WHY *BRIDESMAIDS* WAS BETTER THAN *TREE OF LIFE:*

Or, How I Learned to Stop Taking Myself So Seriously at the Movies

Oscar Wilde once said: "Beauty and value are two different things: one is actually worth something, and the other is value." Well, Oscar Wilde didn't really say this, but it sounds like something he would have said. My point is that aesthetics and worth are not the same thing; the evaluation of quality is an entirely subjective crapshoot that must nonetheless be systematized within the empirical pretext of scholarly or academic analysis. What makes a film a good film? Must a good film be an important social text, or does social meaning and use also reside in collective laughter, personal enjoyment, and downright indulgence? Can humor be beautiful?

As a professor of Cinema Studies, I like to insist on a certain integrity regarding the object of my discipline; I like to teach foreign art house cinema and avant-garde film, and have dedicated my first book to the theoretical inquiry of where film and philosophy meet. And, yet, I try never to miss a rerun of the original *Beverly Hills, 90210* on SoapNet (I even changed my cable package to make sure of this, and have since clogged my DVR with the illustrious exploits of Brandon, Brenda, Dylan, and the other 40 year-olds acting as high-schoolers). As this last parenthetical may indicate, I also do not rely on moving-image culture for its realism, which begs a question: if an audio-visual text lacks realism, where is its place in reality?

Perhaps this is a confusing crux of our cinematic civilization: even the most far-flung fantasy film is as much a reality as

are the sticks in my yard, the bricks in my wall, and the more ominous inevitabilities such as death and taxes. We move alongside movies and shows, coexist in a world both tangible and virtual, and every day the hierarchy between these two flattens a little more, every day we find a new way to do something faster online than on the street, find something easier to write on a computer than with a pen and paper, find it easier to cross-reference a pop-culture text than to describe and explain our feelings. This does not make it bad, or worse—it is not a question of quality, but of utility, function, and taste. What works.

Which concludes this vast digression by returning to the Wilde problem at hand: personal taste and cultural quality. These are conflicting forces in the world that struggle within every individual's attempt to strike a balance between themselves and the world, and this conflict is central to the field of inquiry to which I have decided to devote my time and energy—and central, also, to my concession here that it might benefit the expanse of my analytic horizons to unhook the leash and take my own film experiences a little less seriously. I have decided to explore this conflict through a comparative review: "Why *Bridesmaids* Was Better Than *Tree of Life*, or How I Learned to Stop Taking Myself So Seriously at the Movies."

To begin with, I would like to challenge the wording of this article's title. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, the limitations of our understanding are set by the limitations of our language, and perhaps it is time we concede that there is no way to calculate beauty and taste. If we wish to continue without such limitations on our understanding, instead of asking why a film is "better" than another we should ask: "why does it work better?" What is a text setting out to do; how does it position; what seem to be its own stated—whether implicit or explicit—intentions; how does it set out to fulfill its intentions; and, quite simply, does this work? Comparing *Bridesmaids* and *Tree of Life* seems like comparing a neon pink VW Beetle with a silver Bentley, but this comparison becomes less lopsided if your goal is to get somewhere and the Bentley has no tires. One film

aims at our bathroom humor, the other at our intellectual pretention, but upon exiting the two respective films I couldn't help but find more to think about in a bathroom full of defecating women than in a kaleidoscope of natural imagery and masculine crisis.

Despite its apparent inevitability in the contemporary genre of gross-out romantic comedies that don't really involve the romance that is their pretext (see *The Hangover* and its sequels, or the Judd Apatow dynasty) *Bridesmaids* makes a very ambitious claim: there *is* room for another version of this familiar scene. And, according to critics and box office receipts, sure enough there was! But Kristen Wiig, who both co-wrote and starred in the film (and whose persona was the driving force behind the film's marketing), found the niche not in going grosser, but in opting for an alternate perspective on an almost exclusively male genre: the female perspective. Not a female character from a male point of view (see every role that Elizabeth Banks has ever played), but a nuanced female look at the same issues—frustrated dreams, disillusionment, failed love—that we have seen too many times in the form of John C. Reilly, Seth Rogan, Woody Allen, and so on (and on and on). In the end, the film impresses perhaps most because it provides time-tested staples—slapstick comedy, awkward sex, outrageous excursions that break up an ultimately predictable narrative logic—with a new voice, thus perfectly achieving its goal: uproarious laughter in a traditional genre of comedy, and proof that Hollywood—and, in extension, American pop culture—need not be ruled by the phallus.

