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FILM REVIEW

Mother, Father, Accept Me and Love Me **Film Review of *Tree of Life***

Have you ever stared at the filtered green light under an old oak tree? Wondered, as a child, if you could escape your shadow? Stared at the sky and asked - even if you do not believe in a Higher Power – why did this tragedy have to happen to me?

Or - have you ever considered how a mother's love is different from a father's love? How siblings develop and take on traits of their parents to varying degrees? How boys mature into fully-alive men, despite the dangerous paths that they may take?

Tree of Life is full of questions such as these. If you are open to them, you will find yourself asking questions along with Terrence Malick, the visionary writer and director of this awe-inspiring film and others, such as *The Thin Red Line*.

Malick encourages you to go on a journey with him. He shows us a middle-aged man (Sean Penn) reflecting on his childhood self (Hunter McCracken), brothers (Laramie Eppler and Tye Sheridan), and parents (Jessica Chastain and Brad Pitt) in 1950s Waco, Texas. Notably, this is the setting in which Malick himself grew up. This highly-specific place and time is used to tell universal truths in *Tree of Life*.

In the process of watching this film, you will find yourself reviewing your own childhood, hometown, and family-of-origin. Malick captures the milestones, wonderment, dangers, losses, and uncertainties of childhood (and even of life on Earth) with an expert, gentle hand.

Much has been written about the visual landscape that graces this film by masterful cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki (incorporating actual footage of outer space by NASA). However, many reviewers have neglected to mention that senses other than vision are also important in appreciating this film. A full and utterly absorbing architecture of sound is created, which must be experienced to be believed. The sense of touch plays a pivotal role as well, as the lead character learns to let others touch him and in turn touch (and reach out to) others.

Malick relies on metaphor, feeling, nuance, and suggestion rather than direct, literal, or sequential plot disclosures. He is clearly a "right brain" rather than a "left brain" thinker. He circles around the central loss of the film (the death of one of the brothers) and jumps back and forth in time rather than telling a linear narrative. You may marvel that this film has more in common with the non-linear style of Virginia Woolf than the relatively straightforward approach of most contemporary American film directors.

Recently, I re-read the *Bhagavad Gita* (as translated by Juan Mascaro) and uncovered these revealing lines:

*“There is a tree, the tree of Transmigration, the Asvattha tree everlasting.
Its roots are above in the Highest, and its branches are here below.
Its leaves are sacred songs, and he who knows them knows the Vedas.
Its branches spread from earth to heaven, and the powers of nature give them life.
Its buds are the pleasures of the senses...
Men do not see the changing form of that tree, nor its beginning, nor its end, nor where its roots are.
But let the wise see... (p. 70).*

My advice to you in seeing this film is to surrender and be open to it. Don't try to label your experience or judge it. Just be open to the visuals, sounds, and feel of it. You may not be able to verbalize what you have experienced but you will certainly be able to feel it - if you are open to experiencing it.

Soon after seeing this film for the third time, I wrote a short poem, while sitting under a group of old oak trees in Guelph, Ontario, where I am privileged to live. These four lines encapsulate the full meaning of Malick's 139-minute epic and unforgettable film:

*Filtered green light
Surrounds the Tree of Life
Feel its energy
Savor its quiet joy*

Reviewed by Jim Perretta, PhD

Jim Perretta, PhD was born and raised in suburban Chicago. He currently resides in Guelph, Ontario, and works as a clinical psychologist in a rehabilitation hospital. Besides working in the helping professions, his activities and interests include reading, writing, exploring the great outdoors, spending time with family and friends, dancing, and laughing whole-heartedly.



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