The Tree of Life is Terrence Malick’s most ambitious, most experimental, most personal film. It is also, in many ways, his worst. In the previous issue of Machete, Nathan Brown framed the film’s philosophical explorations in numerous fascinating ways. However, without calling into question the validity of Brown’s reading, I’d like to investigate the reasons why the film remains, for me, a deeply flawed and unsatisfying work. It’s hard to think of a film in which such interesting and impressive moments exist side by side with such cringe-inducing material. While this bizarre erraticness is new for Malick, I think the problems relate to the shifting but always present tension in his work between his narrative and philosophic impulses, and The Tree of Life exposes, in a particularly stark way, the limitations of Malick’s aesthetic strategies in working out this tension.

Much is often made of Malick’s early training as a philosopher, and his small body of work certainly has a legitimate philosophic scope. All of Malick’s films deal with people’s limited capacity to grapple with the sublime natural world, the confusions of love and desire, the enigmas of violence and death – and the problems of meaning and morality that stem from this limited capacity. However, that said, Malick’s masterful early films are more interested in mining the rich dramatic possibilities of innocence and ignorance than in pursuing philosophical inquiries directly. In Badlands and Days of Heaven, philosophical questions emerge implicitly from the mode of narration, meaning not only Malick’s unique use of voice-over but also the way the voice-over opens up possibilities for departures from the story proper, which are nonetheless still contained within its parameters. In both films, the seemingly “limited” perspective of the adolescent girl narrator actually makes the narrative itself more expansive, allowing it to include peripheral elements that would seem inconsequential or unrelated if the story had been filtered through the more focused, self-aware consciousness of an adult narrator. It is this expansive quality that gives philosophic dimensions to the generic narratives (Badlands’ tale of lovers on the run, Days of Heaven’s tragic period romance).

When Malick returned to filmmaking after a 20-year hiatus, he began to search more aggressively for ways of utilizing and undermining and overwhelming with sounds and images and digressions that veer off into broader philosophic territory. Stripping himself of this dynamic leaves Malick floundering. He has to invent his own structures to support the weight of his philosophic inquiries, and he does not always succeed in pulling this off. The Tree of Life is constructed out of six basic sections, which are intercut in various ways throughout the film: 1) the section depicting the birth of the cosmos and the early development of life on Earth; 2) the section depicting the blessed early years in the life of the O’Brien family; 3) the section depicting the O’Brien’s troubled period, in which the eldest son Jack enters tormented adolescence as the father struggles with his failures and regrets; 4) the section depicting the torturous days immediately following the death of the middle son R.L.; 5) the contemporary section depicting Jack as an adult, still haunted by the loss of his brother; and 6) the metaphoric fantasy sequence that concludes the film. Each section suggests a different conception of Life. With admitted oversimplification, we could break it down crudely like this: 1) depicts the scientific view of life; 2) depicts the religious view of life as miracle; 3) depicts the psychological view of life as a vortex of never-fully-conscious impulses and desires; 4) depicts life in the face of death as a confounding void; 5) depicts the anguish of living in the aftermath of this void (represented by Malick as godless postmodern existence); 6) presents a metaphoric vision of life that attempts to reconcile these unreconcilable perspectives.

This is certainly an ambitious undertaking, but Malick’s success varies wildly. The birth of the cosmos/early life discussion has undeniable moments of beauty and power, but its execution is uneven. The section depicting the early years in the O’Brien family features inventive narrative verve, energetically skimming through a decade of happy moments; yet, ultimately, this seems to be in the service of little more than a nostalgic romanticization of banal suburban family life. The contemporary scenes featuring Sean Penn as adult-Jack gazing ruefully out of sterile skyscrapers exists blatantly as a structural device that gives Malick an excuse for the insertion of ponderous voice-over throughout the film; as a sequence in its own right it is embarrassingly inert. The section concerning the news and aftermath of R.L.’s death is appropriately disorienting and also contains the film’s best line, which nicely summarizes Malick’s ambivalence toward God: “He sends flies to wounds he should heal.” However, this section is brief and exists mainly as a jumping-off point for the rest of the film. For all Malick’s formal and structural experimentation and his bold philosophical explorations, the most effective section (#3 above) of The Tree of Life is the most concrete and narrative. The film’s most sustained achievement is the dramatization of the eldest son Jack’s budding adolescent angst and his ensuing moral/existential crisis. Without much dialogue, Malick and his young non-actor manage to powerfully communicate the gradual (but sudden) revelation of life’s many troubling complexities and ambiguities: Jack discovers sexuality and death; perceives the hypocrisies and limitations of his father; senses the erotic charge of his mother; intuits the destructive potential of the family unit; (continued on last page)
Reflections on What Might Be

