

## Terrence Malick's Captivating Meditation on 'The Tree of Life'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on May 27, 2011 - 3:10pm

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – I've seen Terrence Malick's "Tree of Life" twice now and I still struggle with how to put my reaction to it into words. The film almost defies typical critical discussion with its lack of narrative thrust and a structure that makes it far closer to a poem than a piece of prose. How do you even begin to talk about a piece that works with emotions instead of plot twists? Memories instead of motives? "The Tree of Life" is an amazing accomplishment that challenges the viewer by using different cinematic tools than what they expect. Some will shut down like a kid in church refusing to listen to a sermon. But if you truly give in to the beauty of this amazing film, you might even find yourself changed by it. How often can you say that at the cinema?

The word "haunting" is often over-used, so I will try and clarify a phrase that might have lost its critical meaning on a personal level. I dreamt about "The Tree of Life" the two nights after I saw it for the first time. It has changed the way I look at my son and how I think about the institution of family. Rarely has a film had as deep an emotional and even spiritual impact on me as "The Tree of Life." Especially after the second viewing, when I allowed critical thought and analysis to give way to less easily-defined responses to the film. This is a work built on elements of life for which there often is no concrete definition – beauty, grace, nature...emotions, memories, and lessons learned.



The Tree of Life

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

"The Tree of Life" opens with two passages from Job, "*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?*" It is followed with a narration about the difference between nature and grace. The former needs and asks. It needs sustenance, light, shelter. Nature is finite. Grace needs nothing. It is forever. It has been here since before time and will be here after it. As the mother (Jessica Chastain) of the piece tells us, "*No one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.*" Essentially, the rest of the film will be about finding grace, losing it as we get older, and hoping that we find it again before it's too late. Don't worry. Whatever grace means to you – God, hope, love, something else – is unimportant to the overall impact of "The Tree of Life".

To tell that story, Malick opens his film with the loss of a child. A 19-year-old boy has been killed (we don't know how...could be in Vietnam) and his parents (Chastain & Brad Pitt) are clearly devastated. It is revealed that this loss is being remembered by the adult version (Sean Penn) of the boy's older brother. He wonders how his mother survived such a horrendous tragedy. How do we get past the unspeakable?

How do we keep going? It's unclear exactly why but the adult is trying to figure out how he got here and how to keep going, thoughts I think most people have at different periods in their lives. To do so, he explores his memories of childhood and how his mother, father, and brothers formed his very existence.



The Tree of Life

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

The narration-heavy, poetic opening reel gives way about 20 minutes in to a stunning and controversial reel in which Malick explores the very beginning of the universe. We see the Big Bang, star formations, lava, primordial ooze, amoebas, signs of life, and even dinosaurs in a reel that has reminded some viewers of "2001: A Space Odyssey." It's creatively jaw-dropping and its inclusion is left open to interpretation. The scenes of the creation of the world are followed by the scenes of the creation of a man, as we flash back to the child version of Penn's character (a fantastic young man named Hunter McCracken), growing up in Waco, Texas. In a remarkable sequence, we see his two brothers being born, key events around his home & family, moments from his childhood, and settle in as his character approaches adolescence. The second half of the film plays out relatively straightforward compared to the first, as this young man hits that point in his life when character is created, often through questions – Why should I do good if good people can die? Why should I be a good person if my father is not? Why does misfortune befall the good as well as the bad?

There is a repeated question by Penn in "The Tree of Life" – "*How did I lose you?*" The "you" is never defined. It could be God. It could be grace. It could be his brother or mother. But haven't we all felt that something was lost at some point in our life? It could be faith. It could be hope. It could be love. "The Tree of Life" is a film about finding those things and, I believe, as illustrated in an amazing final sequence, using grace to bear the unbearable and find happiness again. The key phrase in that last sentence is "I believe." "The Tree of Life" will have different meanings in every row of every theater in which it plays. It is a film that is clearly meant to be open to interpretation.





The Tree of Life

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

As for traditional critical praise, "The Tree of Life" is one of the most technically impressive films in a long time. Emanuel Lubezki's cinematography is often more like a series of photos that one would see in a gallery. It's a rapturous film just to behold. If he's not Oscar-nominated, there's no point in having the category. And Alexandre Desplat's lovely score has been brilliantly woven together with a large number of older classical pieces. The cinematography and music in "The Tree of Life" are nearly characters in the piece. That's how important they are to the overall fabric.

In terms of performance, the inexperienced McCracken is the lead and he nails it. He was tasked with conveying what is arguably the most character-defining period in a man's life as he goes from wide-eyed innocent to someone who worries he's becoming more like his abusive father. Chastain and Pitt will be underrated but both are simply spectacular. Chastain brings a warmth and heart to the overall piece that becomes undeniably essential to its success and Pitt gives what is easily one of his best performances, completely defining a character even though he may not have that many scenes or lines.

*"Father, mother, you wrestle inside me."* We all have conflicting ideas wrestling inside of us but rarely has that daringly ambitious a concept been brought to life on film. It took Terrence Malick years to deliver his most personal film and the result has already divided audiences around the world. For more than any other time in my critical career, after writing thousands of reviews, I struggle to put into words what this work means to me. In many ways, there are no words for "The Tree of Life." Leave your words at the door and just let it wash over you. Maybe you'll be as changed by it as I was.

*"The Tree of Life" stars Hunter McCracken, Brad Pitt, Sean Penn, and Jessica Chastain. It was written and directed by Terrence Malick. It opens in New York and Los Angeles on May 27th, 2011 and in Chicago on June 3rd, 2011.*



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