

# critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication

2011 Issue 4

Ordinary Men: Paul Rusesabagina and Adolph Eichmann

Alison Krauss & Union Station: *Paper Airplane*

Film: *The Tree of Life*

and

Media Bias and Nurturing Wisdom



## CRITIQUE



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### ABOUT CRITIQUE

*Critique* is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

### RECEIVE CRITIQUE

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Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be *faithful* in the ordinary and routine of daily life and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

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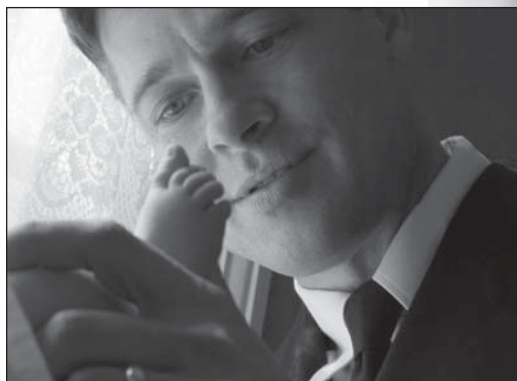
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DARKENED ROOM

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## FROM THE EDITOR

# On keeping on

by Denis Haack



One of the summer thunderstorms famous in the upper Midwest just blew through. Rain poured so steadily the streets outside Toad Hall filled briefly with swirling streams of water, and gravel was swept out of the alley like the debris in a gold prospector's pan. The temperature dropped 15 degrees in half an hour, and wind gusts blew sheets of water against the windows. Now it is quiet, the clouds slowly dissipating, the temperature rising with the humidity, and somehow the grass and leaves look a deeper shade of green. Two robins are in the tree outside my window, preening after being caught in the downpour, looking a bit bedraggled. One cocked its head, its bright eye seemingly locked on me, then turned away and scratched furiously at its neck, balanced on one foot. I wondered where they sat out the storm, how they manage so well against such odds to keep on.

Last night before going to sleep I read a report by George Packer, "Empty Wallets" in *The New Yorker* (July 25, 2011, p. 23–24). He notes that on the first of July 2011, "there were officially 14.1 million unemployed Americans, or 9.2 per cent of the workforce." That is only part of the picture, however. There are also those who have given up looking for work, and those who are termed "marginally employed," in desperation accepting a job that does not supply

an adequate income. "Economists report," Packer says, "that the broader, and more accurate, unemployment rate is 16.2 per cent. Three years after the economic meltdown, nearly one in six Americans are out of work."

Three things seem certain. First, whatever the correct figure, unemployment is too high. Second, whatever the solution is, political posturing and ideological rigidity are not helpful. And third, if we are not deeply thankful for whatever we receive, we are ungrateful wretches.

When we began Ransom Fellowship, we determined that part of our calling was not to raise funds in the ways most nonprofits do but to trust that, if we were to keep on, God would provide through his people. It's not that we think fundraising is wrong (it isn't) or second rate (it isn't), but simply that it wasn't part of our calling (it still isn't). In an interesting twist, a group of trusted friends encouraged us to try it, while all the professionals we approached said our dream would never fly. Go figure: that was 28 years ago.

Almost three decades, and still, month by month, we feel amazed. Amazed that people choose to give, amazed that we can say that perhaps what happens here in Ransom is one small evidence that God exists and is at work in his broken world, amazed that, by God's grace and his people's generosity, we can keep on.

How do we even talk about finances at a time like this? Does my mentioning God's grace to us simply increase the sense of unfairness for someone out of work? Is it selfish of me to ask readers of *Critique* to consider giving to Ransom when so many other ministries need donors?

And so I come again to what I've already said is certain. May those who need work find it, and may more opportunities for meaningful employment open up. May true leaders arise who are willing to tackle the

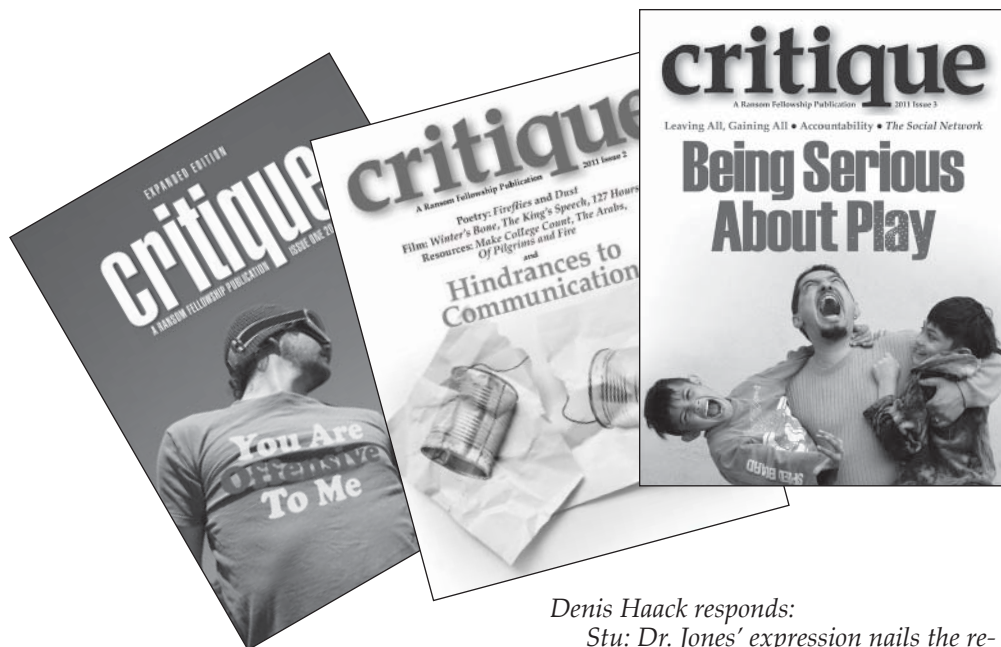
big issues instead of using rhetoric to merely ensure their own political advantage. And may we live lives of deep thankfulness for whatever we receive.

We have been given a number of hints by the prophets as to what the coming kingdom will be like, and one of the sweetest was written by Zechariah. He was a priest, part of the contingent of Jews allowed to return to the land of Israel after years of exile in Babylon. "In that day," he records God as promising, "every one of you will invite his neighbor under his vine and under his fig tree" (3:10). Let your imagination picture it. There will be time to sit and be, because each has enough, and we will take turns sitting in the shade under one another's arbor and tree, fruitful and fresh, enjoying the cool and conversation.

May I learn to be grateful today, in anticipation of that time, world without end. ■



## DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor:

Dr. Jones from Covenant Theological Seminary used to refer to Christians who like to control others because they are “offended” as “the professional weaker brother” [“When Christians offend Christians,” *Critique* 2011:1]. They claim to be offended (or maybe are offended) as a tool to control others. I like to use that term.

Stu Kerns  
Lincoln, NE  
via Facebook

Denis Haack responds:

Stu: Dr. Jones’ expression nails the reality exactly. I had never heard that before, and am glad to know it. What is so insidious is the fact that the reaction is a naked power play but couched in a way that implies they are powerless to do anything but be honest about how they have been hurt by the offender. And so they are able to control others while appearing to be the most sensitive to spiritual hurts, the ones needing solace when what they really need is to repent for lording it over their sisters and brothers. I am coming to believe that ease in “being offended” is not the humble response of a soul sensitive to evil but *prima facie* evidence of pride. It occurs because we are centered on ourselves, on our feelings about things, on our standards and sense of etiquette, and on the sense that the world must never infringe on us. I am not here referring, of course, to those who have been so hammered by the brokenness of this fallen world that their deep scars burn easily when touched. They usually pull back and away, however, instead of trying to assert control. Which is interesting, because though I would not mind their “controlling” (for example) what movies we watch together, I am unwilling to have the “professional weaker brothers” do the same.

