

Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*: A world of confusion

By David Walsh
20 June 2011

“If I include a shoe-brush in the unity mammals, this does not help it to get mammary glands.” – F. Engels

The Tree of Life, the new film by independent American filmmaker Terrence Malick, is a largely muddleheaded and implicitly misanthropic work that also includes a number of exquisite images. The latter, unhappily, do not compensate for the overall mass of confusion and the resulting strain it places on the central human drama.

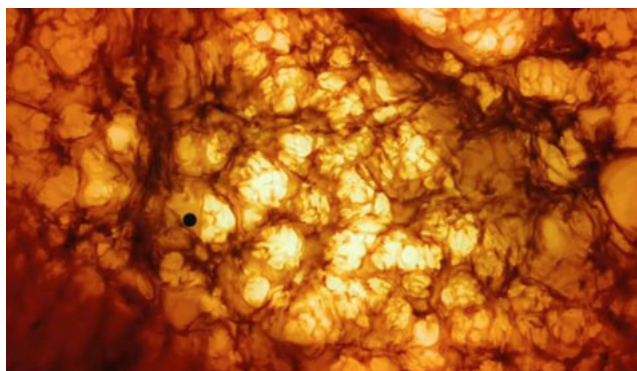
The elliptical and allusive film, whose images follow one another in a dreamlike manner, attempts nothing less than to depict the origins of the universe and the evolution of life on Earth, as well as the origins and evolution of one particle of humanity, a middle class family living in varying degrees of joy and discontent in Waco, Texas (the filmmaker's birthplace in 1943), in the 1950s and 1960s.

Malick is a serious figure (although I am not an admirer of either *Badlands* or *Days of Heaven*, the movies he directed in the 1970s), and portions of his Second World War drama, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), were as powerful, in my opinion, as anything created in the American cinema over the past two decades. In the present situation, where so much of Hollywood production is trivial or worse, the appearance of a decidedly ambitious film inevitably attracts attention. Even bending over backward, however, and giving the filmmaker credit for a number of truly privileged moments, one has to say that there is something distinctly “off” about *The Tree of Life*, bound up with a certain intellectual quackery, which itself reflects some of the problems of cultural life in the past several decades.

That portion of the public dissatisfied with the current fare understandably greets nearly any more challenging work with a degree of interest, but it is important to consider critically what Malick is offering up. Not every difficult or semi-obscure film is a contribution to art or society. Malick's sincerity and dedication to his aesthetic labors are not in question, but whether *The Tree of Life* sheds revealing light on life and the world is another matter.

In a kind of prologue to *The Tree of Life*, we are introduced to a man and woman, the O'Briens of Waco, respectively associated by a voiceover with aggressive Nature (which “pleases itself”) and the quality of Grace (which is merciful and compassionate, and “accepts insults and injuries”). They are informed by a telegram of the death of their middle son (at 19, we later learn), from unstated causes. They are grief-stricken. The father (Brad Pitt) is especially remorseful, while his wife (Jessica Chastain) demands an explanation from God (“Answer me”).

In present-day Houston, a surviving son, Jack (Sean Penn), a successful but morose architect, thinks about the past and wonders how and why his younger brother “was taken away.” (Of course, audience members might have more of a clue about this if they were given a hint as to the cause of the brother's death, although the director obviously has a grander “how and why” in mind.)



Malick

then provides us his vision of the birth of the universe, complete with immense explosions, swirling clouds of gas, nebulae, molten planets and more. Life eventually appears on earth in its most primitive forms, then we see fishlike creatures, followed by a sequence with dinosaurs (including an altruistic one). Somewhere in here is an especially menacing shot of a towering column of hammerhead sharks.

This section seems to follow on from the film's opening title-card, taken from the Book of Job in the Old Testament, where God replies to Job's complaints about his unprovoked and unjustified suffering with this rhetorical question: “Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?” That “foundation” occurred in a gigantic cataclysm, which Malick is suggesting has something to do with the state of the human condition, including possibly the element of sudden and unexplained suffering and death. These characteristics, according to the logic of the film, seem to be encoded in the DNA of existence.

