

DAYS OF HEAVEN AND WACO: TERRENCE MALICK'S *THE TREE OF LIFE*

DAVID STERRITT REVIEWS AN EPIC THAT COMBINES COSMOLOGY AND DOMESTIC DRAMA

Call it coincidence or call it Providence, but Terrence Malick's eagerly anticipated *The Tree of Life* debuted at Cannes less than a week before the Rapture was to occur, according to a California evangelist whose prophecy was widely reported at the time. What's interesting here is not the prediction but the fact that a delusional nonagenarian could make international headlines with a claim that apocalyptically minded preachers have been making since the dawn of the Christian era. Americans are oddly vulnerable to this sort of nonsense—witness our eagerness to inject religion into debates over gay rights, stem-cell research, abortion, and other issues relating more to the flesh than to the spirit. Adding more fuel to the ideological fire is the Christian narcissism that courses through large segments of the United States, less belligerent now than in the Reagan era or the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, but still festering in the national unconscious.

I start my discussion this way not to sound contentious or unholier than thou, but to indicate from the start my reservations about the theology Malick embraces in *The Tree of Life*; while he does brilliant things with his narrative materials, they tap into a kind of American religiosity that specializes in affirming static traditions and shoring up reactionary mindsets. Certain tropes in the film, such as the glowing crystal that apparently symbolizes God, come perilously close to the vague “spirituality” and hazy mysticism of so-called New Age gurus. Other sequences are religious in old-school Christian ways, and some of the imagery recalls the kind of fundamentalist recruiting pamphlet you find on park benches and subway seats. From the prayers at the beginning to the sermon in the middle and the vision of heaven at the end, Malick's film is wrapped in a religiosity that secular humanists will find nostalgic and naive. When the movie visits a cemetery, a thuddingly symbolic name—Gracy, as in grace of God—looms on the biggest gravestone, and when a

scene set in heaven shows a bird flying over the ocean, you can only hope it isn't Jonathan Livingston Seagull trying for a comeback.

In just about every other way, however, *The Tree of Life* seems to me a stunning achievement. And despite my reservations about its religious notions, I'm impressed by the courage Malick shows in organizing such an ambitious, personal film around themes that Hollywood rarely bothers to sniff at, much less explore, except in superstitious fantasies like *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) and propaganda screeds like *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). It's easy to write off the film's sketchy, impressionistic narrative, and it's even easier to scoff at what one reviewer called its “cosmic woo-woo.” It's far more interesting, though, to look beyond the surface layers of story, characters, and milieu, taking Malick's evocation of the supernatural not as a stab at timeless truth but rather as a distinctive cinematic matrix upon which he weaves an intuitive web of meaning and emotion that makes up for its shortage of theological sophistication with large amounts of aesthetic ingenuity.

The film's driving force appears to be Malick's conviction that he can invoke a sense of divine wonder by artfully juxtaposing an autobiographical bildungsroman with sublime artifacts chosen from the visual, verbal, musical, gestural, and architectural treasures that Judeo-Christian thought has generated during its long history. Viewed as an exercise in the Hollywood genres it borrows from—psychological drama, domestic melodrama, coming-of-age tale, family romance—the film is often as muddled as its less imaginative critics have claimed. But they miss the point. *The Tree of Life* puts genre elements into play for the purpose of exceeding and transcending them, using them as building blocks for a risky, resourceful tour de force that moves from earthly, psychological concerns to heavenly, sacramental ones in a manner that might well have pleased one of Malick's heroes, Martin Heidegger, who believed that modern philosophy's most important task is to dig out from under the traditional metaphysics that has long dominated Western thinking.



