

Catholics see the same thing differently: Malick's \"The Tree of Life\"

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jun. 6, 2011 NCR Today

A couple of weeks ago "The Tree of Life" won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival though some audience members booed the film while others applauded it. Robert De Niro, the president of the international jury, said "It had the size, the importance, the intention, whatever you want to call it, that seemed to fit the prize?. Most of us felt the movie was terrific."

Peter Bradshaw, writing in *The Guardian* on May 15 [said the film was "mad and magnificent."](#) [1]

One of the core concepts of media literacy education is that people can look at the same film or television program and interpret it in vastly differing ways, all of them valid. How is this possible? Because each viewer, if one might follow a Thomist principle, "receives according to the mode of the one receiving."

On May 23 *National Catholic Reporter's* Rich Heffern [got a jump-start on Catholics reviewing](#) [2] Terrence Malick's latest film "The Tree of Life" that opened this past Friday in limited release. Heffern is obviously taken with the film and concludes, "Terrence Malick's films always reward with cinema that is unlike anything else ever brought to the screen. This film is alive and electric with a hybrid spirit that's part D. W. Griffith, part Juliana of Norwich, part Thomas Berry. It's about all of us humans, and our deep kinship with the Mystery that got us here."

My written review [appeared on June 3](#) [3] on AmericanCatholic.org (I also did a [brief review on video](#) [4]). I appreciated the film as well and wrote, "'The Tree of Life' is about mystery and about grace, about certainty and the questions, and about the complexity of human freedom in relation to the Creator, to creation, and to one another."

Fr. Robert Barron, [writing on "The Seeker" Blog](#) [5] of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote that "A basic message of the Bible is that, in the play of good and evil, in the tension between nature and grace, God is up to something beautiful, though we are unable to grasp it totally. The way to life, therefore, is a path of surrender and acceptance. I think that 'Tree of Life' is communicating this same difficult but vital lesson."

Then John P. McCarthy, writing a review for Catholic News Service (reviews were formerly issued by the now closed United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcast), [reviewed the film](#) [6] on June 3. His praise is faint indeed as he calls the film "New Age" and "spiritual rather than religious" and believes that Malick's "agnosticism appears to win out."

Helena Burns, FSP, [also leaked an early review](#) [7] on May 25, writing an enthusiastic if rambling review of "The Tree of Life" on her blog "Hell Burns": "It is the primal, primordial Theology of the Body movie. The masculine and feminine principles are so clearly delineated, and one of the film's taglines seems to be: 'O father, O mother, forever you wrestle within me.' Of course, the principles are witnessed and told from a male perspective (both the writer/director and main character are males). We see that we need both in our lives, in our heads, in our hearts."

But on June 3 [she took rousing issue](#) [8] with McCarthy's characterization of the film, stating emphatically that "New Age' seems to be the favorite Post-it Note that is swiftly slapped on anything that emphasizes God's Creation."

These reviews from Catholic writers bring their own lenses to "The Tree of Life." The one sure conclusion, if you Google reviews of the film, is that "The Tree of Life" has already launched at least a thousand conversations, with more to come, I am sure.

Click [here for the trailer](#) [9] for "The Tree of Life."

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