What's disturbing about Malick's representation of the physical origins of the universe in particular, although elegantly composed and shot (primarily using organic materials), is its overriding sense of foreboding, only underscored by the musical background. The devastating collisions, destructive eruptions and ceaseless motion are frightening and seem meant to intimidate, as though we were being reminded that the Earth (and ultimately life) emerged in immense violence and hence we should not be surprised by the dreadful things to come—as though, in fact, given its convulsive origins, life on this planet might have been hopelessly, fatally flawed from the start.

A flickering, eternal flame (the Creator, Spirit or...?) is also present, with which a dialogue is carried on. Grace and gentleness exist as well. How? Where do they come from? It would seem from somewhere outside primal, natural-physical development, although earthly nature has its calm and harmonious side (trees, rivers, fields, clouds). Organic being appears to have this element, above all, as opposed to celestial bodies and rocks and metal skyscrapers. Perhaps its source is inexplicable. We don't know. But holding out hope that human generosity and kindness will gain the upper hand would seem a questionable proposition. It is a flickering flame in dark space, after all.

The story of the O'Brien family in Waco then begins. Courtship,

marriage, the birth of the first son (also a painful process), followed by two others. See video clip.

Mr. O'Brien, who has been in the military, is something of a martinet. He insists on being addressed as "sir"; he punishes young Jack (Hunter McCracken) for letting the front door slam. He instructs the boy about the harshness and competitiveness of the world, telling him that the wealthy get ahead by demonstrating "fierce will" and "trickery." The father tells his son, "If you want to succeed, you can't be too good." He draws an invisible line in the backyard separating the O'Brien family's property from the neighbor's. See video clip.

Mrs. O'Brien, a devout Christian, embodies human caring and sympathy, both toward her children and others. She offers a convict encountered on the main street of the small town a cup of water. She plays with her sons in the house and on the sundrenched lawn and street. She dances, she even floats in mid-air. The mother says little, except to whisper messages to God and chastise Jack for his cruelty to a small animal ("Never do it again").

Her husband is deeply conflicted. "I dreamed of being a great musician." Instead he works as a technician or supervisor in a plant or refinery of some kind. He holds numerous patents, but his effort to strike out on his own in business comes to naught. He loses his job, or has to transfer to another locale. See video clip.

By far the strongest section of *The Tree of Life* treats Jack's growing awareness of life, his departure from childhood. Here the elliptical, imagistic style works supremely well. Malick precisely conveys the *newness* of certain experiences, those moments when the boy becomes conscious of *difference* (and suffering in some instances) for the first time: the haggard prisoners, a crippled man crossing the street, a group of black people at a barbecue joint, the drowning death of a young boy at a local pool.

A brief sequence in a classroom is done with great sensitivity. Jack notices a girl. Nothing much is made of it. But the filmmakers arrange the images in such a way as to subtly suggest why all of a sudden the boy focuses on her—in reality, an entire bio-psychological process comes to life before our eyes. In the film's most heartbreakingly beautiful shot, we see the same girl, in the middle distance, in an otherwise deserted street at dusk. Jack then enters the frame, some distance behind her. We never see the girl again.

Jack also becomes aware of an attractive woman neighbor, enters her house when she's out, goes through her clothes and steals one of her slips. Later, panicked, he tries to hide the undergarment, then throws it in a stream, which carries it away.



In another vivid, fleeting image, which manages to capture the truth of summer and childhood, the camera (operated by remarkable cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki) takes in an entire play area where kids are running in various directions and enjoying themselves. And there's the marvelous moment when the O'Brien boys learn their father has gone on a trip, and they (and their mother eventually) explode in a

celebration of See [video clip](#) freedom.