To the editor:

As a faithful reader for over 15 years, I have to thank you again for the impact of Ransom Fellowship on my life and faith. It has been a kind of compass for me in navigating the sometime turbulent waters of living out my faith in our post-modern culture...of being in the world but not of it. I am so grateful for you and your work—keep on keeping on!

Denis, I loved your article “Hindrances to communication” [*Critique* 2011:2]. You captured the issues/barriers so well and it really resonated with my experience—that truly understanding and connecting with others isn’t a grace to be expected but a gift to be cherished when it’s given.

Kristen Davis  
Tempe, AZ

To the editor:

Always very thought provoking articles. Especially was moved by Wesley Hill’s article, “Leaving all, gaining all” [*Critique* 2011:3]. It reflects the way I’ve thought about homosexuals and Christianity for years, but he expresses it in a very real and moving way.

Danny Bullington  
Knoxville, TN

Denis Haack responds:

Kristen and Danny: Thank you for your kind words, and please believe me when I say that it means a great deal to us when readers take the time to let us know that our publications are actually read and found helpful. ■

# MEDIA BIAS AND NURTURING WISDOM

by Timothy Padgett

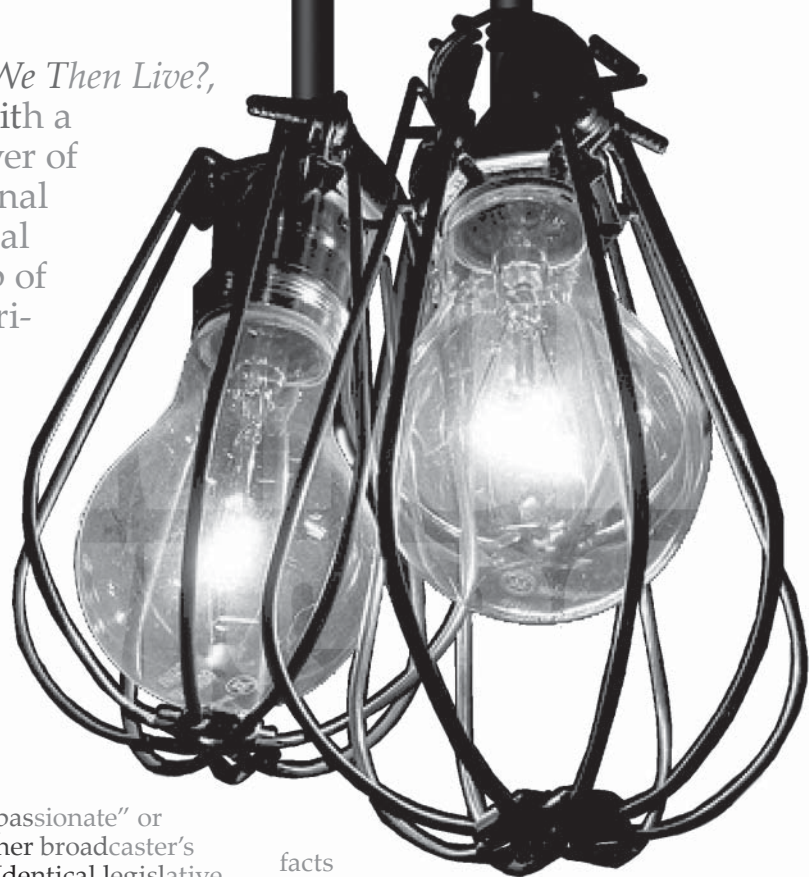
In his landmark film series, *How Should We Then Live?*, Francis Schaeffer presented his audience with a frightening image of the manipulative power of contemporary media. He created two fictional news accounts of the very same hypothetical event. In each case, the viewer sees a group of young protesters in conflict with the authorities. The action is identical but, depending on which version is seen, you either get the idea of the stalwart boys in blue holding the line against a bunch of good-for-nothing hooligans or of the nation's youth standing up for truth in the face of the oppressive arm of the state. Each news story was so crafted that two people offered only one version would come away with mutually exclusive ideas of what had occurred.

Sadly, this sort of thing is not reserved for fictionalized news accounts. We've all had those times when we're watching the headlines on TV and we get the impression that the minds behind the cameras are pulling our strings in a most unwelcome way. We'll be taking in the coverage of this or that event on one network and then switch over to another news outlet to see what they have to say. Watching the second show, it can be hard to believe that both networks are talking about the same thing. A crowd of protesters is "angry" or "disgruntled" when described by one anchor, but it

comes across as "passionate" or "spirited" in another broadcaster's characterization. Identical legislative tricks are either "brilliant" or "corrupt" depending on who is being described.

It would be very comforting to take solace in the idea that whichever perspective rankles us the most must have been the result of willful manipulation of facts by the media outlet in question. If their portrayal of a favorite public figure leaves us vexed, it must have been because they've stretched the truth to the breaking point even though they knew what the

facts were. This sort of thinking leaves us in our happy-place where our own ideas are firmly rooted in reality and where contrary opinions are maintained only through ignorance and deceit. While a world where all ideas are so clearly demarcated would be a nice planet to live on, it is, sadly, not the one where any of us currently reside. Undoubtedly, information in the public square is quite often nothing more than a collocation of lies and





half-truths; but the more unsettling reality that we must all face is that the mutually exclusive presentations of pundits, politicians, and preachers alike are as likely to be the result of sincere attempts at objectivity as they are to be the deliberate machinations of ne'er-do-wells.

Take, for example, the varied interpretations of recent American military conflicts by Christian magazines. Though they would certainly resent being characterized as mouth-pieces for the United States' political factions, *Sojourners* and *World* magazines have each tended to support the American Left and Right respectively. This emphasis came through in how they wrote about the various American

## PANAMA INVASION AND GULF WAR

When it came to the Panama invasion of December 1989, the two journals could not have been more different. *Sojourners* described American troops as "shaking down passers-by at roadblocks and rounding up labor leaders and other civilian politicians considered unfriendly," whereas *World* wrote of the work of Baptist missionaries who had found not only freedom with the influx of American forces but also additional funds. Less than a week after the invasion, U.S. government resources were made available to relief agencies working among the Panamanians. At another point, *World* provided a photo and caption showing a Panamanian child

such that even America's enveloping embrace was seen as an improvement. Likewise, in a summary of comments by CIA director William Webster, *World* asserted that the new American-enshrined government of Panama enjoyed "broad support among the people and the legislature." In a less technical, though perhaps more evocative, observation, the magazine continued this reasoning with a photo. The picture showed two men walking by a short wall in Panama that has been spray-painted with the words "THANK YOU MR. BUSH." The caption added, "They are grateful: Whatever the American press had to say, no one could deny the obvious sentiments expressed by most residents of Panama City."

In contrast, *Sojourners* cast the Americans as bringing nothing but death and destruction. It pointed out that one devastated neighborhood, which had been the home of descendants of Africans brought in a century before to dig the canal, was to be rebuilt, not for the previous residents, but as "a commercial zone for tourists." Of the millions of dollars sent by the U.S. government to Panama for rebuilding, "Not one penny will go towards those displaced by the invasion." Another of their articles spoke of the quest for compensation by civilians caught in the crossfire. With the cooperation of several international groups, some of these Panamanians were seeking recompense from the United States for family members killed or maimed by American forces. The author summarized his point with a quote from a representative of these groups. "'The only 'just cause' in this regrettable and tragic affair . . . is the cause to compensate the Panamanian victims of this illegal act of intervention by the United States.'"

Another arena where the two periodicals offered contrasting viewpoints was in their respective portrayals of those who disagreed with their own view of the given conflict. At one point in the wake of the Panama campaign, *World* indirectly critiqued a letter from the National Council of Churches (NCC). There was little commentary, as all but the initial paragraph was simply quoting the letter, but what was there was telling. The title itself claimed that the NCC was "quick to criticize," which implied a rush



conflicts that erupted in the wake of the Cold War. *Sojourners* tended to talk about the dangers of instability and the suffering inflicted upon non-combatants in the event of reckless war, while *World* spoke about the dangers of inaction and the suffering to be alleviated through a justified use of force.

being playfully chased through one GI's legs by another soldier. To the one magazine, Uncle Sam was the agent of imperialist oppression while to the other he was a well-armed relief worker.

