

The Tree of Life

[The Tree of Life](tree-of-life-cornerhouse.html) at [Cornerhouse](http://www.cornerhouse.org/)

Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](writers.html#anne-ryan) July 2011

Fans of the work of Terence Malik have to be blessed with patience - enduring years between films and then whilst watching the films themselves. His films are characterised by the use of voiceover, over achingly beautiful visuals and an attempt to tackle themes of existence and transcendence. *The Tree of Life* won this year's Palme d'Or, but has since divided critics - even over the scenes they like!

Starring Brad Pitt, Sean Penn and Jessica Chastain (tipped to be the next 'big' Hollywood actress), *The Tree of Life* is the story of three boys growing up in an idyllic 1950s middle class America, playing out an archetypal struggle for their mother's love against their father. This struggle manifests itself in the adult eldest son, played by Sean Penn, who lives with a guilt which prevents him from truly loving anyone else. This central story, which is rumored to be based on the director's own life, is surrounded by an astonishing meditation on the birth of the cosmos.

Are we to understand that this history results in the 50s suburban drama? I am not sure to be honest, or whether this family the Family of Man - and I do mean man as the women are prizes to be fought for, rather than being real characters. I'm also unsure what relevance the sublime images of nature and pre-history have to the domestic drama.

However it is really about the big themes of life, nature, humanity, birth, death, resurrection, and yes, God. The cinematography by Emmanuel Lubezki is beautiful to look at, with breathtaking and profound images.

Perhaps Terence Malik is helping us to reflect on how beautiful the world is, and that we not only come from our families, but from a far deeper history. We're invited to experience awe, both at the micro and macro level, from the cell to the dinosaur, and through the magic of his vision and film, we can see the world anew. All of Malik's films have shown humanity immersed in the wonders of nature, showing an almost dream like vision of the world, but at times the beauty of *The Tree of Life* is almost tedious and unlike in *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line*, the central human story is sometimes overwhelmed.

The images do somewhat distract from the actors' performances, and at times they are archetypes - father, mother, son, but the leads are of a high standard, especially Chastain who is a talent to watch. But the revelations are the child actors. Malik is seen as such an intellectual director it is fascinating to see him elicit such moving and natural performances from the young actors, especially Hunter McCracken, as the young Sean Penn character.

So, is it a profound and monumental masterpiece or a pretentious and vacuous disaster? The real problem with Malik is that he has made so few films, we expect a masterpiece every time, and we judge him by his own high standards. Some reviewers have seen this as a humanist masterpiece, others have found it a meditation on God. I believe that Malik seeks to show how the necessary pain of life can be transcended by the miracle of existence itself. I am not sure if he succeeds, but I do know that I am glad that I saw this work, and am still thinking of this flawed masterpiece days later.