Texas and beyond

The Tree of Life. Photos: Merie Wallace. © 2011 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Before going further into this, some words about the story and the production are in order. *The Tree of Life* takes place in the 1950s in Waco, Texas, one of the places where Malick, born in 1943, grew up. The movie begins with a prologue introducing its allusive, associative structure and the central themes of love, death, grief, and humanity's existential choice between "the way of nature" and "the way of grace" as the right path to redemption and salvation. Malick's trademark voiceovers come and go over a far-reaching montage of microcosmic and macrocosmic images that eventually jell into a fairly linear, if highly unconventional, narrative.

The plot centers on the O'Brien family, whose new proximity to mortality and mourning is established when bad news comes to Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien (Brad Pitt and Jessica Chastain) in a telegram. We then go back in time, seeing the early days of their marriage, the birth of their first son, and the arrival of two more offspring who complete the household. More family history emerges from bits of information scattered throughout the film—the hardship of losing their home when Mr. O'Brien is forced out of his job, a welcome rebound thanks to patents he registered years earlier, the physical comfort they've achieved by the time the sad telegram sets the story in motion.

One of the three O'Brien children, Jack (Hunter McCracken), becomes the focal point of the film, which vividly depicts his experiences on the brink of adolescence. Although he spends much of his time with his brothers and

friends, Jack's life is primarily defined by his relationships with his parents. His mother is warm, sympathetic, and fun to be around; his father is the disciplinarian of the house, forever laying down rules (sit on the front of your chair; pull weeds out by the roots; call me father, not dad) and sometimes flying into fearsome rages when he's disobeyed. Logically concluding that his father hates him, Jack naturally hates him back, and he's at his happiest when the patriarch goes away on a business trip, leaving mom in charge and sparking the film's most idyllic family sequences. Only in the fullness of time does Jack realize that he and his father are very much alike, led as much by instinct as by reason and crisscrossed with contradictory impulses. Meanwhile, tragedy strikes when one of Jack's brothers abruptly drowns in a community swimming pool, the pivotal event around which the entire film can ultimately be seen to revolve. In a sense, the most important figure in the story is the one we see least often: Jack many years later (Sean Penn), a prominent professional coping with a midlife crisis that brings memories of these bygone events—and intimations of a higher power that guards and guides him—flooding into his mind and heart.

By all accounts, the making of *The Tree of Life* was as curious as the film itself. According to Peter Biskind's 1999 *Vanity Fair* article "The Runaway Genius," after Malick finished the high-romantic drama *Days of Heaven* in 1978 he pursued a project called *Q*, which was to begin by illustrating the origins of life. That imposing topic soon became the sub-



American family

The Tree of Life. Photos: Merie Wallace. © 2011 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

ject of the entire film, and Malick used his connection with Paramount Pictures to get cameras rolling around the globe, filming everything from volcanic activity at Mount Etna to ice shelves tumbling into Antarctic waters. Malick himself labored on the screenplay, which was described by an associate as “pages of poetry, with no dialogue, glorious visual descriptions.” Paramount grew impatient for a workable script, and one day Malick simply dropped the project, moving on to *The New World*, his sweeping historical romance of 2005.

Or so it seemed, but he may have reshuffled and recycled *Q* instead: parts of *The Tree of Life* deal directly with the origins of life, seen in cosmic montages where specks of rock and strands of DNA make momentous contact with planets in outer space and ova in the nascent biosphere, producing an array of cataclysmic blasts, planetary lineups à la *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and other cosmos-making miracles. Eventually dinosaurs arrive, looking like extras from *Jurassic Park* (1993); there’s an inscrutable little scene where a big

one puts its paw on a small one's head, as if to crush it, then ambles benignly away—perhaps the birth of altruism in the world. Finally humankind enters the scene.

