

The Thin Red Line

Context/Production

Great changes in M's absence and success of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977): blockbusters, sequels, high concept products plus acquisition of production studios by multinational corps with consequent impact on individual filmmaking.

Fox ad campaign stressed return of auteur and significant aesthetic event Flanagan 128)
Production: shot in Australia (100 days) Solomon Islands (24 days) and U.S. (3); original cut was just under 6 hours (=1 million + feet); Sony dropped plans to produce, fearing cost overruns (\$52m—"moderate by contemporary standards" (Flanagan 129)), but Fox took over project. Malick fell out with producers Robert Michael Geisler and John Roberdeau (VF article)

Incredible list of actors who did screen tests or readings (Martin Sheen, Dermot Mulroney, Kevin Costner) or whose work was left on cutting room floor (Billy Bob Thornton, Bill Pullman, Lukas Haas, Viggo Mortensen, Mickey Rourke).

Cinematographer John Toll had won AA for *Dances with Wolves* (1990)

Spielberg's *SPR*: anti-war mythos of 1970s proves "inadequate against the revived myth of the global war as the Good War" (Streamas in Patterson 138). SS = "the anti-Malick (in terms of industriousness, public recognition and commercial achievement)" (Flanagan in Patterson 124); comparing opening scene of *SPR* with deserted beach in *TRL*; vs. intensity of *SPR*'s opening twenty minutes, *TRL* creates tension "simply by having nothing happen" (Doherty) // *Aguirre*; compare closing graveyard scenes

Remake of 1964 film, directed by Andrew Marton, which is much more plot driven //Herzog: creates anxiety through silence & stillness; compare silent Melanesian man with H's flutist/ "Like Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* [Gulf War doc], M's film owes more to poetry and transcendentalism than it does to combat-oriented photos or newsreel footage" (Curley and Wetla qtd in Hodgkins)

Reviews and Critical Response

"maudlin metaphysics" and "inexcusable descent into the sentimental" (Whalen)
"The Big Dead One" described as a "self-indulgent throwback to the '70s" (Taylor in *Salon*). "Malick wants us to react not to the story or the characters, but to his artistry." Platitudes, inadequacy of voiceovers ("like what Hemingway might have come up with if he write fortune cookies"—Taylor) attributable to thwarted desire for transcendence of men living in quiet desperation.

"no irony anywhere in M's metaphysical gas" (Whalen, LFQ)

Equivocal reviews with main reservations being: 1) historical inaccuracies, 2) lack of dramatic structure, 3) unresolved metaphysical musings, 4) misuse of star actors

Compared with 1970s films

Same “aestheticist detachment” and “cool distantiation” as earlier films (Morrison, rev, 38); same commitment to panoramic landscapes and exotic flora and fauna, natural light; transience of domestic shelter and continual displacement (Martin)
Style: slow dissolves (ceiling->sky//river->road in *Bad*), sunlight through trees
Desire for transcendence now extends to director as well as characters “to ask questions that penetrate to the heart of the Western mythos” (Mottram in Patterson 19)
Contrast to death wish; instead // *New World*: “open to redemption through the radiance of unselfish individual action” (Silberman in Patterson)
See McCann’s “three key elements” in B, DH: fetishizing nature, externalization of private emotions, meditation on conflict, violence and death in nature (in Patterson 77)

Genre: The War Film

TRL has “none of the post-adolescent bombast of FFCs *Apolcalypse Now* (1979), the cloying self-righteousness of OS’s *Platoon* (1986), or the gnawing, sentimental nationalism of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) (Critchley). VN felt in burning village, jungle vegetation, Tall vs. Staros

“That violence is unequivocally presented as evil, and, extraordinary for a so-called war film (especially one about World War II), there is not a single expression of patriotic sentiment in the film and there is no attempt whatsoever to provide a moral or historical justification or even explanation for the violence of war” (Bersani& Dutoit 129)

“M’s Guadacanal diary is more a meditation on nature than an evocation of war” (Doherty)

//Vietnam: “In ideology no less than topography, TRL evokes the Vietnam combat genre, where the worst enemy of the American soldier in the commanding officer, where combat is always chaos without meaning” (Doherty) vs. Hodgkins, who suggests First Gulf War vs. WWII, the Good War (Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation* also published in 1998)

Unlike typical post-WWII Hollywood combat film with melting plot platoon, TRL has undifferentiated GI’s, principal speakers, Witt and Bell, have similar southern accents little personal conflict among GI’s (Tall’s “I know you agree.”)—importance of making Staros Greek in this regard, nullifying ethnicity of Jew

Chion notes “we almost never see a troop of men together,” very little dialogue *exchanged* (often even intimate dialogue employs cutting), sounds of the group are muffled with the sole exception of the Melanesian community in song (29)

Influence of Persian Gulf War/Operation Desert Storm (ended April, 1991): unlike VN, a “good war” because directed vs. acknowledged tyrant

Adaptation

A curious example of inverting the standard formula for fidelity: remaining true to plot (e.g., Doll and stolen gun, xx shot in knee, swipe) but changing the spirit of JJ’s novel Virtually ignores the physical aspects, the male body and homoerotic elements of novel, except for opening images of Caviezel in paradise.

