

Dead Roots: Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*

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 subverting narrative conventions in order to philosophize more directly, with decidedly mixed results. In *The Thin Red Line*, Malick seems to be bluntly squaring off two seemingly incompatible approaches – direct philosophic inquiry, and conventional genre storytelling. The poetic tension generated between the overt philosophizing indulged in by the multiple narrators ("What is this war at the heart of nature?" etc) and the war-story narrative is responsible for some of the film's most interesting moments, as

well as its most awkward. This was repeated in *The New World*, except that there both the philosophizing and the storytelling were significantly less compelling, and the attempts at poetry more hackneyed.

When Malick's narrators were adolescent girls, as in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, he could use them to raise questions without having to pursue these in any serious way. Malick's girl-narrators could muse about their confounding experiences without being expected to try too hard to seek out any answers. This might seem like something of a philosophic sleight of hand (allowing Malick to engage in complex terrain without having to explicitly pursue matters beyond the limited capacity of his narrators), but it was also a brilliantly effective dramatic device that led to rich aesthetic achievements. When Malick starts using adult (and mostly male) narrators in his later work, they have to grapple more directly with the difficult questions that they raise; remaining in a state of child-like awe and bafflement is not an acceptable response for soldiers at war (*The Thin Red Line*), explorers on a colonial mission (*The New World*), or



anguished Texans (*The Tree of Life*). Malick's desire to push his philosophic explorations further into the forefront of his work is certainly understandable, but in many ways his mode of filmmaking does not seem up to the task. It is no backhanded compliment to say that Malick's cinema is perfectly suited to poetically capturing the depths of innocence, confusion and awe – brilliant at raising questions but decidedly less well-suited to actually addressing them in any satisfying way.

I think the problem with *The Tree of Life* has partly to do with the fact that Malick is no longer filtering his philosophic interests through the microcosm of any kind of recognizable narrative genre. Malick's dialectical method seems to require a solid narrative foundation for him to be able subvert and undermine and overwhelm 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. *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'Briens troubled period, in which the eldest son Jack enters thorny 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 section 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 inept. 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 experimentations 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;

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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 form of meaning. This realization enables him to reintegrate into his family and to affirm a meaningful existence. A similar arc is also traced in the father character during this section.

Needless to say, this is not an easy process to communicate, and Malick does it with extraordinary complexity and nuance. But then right after he has accomplished this he adds an unnecessary, unmotivated voice-over from the mother that explicitly states what he has just so subtly dramatized ("Unless you love, your life will flash by"). And then Malick underlines the point further with the concluding fantasy sequence, which has to rank among the worst endings in the history of the cinema, an interminable eruption of insipid, sentimental kitsch that attempts, against all good judgment, to portray this

realm of love that Jack glimpsed as a child and then (presumably) lost touch with after the death of his younger brother. In a sequence filled with beatific New-Age dream imagery, Malick symbolically illustrates the decision to affirm the fragile transcendent meaning founded on love by having adult-Jack walk through an empty doorframe in the desert and then find himself on a heavenly beach surrounded by the people that populated his childhood.

This sequence reminds us that, for all his philosophic inclinations, Malick's most prominent gifts have always been rooted in filming real locations, natural light, concrete situations, inexperienced young actors, haphazard naturalistic dialogue, etc. His talent is for uncovering uncanny and sublime poetry within existing reality, and he's at his worst when he veers away from the actual world and attempts to construct more subjective or phantasmagorical images from scratch. This was apparent in *The Thin Red Line's* sentimental flashbacks to the soldier's wife, and it tainted the entirety of *The New World*, which was poised uncomfortably (and worse, uninterestingly) between fable and history. The birth of the cosmos sequence in *Tree of Life* probably represents Malick's most successful foray into abstraction, but perhaps this is because the sequence is still grounded in a

kind scientific objectivism. Even before arriving at the disastrous concluding sequence, *The Tree of Life* already contains several misguided attempts at symbolic, poetic imagery (the underwater house, the mother as Sleeping Beauty, etc).

While *The Tree of Life* has been the subject of some hyperbolic critical praise, it has also been savaged in other quarters. Most of the criticism revolves around complaints about a supposedly incoherent structure, the absence of any conventional narrative, over-indulgent ponderousness, etc. In and of themselves, I don't think any of these criticism really apply. These critics seem to be objecting to the type of film Malick is attempting to make. But, of course, there are many examples of filmmakers who successfully utilize, subvert, or jettison narrative conventions in order to create more abstract, poetic images through which they can pursue philosophic explorations more directly (Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Straub-Huillet, etc). In *The Tree of Life*, the problem is simply that Malick's images fall short of his ideas.

by Mike Vass