*World* pointed out several times that the invasion of Panama had the approval, or at least acceptance, of those seemingly the least likely to be pleased: the Panamanians themselves. "While there was plenty of squawking, however, throughout Latin America and elsewhere in the world, little criticism of the U.S. was reported in Panama itself." *World* argued that Noriega's governance was



to judgment or a knee-jerk reaction rather than a measured, thoughtful response. This emphasis was continued with the first words of the article itself, "It didn't take long . . ." As the paragraph continued, the swiftness of the "traditional gainsayers" to condemn was contrasted with the fact that "every public opinion poll" and "nearly every member of Congress" were in favor of the military action. Without overtly critiquing the letter, the tone here prepared the reader to view the following comments from the NCC as hasty and mechanical. When it came to the Gulf War, *World* described the "peacenik" groups as "rickety . . . aging . . . same old lefties." One author suggested that, as many of the participants in the protests were from such groups as the Socialist and Communist parties, their opposition had more to do with tired ideals than with present day issues.

*Sojourners* saw Christians in favor of given wars as either typical or depressing. Richard John Neuhaus's *Wall Street Journal* article attacking the anti-war church as "hopelessly marginal" was itself criticized by *Sojourners* as what was to be expected of "the king's court prophets." Billy Graham's overnight White House stay was treated as "disappointing" and a media coup for the Bush administration. In the same way Graham was criticized for praying for "our" soldiers and leaders and thereby identifying the church's aims with American goals. Unnamed "White House theological advisers" and "religious chaplains" to President Bush were seen as, respectively, not wanting to rock the boat and equivalent to Saddam Hussein and his claim of a holy war.

One of the great ironies of these two differing perspectives came in their view of the rest of the media. Each magazine saw itself as a voice in the wilderness speaking forth what the powers that be in the wider world of the press refused to acknowledge. *Sojourners* rebuked what it termed "mainstream media coverage" and "establishment journalists" for being monolithic in support of the invasion. Rather than being critical of the attack along with *Sojourners*, these media outlets had a home team victory "to crow about."

*World*, on the other hand, saw the majority of news reports as being in

opposition to the invasion and accused the media of doing a hatchet job on American intervention. One of their authors implied a connection between the heightened censorship for war correspondents during the Falklands, Grenada, and Panama campaigns and their success. He suggested that "natural press skepticism" towards the government "has evolved into a variety of cynicism that is harming the nation."

This continued during the 1990–91 Gulf War. *World* suggested that the mainstream journalists listened only to those that reported what they wanted to hear. When commenting on a letter from Roman Catholic bishops to President Bush that was critical of his handling of the crisis, *World*

was particularly scathing at what they perceived as profit-making enthusiasm by the various media outlets. Journalists were quoted, disparagingly, as speaking of the military conflict using the same terminology they ordinarily reserved for athletic competition, "a blowout... Patriots vs. Scuds: Iraqi Touchdown is Averted." The magazine even went so far as to suggest that the timing of the American assault on Iraq



pointed out that while the media gave the bishops their ear in full on this point, they were nowhere to be found when these same bishops had been advocating a pro-life stance at other times. "A profound media bias determines when the nation's print and electronic reporters are willing to listen...and when they won't listen."

Unsurprisingly, *Sojourners* took a differing view. In a letter they hoped could be published in Iraq, the editors lumped the media in with the government as those trying to tell the American people who their enemies should be. The magazine

was "scheduled in advance for the networks' convenience.

## REFLECTING ON THE FACTS

So what is going on here? Who had the right perspective? Were most American news agencies uniformly in favor of the various U.S. actions, or were they monolithically opposed? Were the GIs in Panama little more than the thugs that *Sojourners* suggested, or were they the agents of liberation that *World* would have us believe? Was the anti-war crowd trotting out tired slogans from their 1960s heyday, or were President Bush's



spiritual counselors blind to their Christian duty to speak up for peace? How could two groups of seemingly intelligent people sharing the same data and, broadly speaking, the same biblical consensus come to such dramatically opposed views of these events?

Try this thought experiment. Imagine you're meeting with three people. One has been stridently against the Iraq War from the beginning. Another was in favor early on, but, as time passed, became less enamored with the whole endeavor. The third has been a supporter from day one and has not flagged in enthusiasm since. Imagine you give them each fifteen photographs depicting real events in Iraq from 2003 up through the present. Five of these are negative: flag-draped coffins coming home, the Abu Ghraib prison images, and dead civilians. Five are neither here nor there: GI's patrolling Baghdad streets, destroyed armored vehicles, and convoys headed through the desert. Finally, five are positive: British medics treating Iraqi wounded, Arab civilians thrusting ink-stained thumbs in the air, and smiling children getting candy from American troops. Then ask your friends to pick the, say, seven photos which epitomize the Iraq War. Which pictures will they choose?

The result would not be hard to guess. The person against the war from the start will choose the five negative images along with a couple of the neutral ones. Even these last pictures will seem just as negative when seen side by side with the darker photos. The choices of the person on the fence will reflect this ambivalence with smattering of selections from each category yielding an overall impression of a highly complex situation. Finally, the one in favor will be the reciprocal of anti-war participant, and the images will be the five positive images with two of the middle of the road pictures thrown in. Using identical data your three friends will have created collages of the Iraq War that have precious little relation to one another.

Or, if you want a less political example, think of it this way. Have you ever been watching a sporting event with some friends where you go into it not caring who wins? You could just as easily be persuaded to go along

with your friends' team as to root for the underdog. Yet the more you listen to your compatriots, the more you want the other team to win. The problem is the sudden irrationality coming from people who you otherwise could count on for their solid sensibility. Every time a ref makes a call in their favor it's "about time!" since it was obviously only their due. Every time that same ref made a call against their team it was just as obviously a bad call flowing from the



FULLY REQUINED



official's bias. Your otherwise logical friends become sincerely convinced that the powers that be are actively working to prevent their team from winning.

It might well be depressing, but there's not one of us who is as clear-headed as we'd like to think. When we come to some new information, no one takes it in with a totally open mind. We come to it with all the baggage of our previously held ideas about the nature of the world. Bear in mind this is a good thing. Without such preconceptions we would never be able to have any development in our thoughts since we'd always be trying to start from scratch. It'd be like trying to do



ISAF MEDIA

even the simplest of math problems while constantly trying to prove that  $2+2=4$ .

When tasked to explain an event to ourselves or someone else, we do not list everything that occurred. This would yield only meaningless drivel. Rather, we select out those things that epitomize for us the essence of the event in question. All else being equal,





is exactly what we see in the case of *Sojourners* and *World* magazines, and in our nightly newscasts. It is also exactly what we see when we form our own opinions. When the writers and editors at *Sojourners* and *World* drew together the facts for their articles, they chose to look at the available data which best conformed to their preconceptions about what was going on in Panama or Iraq. To the former, stories about Panamanians or Iraqis grate-

of any sort. This is the voice of despair. We can also give up when we double-down and plug ahead ignoring any counsel but that which agrees with our own. This is the voice of hubris. While the former might seem to comport with a loving disposition as it is intrinsically inoffensive, someone who refuses to speak up for fear of being wrong is primarily loving himself and his sense of well-being. While the latter could be mistaken for courage since it boldly takes its stand in the face of any and all opposition, someone who leaps into the fray heedless of any danger is not brave but rather a fool.