The genuinely lifelike and truthful portions of *The Tree of Life*, however, are all too few and far between. Moreover, the film *as a whole* is lacquered over with a coat of unease and pessimism, which never truly dissipates, so that even the moments of delight seem either stolen or forced. The revulsion Malick feels for contemporary Houston (for whose coldness and sterility Jack as an architect presumably bears some responsibility) and, by implication, modern American life is palpable, and the most idyllic scene takes place in the afterlife. The overall thrust of the film should be clear.

The characters and scenes, in general, bear far too heavy a metaphysical load to be able to demonstrate much spontaneity. If it was Malick's intention to impart a free-flowing, river-like quality to his film imagery and narrative, he has failed badly, in my view. One's sense all too often is that of the artist straining to fit events and people into something....

Defining precisely *what that something is* is a more challenging task, and perhaps not entirely possible. Malick eschews commenting on his films and apparently rational explanations of his work in general. An admirer observes that the writer-director's aim is a "purer kind of filmmaking," not shackled by "the realm of story," in which he can "capture feelings and evoke moods."

Purer artist or not, Malick, like the rest of us mortals, has a life history, a position in society and an outlook on the world. The future film director studied philosophy at Harvard and went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar where he apparently had a dispute over his thesis on aspects of the work of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Wittgenstein and so left without a doctorate. "He then travelled to Germany in the mid 1960s to meet with [Martin] Heidegger, and produced a scholarly translation of [Heidegger's] *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (*The Essence of Reasons*) in 1969. That same year, Malick abandoned philosophy to become a filmmaker" ("A Heideggerian Cinema? On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," Robert Sinnerbrink, Macquarie University).

Whether Malick retains his interest in Heidegger is impossible to say, and claims about a "Heideggerian cinema" seem largely unfounded. In any event, Malick is an artist, not a philosopher. Murky influences, however, can be detected. Malick does not seem to share the German thinker and—from May 1933—Nazi Party member's "love affair with unreason and death," or the notion that "man is thrown into the world, lost and afraid" and "must learn to face nothingness and death." But there are hints of the latter in his treatment of the universe's apparently terrifying origins, and is there not perhaps a resonance of the distrust of reason and intellect as "hopelessly inadequate guides to the secret of being"? (Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture*).

Furthermore, are there not traces of Heidegger's "isolation," his "deliberate provincialism, his hatred of the city," his "disdainful rejection of modern urban rationalist civilization," in Malick's life and work, and specifically in *The Tree of Life*?

Just as damagingly, the filmmaker seems to be making an effort to *directly* link processes in nature and evolution to human relations and behavior. One finds echoes of swirling gases, volcanic eruptions, seething planets in the physical movements and conduct of the O'Briens and other residents of Waco.

To his credit, Malick apparently did a large amount of research into the origins of the universe and life on Earth. The production notes explain that Malick and his team talked "for some years" with science consultant Dr. Andrew H. Knoll, Fisher Professor of Natural History at Harvard. Knoll comments tellingly, "Terrence worked hard to get the science right, seeing in life's history the broadest of frames for an intimate family story."

One of the tendencies of many contemporary natural scientists (and artists) is to apply biological and other natural-scientific principles uncritically to the arena of social life, sometimes drawing the most

retrograde conclusions about the so-called inherently aggressive nature of humankind, the inevitability of war, crime, ethnic conflict, social inequality and so forth.

While social life has a biological basis (the physical existence of living men and women as natural beings), it represents a specific level of being and possesses its own distinct and more complex laws. The position and outlook of individuals in society is not determined, in the final analysis, by their natural qualities (although they could not begin to function as social beings or anything else unless they could breathe, eat, move, etc.), but by their membership in a given class and relation to production.

Marx noted in *Capital* that human beings act upon the external world and change it, at the same time altering their own nature and developing their “slumbering powers.” As he commented in an earlier writing, “The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world.” Humanity finds its true nature only in society, and consciousness is a social product, “and remains so as long as men exist at all.” (Engels)

Malick, in his account of the universe from the Big Bang to Waco in the 1950s, leaves out this small matter, the course of human society, including the concrete facts of US history, the nature and consequences of World War II, the contradictions of the postwar boom, the dynamics of life in Texas, and so on. One does find the “broadest of frames” in “life’s history,” but a narrower frame might be required to explain the specifics of middle class reality in the American southwest during the Eisenhower era.

