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The Tree of Life (2011)

Danny Fisher

University of the West, dannyf@uwest.edu

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Abstract

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

With only four other films to his credit in thirty-eight years, Terrence Malick – who trained at Harvard and Oxford as a philosopher, and counts college teaching stints and “bird-watching” among the things that have kept him busy in the large gaps between pictures – has made what will most likely be remembered (and very rightly so) as the crowning achievement of his modest yet resplendent career with the newly-released, Palme d’Or-winning *The Tree of Life*. That said, his latest opus is both the product and culmination of his spiritual exploration in those four previous triumphs, 1973’s *Badlands*, 1978’s *Days of Heaven*, 1998’s *The Thin Red Line*, and 2005’s *The New World*; as such, it is probably impossible to reflect fully on *The Tree of Life* without taking into consideration its predecessors. If, as Roger Ebert has said, this film is best understood as “a form of prayer,” then the rest of the oeuvre should be understood as the catechism that frames this unique act of devotion.

“There are two ways through life: the way of nature, and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you’ll follow,” says Mrs. O’Brien (the exquisite Jessica Chastain), a 1950s Waco homemaker, near the start of *The Tree of Life*. It is the beginning of what is the most affecting of any of the signature voiceover monologues the screenwriter/director has yet composed. She continues, describing what she was taught in childhood about grace, as we see images of a

small girl (presumably her) opening a barn window and looking out: she's sun-kissed, and the image lingers on her hands as they rest on the wood frame, cradle a baby goat, and reach out to grazing cows. Both the sun and hands serve as two important symbols of God's grace throughout the film, and are as important to the viewer's understanding of this theme as Mrs. O'Brien's explication.

That the monologue should come from Mrs. O'Brien is especially fitting, considering the fact that mothers like her are consistently the most important symbols and exemplars of grace in the films of Mr. Malick. "Come, Spirit, and help us in the story of our land," says mother-to-be Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher) in the first moments of *The New World*. "You are mother; we your field of corn. We rise from out of the soul of you." When we first meet him in *The Thin Red Line*, the saintly Pvt. Witt (Jim Caviezel) tells a fellow soldier about the death of his mother, saying, "I couldn't find nothin' beautiful or upliftin' about her goin' back to God." He then begins to weep, however, at the recollection of her calm and consolation of him at her own deathbed, and is heard again, in voiceover, saying, "That's where it's hidden—the immortality I hadn't seen."

The absence (or rejection) of these mother figures in Malick's films, then, often signals a fall from grace. Remembering her childhood, the death of her mother and the effect of it all on her father, Holly Sargis (Sissy Spacek), the teenage protagonist/narrator of *Badlands*, tells us, "He tried to act cheerful but he

could never be consoled by the little stranger he found in his house.” The characters’ attempts to “begin a new life, away from the scene of all these memories [of mother],” ends in the eponymous Badlands of Montana, with Holly and lover Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen) having left a horrific patchwork of violence, vanity, and other inequities in their wake. Similarly, in *The Tree of Life*, movement away from Mrs. O’Brien and her lessons – “Help each other. Love everyone. Forgive,” she tells her three boys through another voiceover – is in the direction of darker, sadder, crueller territory.

In this case, that territory is “the way of nature,” personified here in the emotionally distant, forceful, and hypocritical Mr. O’Brien (played by a pitch-perfect, never better Brad Pitt). Believing that tough love is what they need, he raises their sons in a hard, militaristic fashion (a carelessly slammed door equals shutting it gently fifty times in a row), offering lessons like “Your mother’s naïve,” “To get ahead you can’t be too good,” “The minute you see [an opponent] blink—crack ‘em,” and “The wrong people get loved.” Professional humiliation and frustration with his lot in life drives much of his behavior with the boys, and yet, at the points when he’s able to recognize this, it only seems to spur him on. What’s happening inside the character can’t be much different from the inner struggle voiced by *The Thin Red Line*’s frenzied, desensitized Col. Tall (Nick Nolte): “All I might have given for love’s sake... Too late.”

While Mr. O'Brien is meant to be both an archetypal Eisenhower-era father and the embodiment of nature, he also belongs to the memorable gallery of complicated, all-too-human characters Malick and his collaborators have created. As the lost Linda (Linda Manz) says of her criminal brother Bill (Richard Gere) in *Days of Heaven*, so we could say about Mr. O'Brien: "Nobody's perfect. There was never a perfect person around. You just have half-angel and half-devil in you." Indeed, some of the most moving scenes in *The Tree of Life* come in those flashes when Mr. O'Brien is vulnerable, able to communicate with his sons, and open to love. Even the almost wholly angelic Mrs. O'Brien has her mortal moments as well. In one scene, for example, her eldest son Jack (played as a boy by a truly astonishing first-time actor named Hunter McCracken) talks back to her with a stinging truth: "What do you know? You let him run all over you."