What is called for in response to our own frailty is not to become like TV's "Monk," whose fear of the genuine dangers found in germs, heights, and whatever else happened by leads him to be paralyzed by the most basic circumstances of life. Neither are we called to become the action hero who blasts his enemies left and right shooting first and asking questions never. Rather, we are called to consider our ways and ask ourselves, when confronted with a contrary opinion, whether we've ever been wrong ourselves, and whether we might be wrong now. We are called to stand for the truth because it is true and not simply because it is our opinion. We must have the humility to listen to what another is saying while retaining the courage to speak boldly when the situation calls for it. This is not the path of easy choices where we always know what to do, but this is the path of constructive dialogue. It is the path that calls not for pat answers but for wisdom. ■

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Originally from Nashville, Tennessee, Timothy Padgett studied at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis where he worked at the Francis Schaeffer Institute. He and his wife, Emmalee, and their two boys now live in Chicago where he is a doctoral student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.



SNK/GET



ful for the American invasion are exceptions that prove the rule and don't need to be mentioned. To the latter, examples of U.S. troops acting oppressively are just flukes which would just cloud the issue if highlighted. To both of them, the fact that many parts of the media did not agree with them meant that the whole lot was

against them.

### THE WAY FORWARD

When faced the reality of our own inherent bias, we can be sorely tempted just to give up. We can give up when we collapse in on ourselves and refuse to participate in dialogue

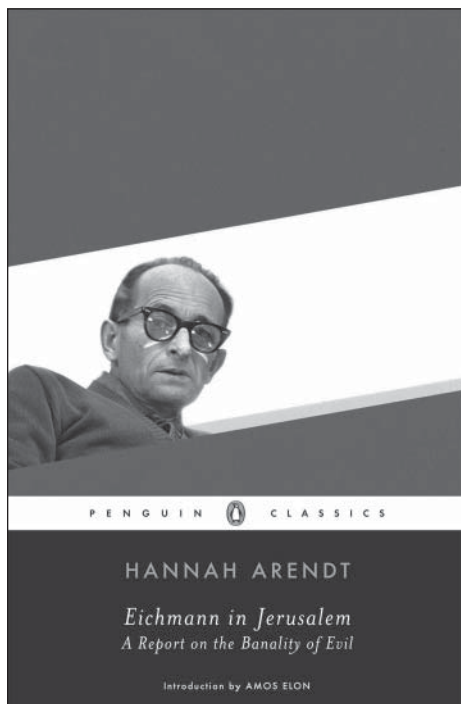
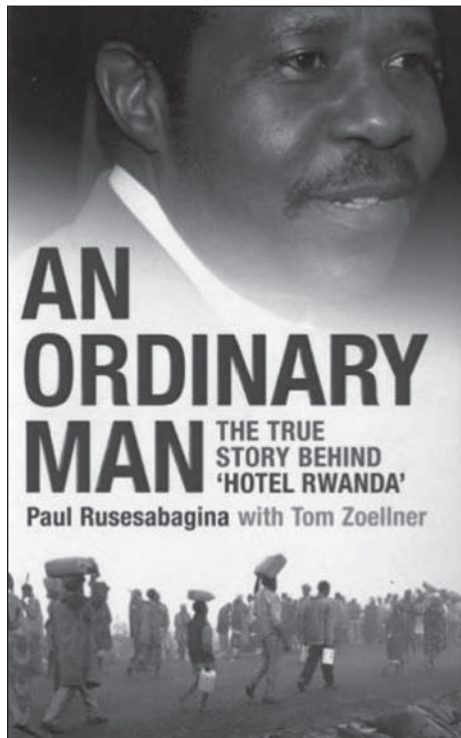
none of us, when describing a conversation we had with a friend, would mention how many breaths we took or the number of tiles on the floor. Even in this very ordinary example, we filter out what we consider to be irrelevant and highlight what we think to be significant in order to explain the true nature of a phenomenon.

As strange as it might sound, this

## RESOURCES

# Ordinary men

Book reviews by Preston Jones



I recently read two books about ordinary men. One of them, Paul Rusesabagina, played a key role in rescuing 1,200 Tutsis and their Hutu friends during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The other, Adolph Eichmann, played a key role in the mass murder of Jews during the Second World War.

In neither case do we want to believe that these men were ordinary. Normal people, after all, don't get asked by major publishers to write memoirs, as Rusesabagina did. And *The New Yorker* doesn't send reporters overseas to report on the trials of run-of-the-mill criminals. But Rusesabagina tells us several times that he isn't a special person; he says he did only what he had to do in an unusual moment. If we could talk to his first wife, we might hear something of his faults. And one assumes that the unknowing customers he picked up as a taxi driver in Belgium after the genocide didn't detect in him anything particularly heroic.

The same is probably true of the Argentine laborers who worked alongside Eichmann through the 1950s, unaware that their workmate, who had fled to South America after the war, had overseen the transportation of Jews to Nazi Germany's killing centers. The philosopher-journalist Hannah Arendt tells us that Eichmann was nothing more than a boring, banal, thoughtless careerist. In a different place and time, he might have ended up as a middle manager, tending to e-mails, meetings, and office gossip.

In both cases, the important thing was practice. Rusesabagina had long practice as the manager of the Hotel Milles Collines, a luxurious place for Rwanda's elite and up-scale visitors. He had risen to his position as a result of hard work, which meant tending to clients' needs. He became highly skilled at figuring out how to make

people's stays pleasant. In the process, he developed habits. He tells us that when the genocide erupted he had little time to think things through. "Over and over people kept telling me that what I did...was heroic, but I never saw it that way.... I was a hotel manager doing his job." But what did it mean to be a successful hotel manager? It meant the cultivation of empathy. It meant the ability to put another's momentary desires (*I need more towels*) ahead of one's own (*I've had a long day and want to go home*). It meant taking responsibility on one's own shoulders. During the genocide, Rusesabagina rejected murderous demands from his political superiors because he felt responsible for the people who had fled to his hotel. In his guests' interests, he employed righteous deception.

Eichmann, on the other hand, never disobeyed orders, and he presented himself as a man of honor because he had always gone along with his superiors' wishes, even when he personally found them unpleasant. Eichmann had no personal hatred for Jews, but his government called for their murder and he was a government man hustling his way up the career chain—so there you go.

Eichmann was not stupid, Arendt tells us. "It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that pre-disposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of [the war] period." Eichmann was not demonic; he was shallow. Considering the hollow man before her at the trial in Jerusalem in 1962, Arendt reflected on the "strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil."

*The interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil.* We can turn that around: the interdependence of thoughtfulness and good.

There is much to say about both of these books, but the discussions



my class will have on them will lead to reflection on the nexus between thoughtlessness and evil and thoughtfulness and good. Of course the Gospels have a lot to say on this theme. "You fool!" God says to a thoughtless landowner. "This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:20)

In a day when keeping student customers happy is a keen goal, it would be tempting to leave the class conversation at the safe level of philosophical abstraction. But we won't. Instead, we will focus, laser-like, on the fact that Rusesabagina and Eichmann did what they did in the big moments because of what they had made of themselves in the small moments. Eichmann did what he did because, in the decades before, he had made decisions that made him into the kind of person who could do that. The same is true of Rusesabagina.

The same is true of you and me.

People say they would never obey orders that would put innocent people's lives at risk, but they have no problem with texting behind the wheel. They deceive themselves by saying that they know texting while driving is dangerous but, since they know it's dangerous, they'll be extra careful and thus, for them, it's not dangerous! That's called self-deception, and little good can come from putting energy into lying to ourselves and then putting more energy into believing the lies we have told.

Little good can come from it, but the obesity epidemic, the pervasive and predictable rudeness associated with communications technology, and the appalling violence against women of prime time fare point, at the least, to a society immersed in thoughtlessness. What are the consequences of these trends, and to what will they lead?

People know that big decisions matter, and they assume that, when

the decisions come around, they will get them right. Sometimes, yes; sometimes, no—consult the divorce rate. Rusesabagina and Arendt suggest that success in the big things depends on learning from previous moral mistakes and general success in life's little demands. They provide us with illustrations of a basic biblical idea: "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much" (Luke 16:10).