This would be a useful lesson considered by Terrence Malick, whose *Tree of Life* is phallic in the most titular sense: a castrated tree giving life to wounded limbs, a vision of the universe and its workings as being driven by the interior and interactive struggle of linear protrusions and male sensibilities. Pride and power, fists and fury. It may be that these are logical extensions of the auteur's own identity-determined obsessions, but being made by an auteur does not excuse a film from needing a balanced vision. Foreshadowing the enigmatic profun-

dity of his characters, Malick brings to this film a wellspring of well-deserved art-house cachet: notorious for making epic films over ruminative spans, the rather reclusive director is known for complex portraits of humanity, ambiguous narrative meanings, and a preference for visual splendor over plot-driven stories. So far, so good. Advertised by a marketing campaign as cryptic as its director's persona, *Tree of Life*'s trailers insinuated its magnitude by admitting only the subtlest hints, implying insistently that a 60-second description could hardly even kiss the tip of the iceberg. This is a Terrence Malick film, and even when you see it you might not be able to understand its depths. In other words: this is some serious cinema, yo!

Holding true to its claims, *Tree of Life* dazzles the spectator with its range of temporal and conceptual facets, moving at ease between the prehistoric age of dinosaurs to its primary setting in the 1950s, to the present day and beyond. Similarly, its imagery makes use of clichés (Norman Rockwell's America, an ultra-modern skyscraper cityscape) and abstract astronomy, the latter blurring their possible referential meaning between the macro (oceanic life) and the micro (biological interiors). But it is not the confusion here that detracts from the film's ability to carry its own promise out; in fact, it is the opposite. *Tree of Life* is a self-proclaimed art film that uses a range of non-narrative imagery and voice-over musings to assert a grandiose depth of meaning, ranging from a spiritual curiosity about the existence of god to an existential cynicism for the dynamics of nuclear families and, especially, the consequences of fatherhood. However, the film carries with it too many contradictions to this philosophical premise and, in the end, opts for conclusive solutions instead of open-ended skepticism.

One overriding problem of the film is that it cast two persona-driven Hollywood stars in roles that are meant to be enigmatic, nuanced, and repressed. While Brad Pitt does a good job converting his usual sociocultural role of gossip-rag scandalier (does he miss Jen? Did he sleep with the Nanny? Is it good for Shiloh to ride a bike around New Orleans when the streets are in such disrepair?!!) into the frustrated and abusive

symbol of postwar masculine crisis, there is a palpable conflict between the excessive noise of star power and the reserved and emotionally meticulous nature of the character. Moreover, Sean Penn's purpose as the present-day son-grown-old in a godless hyper-urban world of office towers seems completely ill conceived. In the ever-uneventful present-day scenes, Penn's role seems mostly to provoke the audience to say: "Oh, hey, Sean Penn is in this." This effect extends to Penn's own critique, clearly stated in this comment in an interview with the French daily, *Figaro*: "Frankly, I'm still trying to figure out what I'm doing there and what I was supposed to add in that context!" We all are, Sean . . . we all are.

Another enigmatic-but-really-transparent aspect of the casting resides in the lopsided nature of its gender balance: opposite two of cinema's most beloved and respected leading men, Malick cast a previously unknown actress (Jessica Chastain), and in doing so *Tree of Life* seems to make an extra-filmic claim to its gender construction: the men may seem more important, but the woman is the silent heart and soul, the innocent source of light who ought not to be burdened by our extra-cinematic knowledge of her escapades as a philanderer, humanitarian, or paparazzi-puncher. In one of the film's 7000 redundant and therefore ineffectual whispered voiceovers, the protagonist reflects: "Mother, Father, always you wrestle inside me, always you will." A very interesting point about the dialectic of growing up with both masculine and feminine influence (and therefore an understandable quote to be adopted as the film's tagline), but one that loses its balance due to the film's larger mismanagement of production details and conceptual themes.

If this critique of *Tree of Life* sounds overly charged, that's because it is. *Bridesmaids* could have been mediocre and no one would have cared, but because a film like *Tree of Life* aspires to greatness, it inspires us to believe that cinema can do great things. When it falls short, there is extreme disappointment (much like when a presidential candidate uses idealistic rhetoric to stimulate political engagement among an apathetic gen-

eration, wins the election, and then proceeds to demonstrate again and again that "change" is not something that is actually possible in the bipartisan American system, reminding us why we became apathetic to begin with). In writing this I am reminded of the great promise held by *Tree of Life*, and the moments of brilliance cracked open by its innovative intersections of visual and audio expression; unfortunately, these are few and far between in a film that is excessively long, unclear in its statements and heavy-handed in the sureness of its depth, and caught on the wrong end of the bear-trap that is the art/reality divide. In other words: it just didn't work.

Bridesmaids worked. It provided new samples of an old song of crass comedy, balanced the extra-filmic credit brought by Wiig *et al* with the outrageous sketchbook of characters, and fulfilled the slightly ambitious claim to a female perspective on a grossly male cultural mold. It was not higher quality, or more beautiful, or more inherently good than *Tree of Life*; it simply worked better. Depth does not mean quality, but is instead like three-dimensional perspective in what is actually a two-dimensional image: the more forced it is, the less it draws us in. For a film to possess or produce deep meaning, it must make us think, not give us answers. But to make us laugh, sometimes a film need only show us something that is right in front of us, but in a new way.