Simultaneously with *The Tree of Life*, according to *IndieWire*, Malick has also been making an IMAX film called *The Voyage of Time*, narrated by Pitt and depicting the first stirrings of life and consciousness, the rise of humanity, and finally the end of everything. If and when it's released, its content may have direct connections with *The Tree of Life*, which was also shot partly on IMAX film. The vicissitudes of casting these projects are a saga in themselves, so I'll just mention reports that *Q* would have starred Mel Gibson along with Colin Farrell, who worked well with Malick on *The New World*, and that Heath Ledger was set to play Mr. O'Brien in *The Tree of Life* until Ledger burned himself out by racing directly from Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) to Terry Gilliam's *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus* (2009), the last movie he finished before his untimely death. There's little point in wondering how different actors might have influenced the outcomes of these ventures, but these days it's a good idea to keep Gibson at a distance.

A factor distinguishing *The Tree of Life* from other Malick projects is its strong autobiographical component; going back to Biskind's account, it's clear that young Malick resembled young Jack in numerous ways. Malick was the oldest of three brothers, fought often with his father, and felt extremely close to his mother. His youngest brother was a gifted classical guitarist whom the great André Segovia took as a student, but once in Spain he had a breakdown, destroyed his hands, then died in an apparent suicide. In another tragedy, the middle brother was horribly burned in a car accident. In the film, Jack relates to his parents much as Malick related to his in reality, attached to mom and at odds with the patriarch. Jack's brother has precocious skills on the guitar and dies, appreciated by few, in the swimming accident. A voiceover tells us that the other brother also died quite young, reiterating the lost-sibling motif, and we occasionally glimpse a neighborhood boy whose head was partly disfigured in a fire.

As bildungsroman, *The Tree of Life* positively sparkles. I've never seen a film that more richly limns not just the characteristic occurrences of growing up but also the ephemera, the fleeting perceptions, the quicksilver moods, the endless ambivalences and indeterminacies that make up both the constitutive bedrock and the ungraspable core of a blossoming personality that's already formed in some respects, still ambiguous and amorphous in others. The overflowing energy of childhood surges through a number of briskly presented scenes, as when Jack and another boy have a whole conversation while running down a back road at top speed,

or when the neighborhood kids fire a homemade rocket into the air, then gaze in bafflement when it refuses to come down where they expect. Fleeting views of youngsters talking through tin-can-and-string telephones and standing on paint-can stilts seem to symbolize their dim awareness of the possibilities for connection and exaltation that the world reserves for humans just like them. Other examples abound, one of the most resonant being a sequence where Jack slightly injures his brother, then apologizes in ways so delicate and inconspicuous that they're hard for an outsider to fathom.

These sequences get much of their power from the cinematography by Emmanuel Lubezki, who also photographed *The New World*, and from the editing by a five-person team during three years of postproduction. The shots in the domestic scenes are brief and mercurial, and the camera is on the move as incessantly as the kids it photographs; yet the predominant effect is less flighty and distracted than dynamic and precise, blending the transitory and the enduring, the breathless and the timeless. From the standpoint of eternity, Malick poetically suggests, the feeling of an instant and the meaning of a lifetime are interwoven parts of a seamless whole.

Malick captures the locales in Waco with equal sensitivity, steeping them in the moods and appearances of lower-middle-class 1950s suburbia. This is partly a matter of story and dialogue: Mr. O'Brien grumbles about neighbors who "have money," for instance, and dreams of the musical career he longed for but never had. As for the physical environment, Malick makes it ring true not by dwelling on drab surroundings, worn-down possessions, or economic anxieties, but by making every house, yard, dusty street, and commercial strip look flawlessly *nondescript*, allowing the poetry of the ordinary, the rhymes and rhythms of the run of the mill, to settle gently over the film. The technique is simple, subtle, and as different as can be from the heroically grand style Malick applies to the film's cosmological and theological material.