“Revolt, yes, if revolt is understood as the demand of a turning point where time changes, where the extreme of patience is linked in a relation with the extreme of responsibility.”

- Maurice Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster

A well-known slogan from 1968 ran, “Be Realistic. Demand the Impossible.” The slogan is highly relevant to our current conjuncture, where the relation of the triad ‘realism, demands and impossibility’ has become a focal point for the Occupy Movement. On the one hand, the Movement is faced with calls to specify our aims, make concrete demands and occupy only until such a moment as those demands are met. On the other hand is the position that we should hold out to see what this movement becomes. In other words, the demand is simply that people come and take their place against unequal systems of distribution and decision-making.

In both cases, it is precisely the impossible that is being demanded: that 99% of the world stop what they are doing, refuse to allow a system to speak for them, and occupy spaces until lasting changes are made. There are two ways to understand the realism of this demand. This impossibility first becomes realistic in a linguistic register. That is, we are realistic here so long as “stopping” is understood as a fundamental change in the situation, not as literal cessation. We are approaching this crossroads where we must at once continue the stopping, continue to be patient for others to join, while at the same time calling on everyone – even the 1%! – to be responsible, to make changes. The 99 vs. 1 must become 100 together. That is impossible, but it is only so today.

Hence, second, the impossibility becomes realistic in a temporal register. Because something cannot happen today, it is impossible. But our realism resides in the fact that we know that it can come to pass tomorrow, that time itself can change. What is impossible today – that the war should end – is possible tomorrow. What is unheard of today – that there should be health care for all – is a fact tomorrow. What we can hardly imagine today – that social equality and economic equality will be the foundation of our society – is the only thing that structures our lives tomorrow. That we will not succeed in an instant is not a failure, it is the condition by which we mark our approximation to the truth of equality.

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Our time will change only so long as we heed this double injunction to patience and responsibility. The slogan of 2011 began in Tunisia: “The people demand the end of the regime.” The focused goal in Tunisia, in Egypt, later became the demands for the end of austerity measures in Greece. It mutated slightly in Palestine: “The people demand the end of the division.” In Spain “the indignant” had a banner at the front of their march to Brussels: “We are going slowly because we are going far.” In each instance, the balance is struck between patience and responsibility. Slowly, yet far. We will be here until the oppression ends. This balance in the Occupy Movement has been pushed to the extremes – our patience is indefinite, our demands are infinite.

The responsibility remains with us, to form the movement into a political force. We must unveil the impossible as illusion, we must show its reality over time. There is no purity of the movement that will be sullied by engaging with systems of power. There is only a force of the movement that must exercise its power over power. Demand the impossible: demand that you will not be corrupted by power, by bribes, by greed. Demand the tenacity to equality that has brought you the streets. Demand that this movement will not rise up and then fade silently. Demand actual, specific changes for which you will be responsible, for which you will be patient enough to see them to their end.

by Avi Alpert

Dead Roots: (continued from page 2)

glimpses the fragile, fraudulent edifice of human meaning in general. He peers into the void and realizes the darkness in his own heart, and it leads him to question the seemingly arbitrary construct of human morality. But then, at the depths of his turmoil, after betraying the trust of his younger brother, Jack senses that his love for his brother is more powerful than all of his dark desires and destructive impulses. Essentially, he realizes that love, whatever it’s source and purpose (Darwin? Freud? God?), is the only sustainable foundation of our society – is the only thing that structures our lives tomorrow. That we will not succeed in an instant is not a failure, it is the condition by which we mark our approximation to the truth of equality.

The Writing of the Disaster

by Mike Vass