet of someone whose face we never see. The last image is of a long bridge out of which swoops a single sea bird. The O'Briens have all taken the way of grace.

But don't take my word for it. After seeing the film for a third time, I believe that any verbal interpretation, right or wrong, could not be aesthetically faithful to Malick's visual masterpiece.



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