"A family can have only one head, and that is the father," says the arrogant Capt. Bosche (George Clooney) in *The Thin Red Line*. "Father's the head, mother runs it." Considering the time period and classically suburban location, the family dynamic in *The Tree of Life* follows this model exactly. The richly complex tension between grace and nature that is at the heart of the film, then, plays out in the uneasy family management overseen by Mr. O'Brien but attended to by Mrs. O'Brien. It is all observed exclusively through the eyes of young Jack, who is deeply conflicted about what he witnesses and feels. He is

especially fearful about what he may be becoming. “I’m more like you than her,” he says almost brokenheartedly to his father in a rare moment of bonding between the two. In another scene, he asks in voiceover, “Why should I be good if you’re not?” This question is to no one in particular, which only serves to blur the line between God the Father and Mr. O’Brien the father. Jack is effectively a stand-in for quite a few of us: able to appreciate and yearn for grace, but somehow unable to completely give himself over to it. (He is seen “experimenting,” committing acts of petty larceny and unkindness, knowing it’s wrong, and yet he’s unable to stop himself.) “Help me to be good,” he prays to God.

It certainly doesn’t help Jack’s sense of himself that his younger brother J.L. (played by another splendid first-timer named Larramie Eppler) is a chip off their mother’s block. Indeed, he belongs among those gentle men of Malick’s films who have been irrevocably affected by grace, including Pvt. Witt; *The New World*’s John Rolfe (Christian Bale); and especially *Days of Heaven*’s farmer (Sam Shepard), about whom Linda says, “Wasn’t no harm in him. You’d give him a flower, he’d keep it forever.” Of course, J.L. also becomes as much a touchstone for good in Jack’s life as their mother: “Brother. Mother. They led me to you,” says the adult Jack (beautifully played by Sean Penn) in the film’s opening seconds as we see only blackness and an obscured light, which could be the presence of God.

It is the news of J.L.'s untimely death in Vietnam at the start of *The Tree of Life* that sets this intimate, subjective meditation on the ways of nature and grace against the massive backdrop of the "big questions" every one of us (not to mention every belief system on Earth) has had to struggle with: Why do bad things happen to good people? What does it all mean? Why are we here at all? Counseled with vague, unhelpful bromides such as "It's God's plan," and "You still have your other two sons," we experience the heartache of the completely devastated Mrs. O'Brien. (The adult Jack wonders, "How did she bear it?") Finally, she speaks to God in voiceover, demanding, as so many before her have, "Answer me."

It is Malick who responds to Mrs. O'Brien's entreaty with a huge, wordless, staggeringly glorious midsection of *The Tree of Life* that takes us through the creation of the universe in all its beauty (grace?) and seeming randomness (nature?). Under the supervision of special effects titan Douglas Trumbull (*2001: A Space Odyssey*), the director and his production team show us the "Big Bang," the origin of life on Earth, dinosaurs that may (or may not) be capable of compassion, the cataclysmic destruction of the planet by a meteor, and the reemergence of life right up to young Jack. What does this all mean? It seems that Malick is trying to understand "God" within the limits of what we know; the sequence evocatively and bluntly articulates all that we have at our disposal for

discerning the answers to those big questions (which, depending on your point of view, may be a lot and may be a little). It doesn't directly answer so much, perhaps, as it does deepen and continue to emphasize that perennial tension between nature and grace throughout space and time – something that, across his films, Malick seems to believe holds the best few clues to figuring out what it's all about.

And yet, *The Tree of Life* also has a decidedly eschatological bent and dares to look into the future, toward our last days, with some conviction. Malick seems to be concerned that humanity is moving farther and farther away from grace. “We’re getting’ greedier,” the adult Jack observes prophetically, sadly, in voiceover as he looks down from a high-rise on modern day Houston. (It is noteworthy that *The Tree of Life* is the only film Malick has directed that features scenes set in the present, and his and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubeski’s wary perspective on it is incredibly striking.) In addition, the conclusion depicts Earth’s eventual destruction by the sun, and then offers a vision of what must be heaven: a shoreline where the adult Jack walks with his younger self, and reunites Mrs. O’Brien with J.L. “Guide us...to the end of time,” he implores them in voiceover.

Remembering the events of his childhood and his own intentional movements toward grace, the adult Jack ponders at one point, “When did you first touch my heart?” From *Badlands* to *The Tree of Life*, Malick is making films with

the hope that our hearts will be touched by nature and especially grace. He is unapologetically earnest in this endeavor – which may explain the boos that were mixed with the cheers when the film debuted at the highfalutin Cannes – and clearly wants very much for humanity to follow Mrs. O’Brien’s instructions: Help each other. Love everyone. Forgive. Though his filmmaking can sometimes be as inscrutable as the universe he observes, the director has always seemed confident that meditating on the big questions asked in *The Tree of Life* will lead us to grace. “Darkness, light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face?” asks *The Thin Red Line*’s Pvt. Train (John Dee Smith) in the last seconds of that film. But he doesn’t seem to care too much, and says finally, capturing Malick’s spirit perfectly in a few lines, “Oh, my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.”

Where Malick goes from here is anybody’s guess, but, surprisingly, we’ll know soon enough: his sixth film, “a love story,” starring Rachel McAdams and Ben Affleck, is currently in production and due out as early as next year.