How I drive matters. What I eat matters. What I watch and talk about matters. What I read, or if I do, matters. The level of attention I give to my responsibilities matters. The degree to which I keep my word matters. Everyday things, small decisions matter.

Eichmann was not a monster, Arendt says; he was "a clown." He had a "horrible gift for consoling himself with clichés."

A key difference between Eichmann and Rusesabagina was that the latter really understood that his decisions didn't only affect himself. He was able to imagine how his decisions might affect others. He understood that his private life had public significance. He had been able to enunciate "words directed against the darkness" in a moment of extremity because he had made the habit of doing so in moments of relative ease. ■

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*Preston Jones teaches at John Brown University*

*Books reviewed:*

**Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil** by *Hannah Arendt* (New York, NY: Penguin; 1963) 336 pages.

**An Ordinary Man** by *Paul Rusesabagina* (New York, NY: Penguin; 2006) 224 pages.

## RESOURCE

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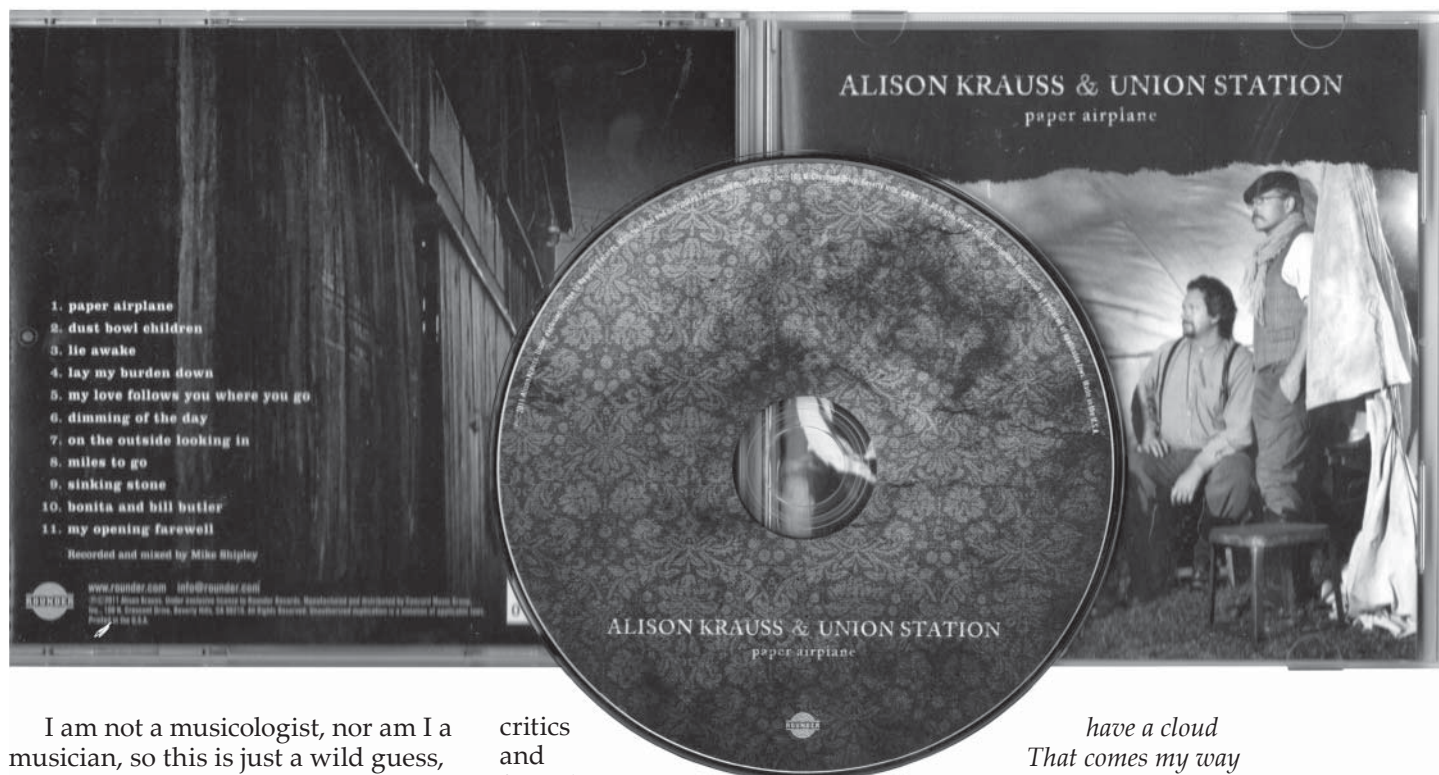
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## TUNED IN

# At the dimming of the day

A review by Denis Haack of Alison Krauss' *Paper Airplane*



I am not a musicologist, nor am I a musician, so this is just a wild guess, but I would not be surprised if most music the world over celebrates love or mourns its loss. Nothing else comes so close so quickly to touch the human condition in all its joy and pain.

*Well I could brag on the things I've  
done or the places I have been  
But I've never found a cure for  
on the outside looking in*

*[from "On the Outside  
Looking in"]*

We yearn for love and are so deficient without it that its loss brings us up short at a dead end that reeks of death itself. This is not just imagination run amok, either: if God is love, as apostles and mystics insist, then to be devoid of love is to be lost in the cosmos indeed.

*Paper Airplane* (2011), the first album since 2004 that Alison Krauss has released with her long time band, Union Station, helps us know and feel this essential reality. Grumbling by

critics and fans about the failure of Robert Plant and Krauss to follow their superb *Raising Sand* (2007) with a second album strikes me as silly. Creativity—especially in the form of collaborative art—can be ruined when rushed, and neither artist has reason to do so. Both Plant and Krauss are beyond such concerns in their careers. Returning to Union Station brings Krauss back with musicians who, as *Paper Airplane* demonstrates, are superb in their own right (as instrumentalists and vocalists). Their long history of working together brings a seamlessness and fluidity that adds to the beauty of the music. Beauty that shines through even when they sing of the heart's broken cry that we all know only too well.

*I've put it all behind me  
Nothing left to do or doubt  
Some may say  
But every silver lining always seems to*

*have a cloud  
That comes my way*

*Anticipated pleasure or  
unexpected pain  
No choice I fear  
And love is hard to measure  
hidden in the rain*

*That's why you'll find me here all alone  
and still wondering why  
Waiting inside for the cold to get colder  
And here where it's clear that I've  
wasted my time  
Hoping to fly 'cause it's  
almost over now*

*People come together, people go their  
own way  
Love conquers few*

*[from "Paper Airplane"]*

Few groups have sung as eloquently and consistently of the sorrow of lost love as have Alison Krauss & Union Station.

The second song on the album, "Dust Bowl Children," is by Peter



Rowan who released an album of that title in 1990. With echoes of Woody Guthrie and Wendell Berry it reminds us that love of God and others is inseparable from love of the land. Made for love, we are also made of dust.

*We're all Dust Bowl children  
Singin' the dust bowl song  
Well, the crops won't grow,  
And the dust just blows  
When the green fields are gone.  
When the green grass growing fields  
are gone.  
When the green fields are gone.  
When the green grass growing fields  
are gone.*

*Well, they said in California there's  
work of every kind.  
The only work that I got out there was  
waiting on a welfare line.  
Once I had a dollar, once I had a dream.  
Now all the work is being done by a  
big ole machine.*

[From "Dust Bowl Children"]

The song evokes memories of the historic Dust Bowl, the phenomenon in the first six years of the thirties that saw the topsoil of America's plains dry up and blow away. A lack of rainfall coupled with intensive farming practices that in turn opened the door to disaster and the ripples of poverty that spread out into communities and families for years. It was not the historic Dust Bowl, however, that came to mind as I listened to the song.

