



Movie Review: *The Tree of Life*

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**“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? ...
When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4-7)**

Terrence Malick, the philosopher turned film director, opens *The Tree of Life* (2011) with the above quote from the book of Job.

The Tree of Life won the Palme d’Or at Cannes in 2011 and features Sean Penn as an adult Jack (the elder of two brothers), Brad Pitt as the father, and Jessica Chastain as the mother. The film is a meditation on the problem of evil, in particular the evil of suffering. The film starts with the father learning of his younger son’s death—the cause is not stated, but suicide is implied. An adult Jack wanders an urban landscape decades later meditating on this seminal event. He contemplates his childhood in Texas as he discerns what meaning there could be in the death of his innocent brother. Terrence Malick himself grew up in Texas and lost his younger brother to suicide when he was in his twenties.

Although some scenes are memories (real and fantastic) of Jack’s childhood, other scenes are Malick’s own artistic meditations on human existence and suffering that attune the viewer to Jack’s experience. Such scenes include travelling billions of years through the creation of the universe, the formation of the Earth, the development of life, and finally, the end of the universe. The narrative is particular to an individual family, but the film as a whole is cosmic in scope.

Malick’s unique film style demands a reflective attentiveness from the viewer, whom he invites into a vivid sensory experience. Malick wants to attune us to a world and mood (*Stimmung*) through a carefully curated selection of images, sounds, and music. These sights and sounds affect us as much on an emotional as on an intellectual level. In allowing ourselves to be attuned, viewers rejoice in moments of levity and child-like humor or wallow in the sorrow of tragedy. In the midst of a fragmented conceptual and thematic narrative, the imagery is deeply emotionally effective and holistic.

Aesthetically, this film is a masterpiece. Each image is carefully selected and edited personally by Malick, blending the joyful, the comic, and the tragic to achieve a meticulously manicured portrayal of childhood. Examples of poignant scenes are Jack’s birth and his first words, his jealousy of his younger brother, the tyranny of his father, and consequently, Jack’s rebellion, and the grace of his mother.

Philosophically, the ideas and themes are abundant.

First, Malick tackles the second most important question in philosophy: “Given that there is something at all rather than nothing, why does suffering exist?”

This film, viewed through a theistic interpretation, raises important questions about God’s providence and theodicy. Adult Jack starts his musings on his brother’s death with these questions: “How did I lose you? Forgot you?”

A theme as important as God’s providence is the theme of grace versus nature. Jack’s mother opens the film with a monologue juxtaposing the “way of grace” and the “way of nature”:

“You have to choose which one you will follow. Grace doesn’t like to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked... accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself, get others to please it too, likes to lord it over them, to have its own way. It finds reason to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it, when love is smiling through all things.”

Interestingly, Jack’s father and mother represent these two “ways” of life in his memory. This theme raises the question of whether nature is good or evil, whether there is a way to live beyond nature, given its tendency to dominate and subdue.

Second, the telling of the narrative through Jack’s memory raises questions about how memory develops as a narrative over time. It is clear that Jack, by the end of the film, discerns in his memory something that suggests that all manner of things will be well. What is this something, and is it possible for the viewer to grasp this in their own experience? How is it possible to see the goodness of existence even in the midst of profound suffering?

This film is for philosophers. But because all people are capable of asking the question “why is suffering in the world”, it is for everyone. It is open to as much theological interpretation as the viewer desires and is as much a story of psychology as it is of the universal human condition. Malick offers the viewer the task of piecing together cosmic reality and the meaning of suffering, which is ultimately a task each one of us faces in our own lives.

This film reminds us that this world, dominated today by immanence, politics, radicalism, suffering, exploitation, and despair is also a world that had a beginning, that slowly formed minerals and planets, that formed an earth with molten lava, flora, dinosaurs, mammals, and humans. It reminds us that this world that all so often seems cramped, frenetic, and full of pointless natural and moral evils is also a world of love, joy, celebration, and grace.

The film is book-ended by shots of a mysterious flickering light, welcoming the contemplation of the mysteries of human existence. This light underlying the film is a light of hope that symbolically speaks: “and yet”. And yet, somehow it is not only better that there is something rather than nothing, but even that there is suffering rather than a world without it.

“I give you my son,” Jack’s mother says in the last line of the film, followed by a shot of an endless field of sunflowers bathed in the dawn light as birds and crickets chirp. As Jack’s memory shows, even amidst tremendous suffering, this is a world in which sacrifice and gifts are possible.