



Cannes 2011: The Tree of Life

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Long delayed and belatedly unveiled this morning to the Cannes critics mob, Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* is a ravishing, stimulating feast of sights, sounds and existential soul-searching that wraps the woolly history of the cosmos around the heartfelt tale of a small-town 1950s family lorded over by Brad Pitt's bully dad, *writes Matt Mueller*.

Cinema as magnificently, crazily ambitious as this will annoy as many as it enthral (the word "pretentious" will be bandied about), but even if it doesn't deserve to be called a masterpiece, it is not the grand folly many were predicting.

The first hour is the most mesmerising — and also the most fragmented — leading with a passage from Revelation into a cornucopia of gorgeous cosmic imagery, spiritually inquiring voice-over, lush symphonic music cues and the driving narrative thread. As Jessica Chastain's loving "mother" spells out early in a breathy whisper, you either choose to follow the path of (religious?) grace or the forces of oppressive nature: she is the former, Pitt is the latter, and their three young sons grow up torn between the two.

Meanwhile, Sean Penn is one of the sons in the present day, looking mystified in his own environment, a forest of glass skyscrapers, although judging from the amount of screen time he gets, we're assuming there are big chunks of the two-time Oscar winner's work on Malick's editing-suite floor.

The film-maker's passion for nature is in full, glorious flow, and Emmanuel Lubezki's photography is sumptuous. At times, it's like watching the BBC's *Planet Earth* series, minus the Attenborough commentary. Malick's most audacious creative leap is dragging viewers on a magical mystery tour through the primordial soup of creation — including those infamous dinosaurs, which occupy two short sequences — but the poetic swirl of images, ideas and sound can become mind-numbingly repetitive, and *The Tree of Life* drifts somewhat listlessly towards its "heavenly" conclusion.

With the heavy religious overtones, many will conclude that Malick has found God, and that may well be the case. But as alternately hypnotic and frustrating, awe-inspiring and simplistic as *The Tree of Life* can be, it's a beautiful and highly personal piece of cinema made by one of the medium's last visionaries. And that's the essence of a must-see movie.