This past weekend my wife and I drove across southern Minnesota from where we live to the shore of the Mississippi, where we sat in the shade of a huge elm tree to talk, pray, think, and read. This is a remarkably green summer—the summer of 2011—so far, the rainfall coming in just the right amounts and in appropriate intervals to keep the fields green, the woods along the creeks lush, so that even the ditches along the highway have none of the dried sections so common in the summer heat. We have made this trek at least annually, usually far more often than that, in the three decades we have lived here. We know this road, the land we drive through, and we love it enough to notice the changes that are occurring. It used to be that family farms predominated, but that day is gone. Pastures with animals are fairly scarce now, and the planted fields have been combined, so

that the hedgerows that used to separate field from field are now few in number. More efficient, as capitalism and the invisible hand of the market measures such things, but the loss is incalculable—and seldom calculated, it seems. The hedgerows were where the tiny creatures lived, where birds made their nests, and where the

that loves that should be seen merely as signs of a greater, more promising love are seen instead by broken people as the fulfillment of love.

*More laughter than a kindergarten  
out to play  
One Sunday morning song that  
says it all  
More summer than a California beach*



bounty of the countryside was shared with the wild inhabitants of the land who were here first. The pastures were where cows lived out their days. Now, when cows are glimpsed at all, they are standing in huge sheds, each in an allotted slot in which they never move. The farmyards were where chickens and turkeys chased insects, but they too are confined now in massive, crowded sheds. I do not dispute the economics of the case: meat, milk, soybeans, and corn are much cheaper now, no question. When "all the work is being done by a big ole machine," prices usually drop, but this is merely the whistle that should catch our attention. As we watch, if we have eyes to see, we will notice that more is going on than meets the pocketbook. The land must be loved, not merely used, because it belongs to the one who is love itself. And being of dust, we lose something when we lose a love of the land.

Love lost is just one sign of the brokenness, but it is a potent one. It gets our attention. The difficulty is

*can hold  
My love follows you where you go*

*Take forgiveness—take a prayer—  
take the deepest breath  
Take the answers in your heart  
When you wake up and the world is  
cruel and cold  
My love follows you where you go*

*More freedom than a field of flowers  
in the wind  
More beauty than a morning after rain  
Up the steepest hill—a dark and  
crooked road  
My love follows you where you go*

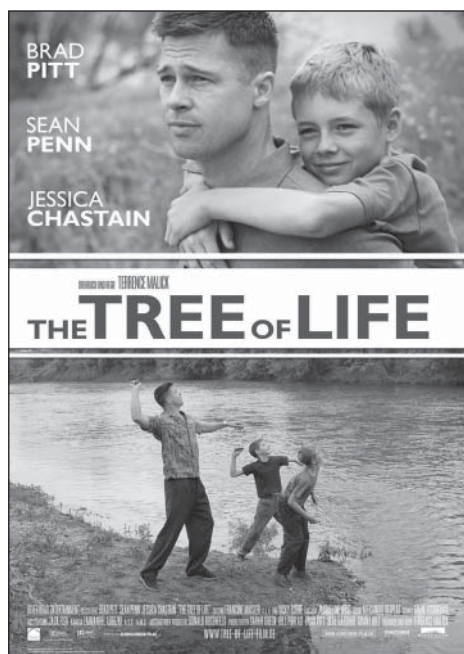
[from "My Love Follows You  
Where You Go"]

We cannot be persuaded not to love, nor persuaded when it is lost not to yearn for it, all for the simple reason we cannot be persuaded to shed our humanity. The question is not whether we follow in our yearning for love, but who.

**Recommended album:** Paper Airplane  
by Alison Krauss & Union Station

# A picture in need of words

A review of *The Tree of Life* by **Greg Grooms**



Remember the old saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words”? It’s not true. Take Terrence Malick’s latest film, *The Tree of Life*, for example.

If you know him at all, it’s probably as the director of one or another of the five feature-length films he’s made over the last 40 years: *Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005), and this year’s *The Tree of Life*. But it would be misleading to describe him as just a film director. He is a philosopher-rare-makes-movies, and they are rare and wonderful creatures indeed. Malick cut his philosophical teeth as an undergrad at Harvard, then did most of the work necessary for a PhD in the subject at Oxford, but left without the degree after a disagreement with a professor about the writings of the twentieth century Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Yes, I hear you: you don’t know who Wittgenstein was, you don’t care, and what does this have to do with the movie, anyway? Patience, please.

Wittgenstein had the unusual

distinction of having inspired two philosophical movements: logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy. The former is probably familiar to you, at least in its street form. LPs think that the only questions worth asking are those that can be answered scientifically. Thus, he concluded, “Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical.” Still Wittgenstein—unlike most of the LPs who followed him—was fascinated with those questions. They may be nonsense, but they are in his opinion a special kind of higher nonsense that cannot be conveyed in words. The problem in describing them doesn’t lie in them, but in the limits of language. Thus, in one of his early works, he famously wrote, “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”

Terrence Malick isn’t content to live within those limits. In *The Tree of Life* he bombards us with image after image, epic in their scope and extraordinarily beautiful in appearance. Many of them will be familiar to residents of central Texas: Barton Springs Pool and Hamilton Pool Nature Preserve make their appearance, along with Eisenhower-era Waco in all its 1950s glory. Others are less familiar, but no less stunning: the birth of the universe, the origin of life, and the survival of the fittest all parade across the screen to the accompaniment of Alexandre Desplat’s exquisite musical score.

Malick offers us two things to help tie these images together and make sense of them. First, the O’Brien family: Mom (Jessica Chastain), Dad (Brad Pitt), and their three sons. Lest we mistake this as a nostalgic recollection, the film begins with the death of one of the boys, jumps back to their childhood, and then moves forward, leaving us all to wonder when and why the tragedy will arrive. Through

it all Dad—frustrated, overbearing, frightened, and frightening—is the persistent threat to their happiness and security. Mom, though winsome and beautiful, is neither the equal of the threat Dad poses, nor strong enough to be her family’s savior.

In, around, and beneath the unfolding family drama, Malick weaves one of his trademarks: a series of voice-overs, but most spoken in whispers. It’s as if he’s saying, “There are things you need to know here, but I’m not sure I really want you to hear them.” I have to admit that his voice-overs annoy me. He’s a skillful director; can’t he stitch his story together in any other way? But perhaps he doesn’t think the story can—or should—be stitched together. Perhaps Malick agrees with Marshall McLuhan’s dictum, “The medium is the message,” i.e., how the story is told is what the story is about. Life often seems beautiful, but is apparently random and disjointed. Rarely does it make sense to us as we’d like it to. In this regard Malick’s film is certainly honest, if not encouraging.

Even so, no one, I think, can see *The Tree of Life* and walk away feeling that Malick doesn’t believe in beauty, the significance of human relationships, and an ultimately hopeful resolution of all our conflicts; but why he believes in them is anyone’s guess. A.O. Scott closed his review of *The Tree of Life* like this: “...the imagination lives by risk, including the risk of incomprehension. Do all the parts of *The Tree of Life* cohere? Does it all make sense? I can’t say that it does. I suspect, though, that sometime between now and Judgment Day it will.”