The sequences in Waco and other earthbound milieus are nonetheless charged with Malick's sense of life's inherent mystery, expressed through visual markers familiar from his earlier work. Boundaries between outdoors and indoors are blurred in various ways—a room has no solid walls, a glass building mirrors the sky—and voiceovers speak of the "shining" of the world, a term from Heidegger that Malick virtually patented with *The Thin Red Line*, his philosophical World War II epic of 1998. The camerawork is crucial in this regard, continually gliding, swooping, soaring, and traveling with the characters as they go about their daily rounds. The film's quick cutting and spirited camera movement have led some reviewers to think of Stan Brakhage's boldly kinetic style, but if you're acquainted with Brakhage's work you'll

see there's approximately zero resemblance between the luminous precision of Lubezki's photography for Malick and the radical lyricism of most Brakhage films, which are even more subjective and spontaneous than *The Tree of Life*. The one strikingly Brakhage-like touch I do detect is the God-symbolizing crystal, which recalls *Text of Light* (1974), an essay in articulated luminescence that Brakhage made by photographing a glass ashtray over many months. (Nor do Jordan Belson's nonfigurative works have much in common with the occasional abstract interludes in Malick's film, although the thought did cross my mind.)

One of my strongest impressions regarding *The Tree of Life* is that no filmmaker has ever come closer to creating an authentic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a work of art that incorporates all the arts on an equal and interactive basis. Of course the term derives from Richard Wagner, who was first and foremost a composer, and despite his ideal of equivalency among the arts, music is first among equals in his masterpieces. Visuals have the same privileged place in cinema, and Malick approaches the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal via his truly Wagnerian orchestration of framing and composition in conjunction with poetic language and dialogue, verbal and gestural performance, source music and underscoring, costume, architecture, and décor. Critics and scholars will be analyzing the extravaganza for years to come, so I'll note only that if dynamic imagery is its greatest single asset, majestic music is a very close second. The original score was written by Alexandre Desplat, my nominee for finest movie composer working today. The rest ranges from harmonic chants by David Hykes and sound collages by Arsenije Jovanovic to funerary music by Zbigniew Preisner and selections from the classical hit parade by Gustav Mahler, Hector Berlioz, and Gustav Holst, plus an arresting excerpt from Bedřich Smetana's *Ma Vlast* with brisk dotted rhythms we've heard a million times before, joined here to exhilarating images that set the musical warhorse galloping with renewed vigor. These are some of the ingredients that justify ranking *The Tree of Life* not too many notches below Wagnerian opera; and while there's no Wagner on the soundtrack, remember that *The New World* opened with Wagner's prologue to *Das Rheingold*, itself the prologue to the *Ring*, his magnum opus.

Also like a Wagnerian opera, *The Tree of Life* is a mythopoetic work. The cosmological sequences sketch out a scientific creation myth, while the family scenes trace Jack's growth along classic Oedipal lines, following the mythos of classical psychoanalysis: strong attachment to his mother accompanied by sharp conflict with his father, which is eventually resolved. Malick's use of the Oedipal scenario is not as one-dimensional as some commentators have implied,

though. At the film's Cannes press conference, Pitt said he was somewhat reluctant to play an "abusive father," and many journalists have picked up on this, describing Mr. O'Brien as a veritable household ogre. They and Pitt should have watched the finished film more carefully, since while Jack is looking through Oedipalized eyes, most disinterested folks would agree that Mr. O'Brien falls well within normal limits as a dad. At one point, for instance, we hear a string of Jack's resentments on the soundtrack—father lies; he makes up stories; he says don't put your elbows on the table but he puts *his* on the table—yet what we see on the screen is Mr. O'Brien goofing around with the kids, all of them having a terrific, playful time. Even a scene showing Mr. O'Brien exploding with rage at the dinner table is less the stuff of Dickensian nightmare than a portrait of a well-intentioned but all-too-human man who falls short of his own standards in any number of departments. Malick delicately conveys this.

He also portrays sibling rivalry extremely well, as when Jack plays "trust me" games with one of his brothers, sometimes fooling or betraying him in little ways, then taking care to calm the waters afterward. In an episode that beautifully captures Jack's wobbly position between childhood and adolescence—another blurry, wavering borderline—he sneaks into a neighbor's bedroom, steals a slip from her drawer, and runs to a nearby river where, driven by an ill-understood combination of fear and desire, he hides it on the bank and then puts it in the current, which carries it swiftly out of sight and mind. The scene superbly encapsulates the scary, exciting, mystifying advent of maturity.