But the concrete facts of historical development, one gathers, are of little interest to Malick, whose view of things is essentially static. He finds eternal patterns wherever he looks, patterns that perhaps form the basis of myth and religions.

A commentator suggests that “rather than imposing myths onto the reality, Malick finds mythic material out of the reality.” Somehow this misses the point. Classical myths reflected the primitive state of relations between people, and between people and nature, when the latter hung over humanity “like a fate.” We don’t need myths, but the truth about reality.

Unfortunately, one feels various myths lurking in and around *The Tree of Life* (which takes its name from both Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and the Book of Genesis among other places), including Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Job, Oedipus and who knows how many others. The film feels packed with these intrusive ghosts.

This helps account for the biggest dramatic problem. While Malick’s film runs more than two hours and a quarter, relatively little time is given to the most intriguing developments, Jack’s relations with his mother and father, his younger brother, members of the opposite sex. Oddly enough, sections of this central drama feel rushed and underdrawn. We are hurried along, being urged, surreptitiously or not, to see the great cosmic picture.

One is tempted to say that if Malick had simply removed the birth of the universe from his film, along with that eternal flame, the story would have been far more concise and compelling! But that’s too easy. The contrived quality of the drama doesn’t simply stem from the lack of time available for its unfolding, but from the director’s insistence on stuffing real life into a paradigm for the ages, and a false, demoralized one at that.

Thus, for example, the relations between Jack and his father. There are convincing moments, even convincing conflicts, but Malick overreaches. Pitt’s character is not a brute, he’s presented as energetic and impatient. When Jack, speaking of his father, says, “You hate me...you’d like to kill me,” one is left largely unconvinced. The Oedipal relationship taken to this extreme may be a necessary ingredient of Malick’s world schematism, but it makes relatively little sense from what we have seen of the O’Briens.

So too is the father’s ultimate sense of worthlessness. It seems out of proportion and out of character. “I wanted to be loved because I was great...a big man,” he tells Jack. “You’re all I have,” he goes on, referring

to himself as “zilch.” This is a man laid low perhaps in appropriately Biblical terms, but what does it have to do with a middle manager or engineer in Waco in 1955 or so? (In any event, the scene in which the parents find out about the middle brother’s death, which would take place a decade or so later, indicates that the family has done quite well economically.)

Jack’s sense of sin, of innocence lost, over the pilfered lingerie, seems overdone as well. Too many of these moments, driven by Malick’s ideological interests and not the logic of the drama, stick out like bones in a misshapen body.

And, in the end, the message that the “only way to live is to love,” that one can transcend one’s natural aggression, and this foolish walk on the beach, among the living and the dead...? It’s rather banal.

Pitt is an excellent actor, the strongest presence in the film. Chastain, a relative newcomer to films, is encumbered with representing something quasi-saintly and she doesn’t always bear up well under the pressure. The boys, especially Laramie Eppler as the middle son, R. L., do very well. The scenes of children at play tend to be the least overweighted. Sean Penn has little to do, other than pull a long face.

The Tree of Life is an extreme example of certain cultural and intellectual tendencies: technology and image-making have developed immensely in recent decades, while considerations and understanding of social life and history in art have fallen far, far behind.

Great claims are being made for *The Tree of Life*. The critics, largely shooting in the dark, are stirred to life by anything extreme and wonder each time, “Is this the great one?” One of them writes that in this work we see the filmmaking of the future. I think, on the contrary, that Malick’s effort may very well show us the end of something.

The truly innovative work to come ought to draw from the seriousness with which Malick and others capture individual images, from their ability to suggest by intimate and intense visual means various ephemeral mental states, but such filmmaking will need to join these elements to a far greater awareness of social processes and historical laws and to a far deeper immersion in life, not as a schema, but as it is actually lived.

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