It’s a fitting postscript to this beautiful, sprawling mess of a film, I think. One can only hope that if—before Judgment Day—life begins to make sense to Malick, he’ll be willing to talk about it. ■

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### Credits for *The Tree of Life*

#### Starring:

Brad Pitt (Mr. O'Brien)  
 Sean Penn (Jack)  
 Jessica Chastain (Mrs. O'Brien)  
 Hunter McCracken (Young Jack)  
 Tye Sheridan (Steve)  
 Fiona Shaw (Grandmother)  
 Will Wallace (Architect)  
 Kelly Koonce (Father Haynes)  
 Cole Cockburn (Harry Bates)

Director: Terrence Malick

Writer: Terrence Malick

Producers: Donald Rosenfeld, Paula Mae Schwartz, Steve Schwartz, and others

Runtime: 138 minutes

Release: U.S.A., 2011

Rated: PG-13 for some thematic material

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

1. What lingers in your mind after your first viewing of *The Tree of Life*? If images, which ones? If events, which events? If words, which words?
2. Early in *The Tree of Life* we hear Mrs. O'Brien in a voice-over say, "The nuns taught us there were two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow." Discuss this quote. What do you think she meant by the ways of nature and grace?
3. *The Tree of Life* consists of two parts: the larger is the unfolding story of the O'Brien family. The smaller, folded somewhat awkwardly into the larger, is the story of the origin of the universe, the origin of life, and the process of evolution. Discuss what role each story plays in Malick's film. What relationship do the two stories have to one another? Why does Malick insert one into the other?
4. How did the music played during *The Tree of Life* make you feel as you watched the story? Did the pairing of music and image feel like a good combination? Why or why not?
5. Discuss the last scene in *The Tree of Life*. Where does it take place? Who is there? Who is not? Were you surprised by this ending? Did it seem an appropriate ending to the story that had been told before it?
6. In your opinion, did Malick's use of voice-overs enhance his story? Defend your answer.
7. In an interview about *The Tree of Life*, Malick (who usually doesn't do interviews) said of his film, "Experience it like a walk in the countryside. You'll probably be bored or have other things in mind, but perhaps you will be struck, suddenly by a feeling, by an act, by a unique portrait of nature." Discuss this quote.
8. What role do you think relationships play in making sense of life? In your opinion? In your opinion of Malick's opinion?
9. One reviewer said Malick's goal in *The Tree of Life* is "to shake us loose from our dependence upon linear narrative and plot." Do you agree? Is this dependence something we should be shaken loose from?
10. If you were given the honor of dining with Malick after watching *The Tree of Life* and of discussing his film with him, what questions would you like to ask him?



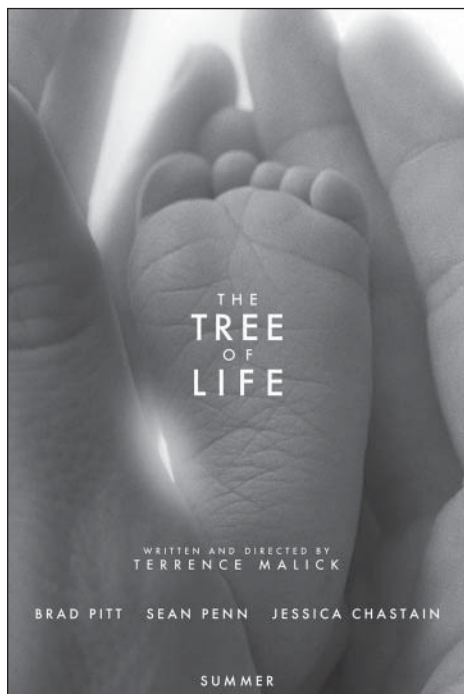
**Greg Grooms**, a contributing editor for Critique, lives with his wife Mary Jane near the University of Texas in Austin where they often welcome students to ask

questions and seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.

## DARKENED ROOM

# Raw beauty, seeking grace

A review of *The Tree of Life* by Denis Haack



Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* is not, as a piece of cinematic art, very subtle. Nor does he allow any viewer wondering in unawares, seeking only entertainment or a chance to escape summer heat in an air conditioned space and a tub of popcorn, to imagine that this film can be mindlessly consumed. My friend Steven Garber likes to remind people not to leave their brains at the box office, and Terrence Malick takes that one step farther—he simply won't permit it. *The Tree of Life* is such a richly constructed film that we either think while it is showing, or become quickly convinced we shelled out good money for the wrong movie. People who want an easy to follow story will be disappointed. So will those who want answers rather than questions. Actually, that's not quite correct: I think Malick does suggest an answer, but I would suggest it is not ultimately fully sufficient for the questions he raises. But that's getting ahead of myself.

Let's begin, as Malick does, at the beginning. In the darkened theater the screen goes black. After a pause, simple unadorned text appears, ancient words spoken by God.

*Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?...When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?*  
(Job 38:4, 7)

An extended, stunningly crafted visual montage of creation follows. A voice-over speaks of two ways, nature and grace, between which we must choose.

*The nuns taught us there were two ways through life—the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow.... Grace doesn't try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries.... Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. And love is smiling through all things.... The nuns taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.*

A story slowly unfolds of a family that, like all families, knows both blessing and curse. The O'Briens know goodness fostered by gentle beauty (in grace personified by the mother) but then are slowly strangled by a quiet wickedness (in nature personified by the father), made all the more painful by the cruel interruption of the death of a son gone off to war. Throughout the film we are made to live in a succession of memories and brief snippets of experience, fragments of reality mixed in with dreams, fears, hopes, and the confusion of daily life with its surprises, disappointments, and nightmares, all the while trying to make sense of it all. Forgiveness is needed, sought, and given while a lost son, now grown and away from home,



lives out his life in an urban setting beset with endlessly moving, nameless crowds among and in buildings that, like desert caverns, open to a sky so blue it seems to offer hope. In the end, the yearning for a world touched by love in relationships is the dream that seems to hold promise in overcoming the deep scars left by the brokenness that has been lived out so painfully, so cruelly, in a world of such unspeakable beauty.

If that doesn't seem to be clear and orderly enough to be an adequate summary of a film, you probably haven't seen *The Tree of Life*.

Most filmmakers use the screen like the blank pages in a journal, projecting an unfolding story that is the primary point. Occasionally films are released for which money and effort seemed to be poured into everything *but* the story—*Avatar* (2009) comes to mind—and the fact that the story is the primary point is painfully obvious. Terrence Malick uses the screen



more like a painter would a succession of canvases. He paints a succession of images and sounds as a series of impressions that are experienced, much like the momentary glimpses we get into life and reality, day by day. They appear before us unhurried, insistent, leisurely enough to permit us to reflect on their meaning, to wonder or shudder. Another way

to catch the latest film by Ingmar Bergman. His films always made me feel like he was treating me with respect, inviting me into a conversation about the biggest questions of life, the issues that can only be explored by thinking about story, about art, about truth, about nature, about grace. Art by its very nature touches on the big questions of life. Most art touches on

into him and his work; but it seems to me that he has maintained an existentialist sensibility over the years in his work. The beauty of the cosmos is overwhelming, as is the fragmentation that festers so deep within us, and somehow it is in and out of our choices that significance seems somehow, mysteriously, to arise. Similar themes appear in Malick's *The Thin Red Line*



to think about it is this: Most films are like classical music, with a beginning, a middle, and an end (though not always arranged in that order). Malick, on the other hand, shapes a series of visual and audio impressions for us to experience, each appearing like the swelling notes in a piece of improvisational jazz, always on key but circling around like the content of our memories, raising questions, evoking both awe and dread. The editing of *The Tree of Life* suggests to some a classic postmodern consciousness, but I cannot see that. This film is, if anything, profoundly impressionistic—not in the line of artists like David Hockney, or Yoko Ono, or Jeff Koons, but rather Claude Monet, or Édouard Manet, or Mary Cassatt—a resoundingly modernist vision of life shaped by an artist sensitive to his postmodern audience and times.

Watching *The Tree of Life* conjured up for me memories of being in college in the sixties, skipping class

these things implicitly, not explicitly. One reason is that it is hard to make art that addresses the big questions directly without the product descending into sentimentality, which means it is no longer good art but a form of propaganda. A few filmmakers have succeeded in creating movies that raise and address the questions explicitly—three that come to mind, besides Bergman, include Krzysztof Kieslowski, Woody Allen, and Terrence Malick.

Another similarity with Bergman is Malick's existentialism. This is most obvious in his earliest films, *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978)—both of which can, I think, be plausibly seen as cinematic windows of insight into existentialism. This may be reflective of his interest in the work of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, one of whose works Malick translated and published. Malick is very reclusive, refusing all interviews, and so I want to be careful here, and not read things

(1998) and *The New World* (2005).

