



Brian McClinton

Dead Wood

The Tree of Life

ONE man's fish is another man's poisson, and there is certainly no escaping the subjective nature of artistic appreciation. In *The Guardian* (7th July) Peter Bradshaw described *The Tree of Life*, winner of the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes and the *Sight and Sound* poll for Film of 2011, as a 'magnificent, toweringly ambitious and visionary work'. In contrast, I think Terrence Malick's fifth film in 38 years is an agonisingly tedious, uninvolved and pretentious piece of pious piffle. The heavy breathing adulation of some critics brings to mind Lord Byron: "And if I laugh at any mortal thing, 'tis that I may not weep".

The film focuses largely on a 'humble' family living in 1950s Waco, Texas, where Malick himself was raised as a child (there seem to be a lot of nutters in that neck

of the Texas woods). Brad Pitt plays Mr O'Brien, a strict and embittered father of three sons who aspired to be a classical pianist but works in a dead-end job at a local factory, and Jessica Chastain is the saintly Mrs O'Brien. The movie proper begins in their middle years with Mrs O'Brien receiving a telegram informing her of the death at 19 of one of the sons (in Vietnam, perhaps?), and ends with the family on the shore of eternity (I kid you not) as she whispers to an unseen God: "I give my son to you". This bizarre celestial beach party, complete with cosmic hosannas, would stun a horse.

After the death and the funeral and shots of the aimless wanderings among skyscrapers and deserts of the eldest son Jack (Sean Penn), an architect and lost soul adrift in an impersonal world who reflects on his childhood with his dead brother, we have a flashback, but not yet to the early years of the family, for that would be too 'ordinary'. No, this particular rewind is to the Big Bang itself and the early universe (you better believe it). We now witness a 20-minute CGI visual poem in which galaxies explode, volcanoes spurt, primordial swamps bubble, underwater tadpoles and hammerhead sharks swim in the sea, an embryo's eye stares at the screen, and dinosaurs lounge in rivers. One large dinosaur wanders down to the bank to a smaller one, lying apparently wounded. It slams its claw down on the face of the stricken creature but then pulls off and wanders away. You see, even dinosaurs were not all red in tooth and claw. They too could display mercy.

This juxtaposition of microcosmic death and macrocosmic creation is of course meant to convey the pretentious twaddle that it is all part of God's great plan. This mixture of brute force and beauty, so central to God's mystery, is replicated in humanity itself. The mother explains that a nun told her "there are two ways through life, the way of nature and the way of grace". As the film settles down to a kind of narrative about the family, we see that the father has large elements of nature – he can be brutal, cruel, selfish and wilful. Young Jack (admirably played by Hunter McCracken) is like his father, though there is – surprise, surprise – an oedipal dimension to their relationship. The mother is like



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the Virgin Mary, 'full of grace' – in one scene she levitates like an angel (honest). She is gentle, loving and kind, smiling sweetly as she plays with the children and floats among trees, birds and butterflies.

Let no one tell you that this is a 'spiritual' rather than a Christian film. The dialogue, of which there isn't much, is largely whispered like a prayer or incantation and is full of ponderous voiceovers and trite questions to God. The Bible is quoted several times. The family are practising Catholics. Jack loses his innocence in this Texas 'garden'. A priest preaches a homily. The imagery is riddled with religious

clichés of candles, flames, sunflowers and waterfalls. The soundtrack is replete with sacred sounds. The mother tells her son that God lives in the sky, and the whole gloomy godfest ends in

heaven.

The family in *The Tree of Life* are not really interesting in themselves. The mother and father don't even have first names because they are meant as theological archetypes. There is no narrative or drama as such to engage the viewer at an emotional level. The reason is that this film is essentially a sermon, preaching a message about the meaning of life or, more specifically, the problem of suffering.

After receiving news of the death of her son, Mrs O'Brien asks God: "Lord, why? Where were you?" God's answer is given at the opening of the film in a quotation from *Job* 38:4. Like Mrs O'Brien, Job cannot understand why a good God should have caused him, a righteous person, to suffer. God's answer is no answer at all but rather a boast about what He can do and Job cannot: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundation of the earth?" God is saying that He has no need of the approval of his creation, and Job seems to accept this 'explanation', as does Mrs O'Brien at the end of Malick's devotional movie.

Going back to *Genesis*, we are told that animal and human suffering entered the world through the fall of poor old Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But there were actually two trees in that garden, the other being the tree of life, which confers immortality on those who eat it. Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden and denied access to the Tree of Life because they have eaten from the forbidden tree. So the message of Malick's cinematic sermon is: don't seek knowledge or answers, just surrender and accept.

Is this really the only message Christianity can offer? Somehow, God is good, despite all the evil and suffering that happens, but his goodness is beyond our grasp. It might seem to embrace what we consider 'evil'; but that only exists to bring about a greater good. "This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that he should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good", wrote Thomas Aquinas. This is the import of Malick's film and it certainly won't wash in the 21st century, just as it should not have done nearly 800 years ago when Aquinas wrote it.