



# Life, the Universe and Everything

Terrence Malick's extraordinary ordinary film

**THE TREE OF LIFE:** Written and directed by Terrence Malick. Cinematography, Emmanuel Lubezki. Music, Alexandre Desplat. Editors, Hank Corwin, Jay Rabinowitz, Daniel Rezende, Billy Weber and Mark Yoshikawa. Starring Brad Pitt, Sean Penn, Jessica Chastain and Hunter McCracken. Fox Searchlight, 2011. PG-13. 139 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Long, often remote, unforgettable and covering unexpectedly familiar ground, Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* is hardly the director's first film to have called into existence an army of skeptics who can't sit through it. I didn't notice the people who walked out of Malick's 1998 *The Thin Red Line*, but I counted four people who left the theater before *The Tree of Life* was over.

Maybe it was the dinosaurs. Maybe it was the voiceovers, breathy whispers about divinity and family that join with Malick's grandiose imagery to suggest that God is way too busy playing with the fun, exploding parts of the cosmos to concern himself with the pain of an individual. (Malick, in turn, isn't the least bit concerned with whether his stately, dreamy film is of interest to your individual taste.) Maybe it was the sense that if you were to sit in that theater wrapped in your own expectations, you would be firmly let down by a film that trades traditional structure for an impressionistic take on the damage and duty of family, the beginning and end of life (on a cosmic and human-personal scale), and the way sons do and don't want to become their fathers.

For all its structural strangeness — there's a long, long segment of nature and celestial images (beautifully created without CGI) that had me simultaneously entranced and wondering whether the same effect could be achieved by watching the Discovery Channel while listening to Sigur Rós — *The Tree of Life's* central characters tread familiar ground. Slowly, dreamily, the film stitches together a story that's specific to one family, the O'Briens,

and also a quiet commentary on the way one generation's restrictive notions about gender and behavior can wreak havoc on the generation that follows. The relationship between father and son sits at the center of the film, but Malick spins their lives around Mrs. O'Brien (Jessica Chastain), a warm, graceful presence, unable to do much but watch as her oldest son, Jack (Hunter McCracken), begins to struggle within the role his father expects him to fill.

The O'Briens are the forebears and siblings of countless unhappily happy cinematic families; what's new about them is in the deconstructed shape of the film they inhabit, which trips through pain and growth with an almost glazed beatificity, reverently scored and barely dotted with humor. When Malick isn't staring straight into the family's tight-laced heart or following kids as they try out their first minor rebellions, he's surfing through nature, returning to a beach, a rock formation, as if the answers to his characters' questions are all there, if only they would look outside themselves and their beautiful, tidy homes (impeccably shot by cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki).

*The Tree of Life* is so insular, so specific in its approach, that it's hard to find the cracks that let you into the film, which can feel like a glass bubble of natural perfection and perfectly flawed humanity. Malick's precise vision is astonishing, but it also left me asking whether structural and narrative experimentation sometimes turn a film into a curio, a thing that gives you a discussion topic but little more. You may be bored; you may be awed; you may leave the theater saying, "That movie made me want to eat mashed potatoes." Beautiful, frustrating, ponderous and self-important, Malick's film strikingly sets the uncertainty of childhood, precisely seen in the eyes of young Jack O'Brien, and against a journey through life, the universe and everything. **EW**

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