From a Christian perspective, existentialism—I'm referring here to the actual philosophy proposed by the likes of Albert Camus (1913–60), Jean Paul Sartre (1905–80), or Martin Heidegger (1889–76)—was something of a positive effort in the history of ideas. Naturalism, based supposedly on the theories of modern science, proposed an impersonal cosmos of raw time and chance, with no meaning or possibility of morality. The existentialists said No: significance was possible because choice existed. Their attempt to provide dignity and a sense of meaning was noble but fatally flawed, since choice alone is insufficient to provide meaning if we are choosing between ultimately meaningless options. Existentialism had an added benefit: it feels true because we do make choices, all the time, and our choices, especially the ones that seem important, feel imbued with meaning, since choosing can



lead to blessing or curse, results that play out in ripples across time and space and lives. Thus the enigma of existentialism since its heyday in the sixties: very few propose it seriously as a formal philosophy for life but Western culture is shot through with a sense of it. It's that unexamined but firmly held conviction that our choices as individuals matter, our moral motions are meaningful, and our sense

of awe at the beauty of nature makes a love that blossoms into some form of mysticism the true hope for the future of humankind.

I do not mean to suggest that *The Tree of Life* is an exposition of existentialism, for it is not. Nor do I think we should try to parse every scene or shred of dialogue or moment of music to uncover what it means. Nor do I think we should think the biblical quotations and allusions transform it into a Christian (or even religious, narrowly defined) film. What I mean to argue is that *The Tree of Life* is likely the film that will be remembered from the early twenty-first century as a true cinematic masterpiece, a piece of art that explores the most ordinary details of life in light of the deepest questions we can possibly imagine. But in terms of answers, something is missing.

As I watched the film with four of my closest friends at a small theater in St. Paul, my heart ached for what is missing: atonement. Atonement is not a notion that's well received in our postmodern world, associated as it is with bloody sacrifice and an angry God. Yet no forgiveness is possible without it. What is forgiveness if it is not accepting the pain you have inflicted on me instead of making certain you feel pain in return? An offense against you, whether great or small, instantly places me in your debt because the offense hurts you in some way. There is no way to speak meaningfully of forgiveness without also speaking of sacrifice in satisfaction of the debt. The only question that remains is who will pay and how much will be the cost. Atonement refers to the satisfaction provided when a debt is fully paid.

When the debt is greater, the stakes increase. Consider this example: The media affords us occasional brief glimpses as tens of thousands—thousands!—of girls and women are brutalized as rape and mutilation are used as weapons of war in Africa. Assume for a moment that a god exists but that, as its omniscient vision pierces the forest canopy to the horror unfolding on blood-soaked ground, this god is forever serene and so is unmoved. I don't know about you, but to my mind this god is not sufficient for the world as it is, and not worthy of worship—though it has become the postmodern ideal. Now imagine





a God that sees and is filled with righteous wrath, an anger birthed in love for that which has been so cruelly ripped apart, a wrath determined to redeem, even at the inexplicable cost of accepting the weight of atonement on himself. It is atonement—horrible yet necessary—that finds its fulfillment in the crucifixion of Christ. It is not nature or our finitude that is our problem, but a moral debt we have

incurred. A debt that is human (it is human beings working their cruelty under the forest canopy) yet so immeasurably huge that only God can possibly pay it (no mere human could suffer enough to equal the total horror under the forest canopy). The solution is found in the choice of God to enter human history as a man, out of love alone; then, in an hour of unimaginable darkness, be cut off from the

very source of love, and in that death absorb and fully pay the debt we could not begin to pay.

Only then is the story of *The Tree of Life* complete. Only then do we find access to the tree of life. ■

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/REFLECTION:

1. What is the significance of the film's title, *The Tree of Life*?
2. Some Christians have reported that watching *The Tree of Life* was for them "a spiritual experience" or "a time of worship." To what extent did you share their experience? What do you think they were responding to in the film? To what extent do you find their experience biblically valid?
3. In what ways were the techniques of film making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, dialogue, voice over, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
4. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Discuss each main character in the film and their significance to the story.
5. Discuss *The Tree of Life* in terms of the four-part story of Scripture: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. As the discussion proceeds, keep in mind how in *Getting the Message*, theologian and pastor Daniel Doriani says, "Biblical dramas do not follow the patterns of literary dramas because someone 'massaged' the stories to make them fit. Rather, God has structured human nature and creation so that certain elements are present in all stories worth telling. If biblical dramas have the same structure as fiction, it is because art imitates life, not because the Bible imitates art."
6. Throughout the film, Malick includes images from nature. How did you respond to them? What was their role in your experiencing the film?
7. To what extent are you comfortable with the notion of atonement? Why might it be wise to never be fully comfortable with it? What plans might you want to make to be better able to discuss it intelligently with non-Christians?
8. In his review of *The Tree of Life*, Roger Ebert has a surprising take on the father, Mr. O'Brien, played by Brad Pitt: "Some reviews have said Mr. O'Brien (Brad Pitt, crew-cut, never more of a regular guy) is too strict as a disciplinarian. I don't think so. He is doing what he thinks is right, as he was reared. Mrs. O'Brien (the ethereal Jessica Chastain) is gentler and more understanding, but there is no indication she feels her husband is cruel. Of course children resent discipline, and of course a kid might sometimes get whacked at the dinner table circa 1950. But listen to an acute exchange of dialogue between Jack and his father. 'I was a little hard on you sometimes,' Mr. O'Brien says, and Jack replies: 'It's your house. You can do what you want to.' Jack is defending his father against himself. That's how you grow up. And it all happens in this blink of a lifetime, surrounded by the realms of unimaginable time and space." Do you agree? Why or why not?
9. At the final credits, what questions came to mind? To what extent do you think Malick intended viewers to leave the theater with questions? Why?
10. Some viewers find the movie

confusing and rightly raise the question whether a good film should leave viewers confused. For example, Jenn Wright, in her review of the film, said: "One of my favorite bumper stickers reads 'Eschew Obfuscation.' Terrence Malick's latest release, *The Tree of Life*, only furthered my infatuation with the bumper sticker directive. I've seen Malick's films before, and none of them have appealed to me in the least. I find them irascibly tedious and plot-barren... My husband and I previewed this movie together, but we didn't see the same film. Since there is only one character that has a name spoken in the movie itself, it was rather humorous that my husband and I debated all the way home about which character was 'Jack,' played by Hunter McCracken as the pre-teen boy and Sean Penn as the broken adult who narrated the story. The fact that two well-read and movie-savvy critics couldn't agree on who was the main character sheds a little light on the obfuscation factor. How can you not know who the main character is?" Did you find anything confusing in *The Tree of Life*? What is the proper relationship between good cinematic art and viewer confusion?

**Source:** Roger Ebert quote online (<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20110602/REVIEWS/110609998>); Jenn Wright quote online ([www.hollywoodjesus.com/movieDetail.cfm/i/72F2D0EC-EAF3-01DA-426E8F685A4F4135/ia/C1E7BC78-B62E-7821-DF9A7729DB9D9C3C/a/1](http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/movieDetail.cfm/i/72F2D0EC-EAF3-01DA-426E8F685A4F4135/ia/C1E7BC78-B62E-7821-DF9A7729DB9D9C3C/a/1))

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### Credits for *The Tree of Life*

#### Starring:

Brad Pitt (Mr. O'Brien)  
Sean Penn (Jack)  
Jessica Chastain (Mrs. O'Brien)  
Hunter McCracken (Young Jack)  
Tye Sheridan (Steve)  
Fiona Shaw (Grandmother)  
Will Wallace (Architect)  
Kelly Koonce (Father Haynes)  
Cole Cockburn (Harry Bates)

Director: Terrence Malick

Writer: Terrence Malick

Producers: Donald Rosenfeld, Paula Mae

Schwartz, Steve Schwartz, and others

Runtime: 138 minutes

Release: U.S.A., 2011

Rated: PG-13 for some thematic material