Malick's films are always pervaded by philosophy, most notably that of Heidegger, which Malick studied, translated, and taught during his academic years. Heidegger's presence in *The Tree of Life* is as plain as the "shining" affirmed in the voiceovers, recalling resonant words from *The Thin Red Line*: "Darkness and light, strife and love, are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh my soul...look out through my eyes. Look at the things you made, all things shining." This is not the telepathic "shining" explored in the eponymous film by Stanley Kubrick, another director with a restlessly moving camera and a taste for philosophical subjects; to Malick shining is not anomalous but universal, not amoral but a sign of God's goodness and mercy. More emphatically in every new film he makes, his goal is to evoke the shining of the world with reverence and awe, showing that the way of mortal nature is a misleading, ultimately illusory detour from the abiding way of immortal grace. The filmmaker who shot parts of *The New World* on 65mm film and parts of *The Tree of Life* in IMAX is something of a cinematic alchemist, hoping that an expansive, fine-grained film emulsion might absorb not only



Father of the house

The Tree of Life. Photos: Merie Wallace. © 2011 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

the light but the very *essence* of the people, places, and things in God's creation. This is the very essence of Malick's art: movie technique as revelation, cinematography as theophany.

As engrossing and often stirring as these aspects of Malick's creativity are, his new film's passage from philosophy to theology—and specifically to theodicy, arguing for God's goodness despite the evidence of a fallen, iniquitous world—eventually lets me down, as I said at the beginning. *The Tree of Life* opens with a quotation from the Book of Job, and dead center in the story an Episcopalian priest delivers a sermon on the sufferings of that virtuous man; yet the film presents us with a strangely bloodless version of suffering, so reticent about physical agony and psychological affliction that giving birth seems effortless, characters hardly seem to age, and dying is over in a flash. In the end Mrs. O'Brien can give up her son with contentment because she knows he is in God's hands, and has been all along, and they'll be happy together in heaven before long. O death, where is thy sting? Not in this movie.

Near the beginning and again near the end, Malick fills the screen with a large field of beautiful sunflowers, the great monotheists of the plant kingdom. While it's a glorious image, I couldn't help reflecting that like their fundamentalist Christian counterparts, sunflowers have both the blessing and the curse of facing forever in a single shared direction.

This unchanging uniformity makes them a dubious metaphor for the spirituality Malick aims to celebrate. What this flawed, fascinating film needs more of is the boundless contingency of the human spirit, faced with unyielding pain as well as needed solace, and greater recognition of the power we humans have to remake and rejuvenate the myths, philosophies, and theodicies we invent to make sense of ourselves. Instead the film gives us those obedient sunflowers and the dutiful worshippers they symbolize, transfixed by a radiance that out-glow and often veils the horrors of the world, but does not prevent them from recurring no matter how soothingly, suggestively, spellbindingly it shines.

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ABSTRACT A review of Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* which argues that the remarkable aesthetic ambition of the film and its great success in depicting a mid-century American childhood are to an extent undermined by its invocation of a benign divinity.

KEYWORDS Terrence Malick, childhood and cinema, religion and cinema, *The Tree of Life*, film music

CREDITS *The Tree of Life*. Director, writer: Terrence Malick. Producers: Sarah Green, Bill Pohlard, Brad Pitt, Dede Gardner, Grant Hill. Cinematographer: Emmanuel Lubezki. Editors: Hank Corwin, Jay Rabinowitz, Daniel Rezende, Billy Weber, Mark Yoshikawa. Music: Alexandre Desplat. © 2010 Cottonwood Pictures LLC. U.S. distributor: Fox Searchlight Pictures.