No native islanders in novel, Witt doesn’t die. JJ’s Witt is a bigoted eccentric, Welsh bordering on madness

Contrast JJ's inscription (which may be ironic) with anti-war sentiments of TRL
J. Cain shows how Witt based on JJ's Prewitt in *From Here to Eternity*. The film's opening three scenes are each missing from novel: Witt AWOL, Witt/Welsh in brig; Tall/Quintard on the bridge. Cain shows how these scenes have their sources in FHTE. "Witt embodies 'the very essence' of Prewitt, and his depiction by Malick portrays a reincarnated Prewitt in an intermediate stage of soldierly development."
Multiple voiceovers is less M's addition than his equivalent for the shifting narrative perspectives of JJ's novel. Witt often speaks Pruitt's words and Walsh speaks Warden's (FHTE)

Character

Again, characters are representative: Staros—Tall = duty; Bell—wife = love; Witt—Welsh = truth (Critchley) //Russian silent films: no central hero or protagonist
Again, deliberate physical resemblance between Caviezel and Ben Chaplin (Bell), "courting confusion between the characters" that culminates in final v.o. about "the workings of one mind, the features of the same face" (Morrison and Schur 28). Schaffer describes "endless modulations of a single face"—corresponding to closing monologue; difficulty of distinguishing voices, particularly in final scene on landing craft
Tall alone has "biographical density" (Bersani 135)
Witt="somewhat incoherent as a person" (Bersani 158); he "fits the death-bound pattern of M's male protagonists (Critchley), but he meets it with calmness

Voiceovers

Constitute M's addition to the novel, while plot and dialogue are from JJ; they appear to be a late addition, not in earlier drafts of the screenplay (Silberman in Patterson 162)
Not just multiple, but in present tense rather than past; not actual voice-over, however, but voice-off, or the 'mindscreen' that voice-over engenders" (Kline 141). //JJ's omniscient narration
Influence of WW: interior monologues asking questions (*What is the grass?*), journalistic observation of death, faith in unity of human experience, synthesizing ideal and observed world, voyaging thither
Crudeness, abstraction of internal monologues may not advance the study of philosophy at Harvard but seem appropriate to the condition and education of the soldiers, who are confronting life's unanswerable questions for the first time. "They claim a measure of their pathos from their forthright platitude" (Morrison, rev. in FQ)
Witt's concluding v.o. is from beyond life//Divine Comedy, Cant. Tales: "Even soaked in blood, the world, for those looking at it from within the glory, can be celebrated as beautiful and good" (Bersani 142)

Form

Structured by three dialogues between Witt and Welsh; prologue and long denouement; two battles for hill; paradise and paradise lost crocodile, return to village
Four elements again

Self-Reflexivity

//brief moments in JJ's novel, e.g. 237: "If this were a movie..." or 250: [Tella's death] had "no more reality to Welsh than a movie"

"a meditation not so much on war, as on film" (Ebert in Cain 3)

"Other world"= spiritual realm (Witt) or artistic imagination (Malick) (Silberman in Patterson, 169)

"spatial paradox" of spectator vs. safety of watching SPR

"The Unanswered Question"

Ives' music, composed in 1906, is heard at 1h47m20s during scene between Jap prisoner and soldier—phrase comes from RWE's "The Sphinx" but also cite "Brahma" (dead Jap's monologue). The "enemy" is hardly the opposite of his comrades//RWE's "Brahma" (see W's closing monologue)—"One big soul" (beginning)

Job's question, the problem of Evil. For Bersani and Dutoit, "a reflection on the presence of evil in the world"(128); alternatively, simply a natural instinct—to survive, to exceed normal bounds, to be accepted by comrades—rather than moral choice. An unanswered Question

Multiple rhetorical questions are "crucial to the film's sense, but they have very little intellectual weight" (Bersani 132). "The film's verbal questions are responded to visually. Or, more exactly, questions *about* the world are coupled with different ways of *looking at* the world" (143). Examples: 2nd dialogue W-W, followed by two shots of nature, 2 different worlds; "where's your spark now?" followed by soaring birds
All four films express a kind of separation anxiety, not just from paradise but from persons with whom one seemed to share a destiny.—e.g., Bell's wife's letter. "Many dialogues in M's films are in fact thus monologues" (Chion 60)—e.g., vicious exchange in foreign language between GI and Jap about death//Bell's wife's letter: The failure of Bell's love to hold his wife contrasts with Hanks' fulfilled hope of returning to his wife in SPR

TRL closes not on answers but prayer, benediction