



THE TREE OF LIFE

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From a review by Alistair Harkness, *The Scotsman*:

Arriving on the back of its recent Palme d'Or win at the Cannes Film Festival, Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* finally descends upon British cinemas with the kind of hype, excitement and chin-stroking reverie normally reserved for blockbuster art exhibitions. This seems entirely appropriate given the exalted status America's least prolific auteur has achieved on the world cinema stage. Only his fifth film in a career spanning nearly 40 years, the enigmatic gap between his films has ensured that even when the finished results don't exactly set the world on fire (see previous effort *The New World*), enough time usually elapses for interest in his work to be stoked to fever pitch by the time he deigns to again grace us with his considerable cinematic prowess.

That he's returned with his most crazily ambitious, absurd, brilliant, flawed, messy and meaningful movie to date is a source of numerous pleasures...it may be a ponderous, existence-straddling non-linear epic, but it's also more concise and coherent than *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, and it features CGI dinosaurs to boot. The dinosaurs are part of an audacious conceit that sees Malick wind time back on what appears to be a relatively straightforward - and, by all accounts, autobiographical - 1950s-set family drama to the Big Bang and the evolution of life, a conceit that takes us from the microbial level to the arrival and disappearance of the biggest creatures that have roamed the Earth. Of course, Malick doesn't use dinosaurs in a rampaging Jurassic Park way. The sight of a solitary raptor wandering through a vast, verdant landscape has an oddly mournful quality, as if it's acutely aware of its imminent extinction, and Malick echoes that mood throughout, particularly in the scenes featuring Sean Penn wandering through a deserted, vertiginous cityscape, his expression one of similarly confused wonder, suggesting he can't quite fathom how he arrived at this point, either as a man, or, more generally, as part of a species that has consistently conquered nature.

That type of inquiry is at the root of *The Tree of Life*, and it grapples with these issues by homing in on the boyhood of Penn's character, Jack, as he grows up in the picket-fenced suburbia of Waco, Texas in Eisenhower's America. Jack is the oldest of three boys, one of whom we learn early on will die as a young man - a tragedy that Malick elliptically suggests has driven a wedge between the grown-up Jack and his father. The source of their enmity, though, is made clear in the many scenes of the young Jack (newcomer Hunter McCracken) awkwardly bonding with his strict, crew-cut-sporting father (Brad Pitt). The latter is an imposing figure, whose thwarted artistic ambitions (he dreamed of being a musician) manifest themselves in moments of frustrated anger and genuine tenderness towards all his children. Jack's mother (Jessica Chastain), on the other hand, is saintly and beatific, an idealised vision of maternal love that's as cliché-ridden and simplistic as Malick's repeated equation of nature with purity - a common trope in his work.

Not that one should ever expect gritty realism from Malick. He's a director who has consistently favoured shooting in the hazy glow of the magic hour and, with the aid of cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, that's exactly what he does here. It's gorgeous to look at and barely a scene goes by that couldn't be freeze-framed and hung in a gallery. It's just a shame that an over-reliance on poetic-sounding interior monologue occasionally ruins these meticulous compositions by ripping you out of the trance-like rhythms the fluid camera movements create.

That voiceover has a tendency to pose lots of big questions that the film has no intention of even attempting to answer definitively. Instead, Malick offers us a lot of heavenly imagery and numerous musings on God and his willingness to allow suffering in the world (on one level the film seems to be a Job-like exploration of a father's failed life and his problematic attempts to ensure his son doesn't endure the same fate). But in imbuing the somewhat mundane story of the O'Brien family with so much cosmic significance, Malick seems to be trying to crystallise - in his own abstract way - a running theme in his work that dates back to *Days of Heaven*: that however significant or insignificant our lives turn out to be, our continued existence is a miracle in itself. If that makes *The Tree of Life* sound woolly and pretentious - and it is - it also makes it strangely satisfying.

