A horrible state of war

David Walsh reviews The Thin Red Line

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The Thin Red Line, *written and directed by Terrence Malick, based on the novel by James Jones*

I hope a great many people will see Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* and be moved by it, as I was. I can think of few, if any, American films made in the past number of years as compassionate as this one.

The film, adapted from James Jones's 1962 novel, follows US forces attempting to seize control of the Japanese-occupied island of Guadalcanal in the south Pacific in 1942. The men of Charlie Company, an army rifle unit, land without encountering opposition, but they suffer heavy casualties when they attempt to scale and capture a strategically significant hill. A Japanese bunker built at the top of the slope gives their forces a commanding position; a daring raid destroys it. The American troops vanquish the Japanese in a battle, overrun their encampment and take a sizable number of prisoners. The company is rewarded with a week's rest. Upon their return to the battlefront another skirmish with the enemy leads to more death and sadness. The film ends with the company's departure from the island.

Malick conscientiously depicts the course and outcome of the military operations. But his film is principally focused on a handful of men and the ways in which they grapple with the moral problems posed by war.

Pvt. Witt (Jim Caviezel), a Southerner, is entranced by the natural beauty of the Solomon Islands and the life led by its Melanesian population. He has deserted his unit more than once to live on one or another of the islands. Pvt. Bell (Ben Chaplin) survives by idealizing his wife. In the midst of the horror he remembers or imagines this slim, pure figure. First Sgt. Edward Welsh (Sean Penn) is battle-hardened, but perhaps insufficiently. His dilemma is that he continues, despite everything, to feel sympathy for his fellow creatures. Captain James Staros (Elias Koteas) is in charge of the company. Determined to keep his men alive, he refuses at one point to launch a suicidal assault on the Japanese position. Lt. Col. Gordon Tall (Nick Nolte), Staros's superior, is a career officer. He views the fighting on Guadalcanal as his opportunity, after years of being passed over, to make a name for himself and win advancement.

The film's characters advance conflicting notions about Man and Nature, Man's Nature, Man *in* Nature. Attempting to justify his own harsh commands, Col. Tall argues that nature itself is "cruel" and merciless. Staros, you sense, views life as sacred and all men as God's children. For Bell everything is redeemed or apparently redeemed by human love and passion. In Melanesian society Witt sees what he takes to be the elementary harmony of humanity and nature. He wonders what gave rise to war and violence. Man is nothing, Welsh tells Witt, and any attempt to alter the present terrible state of things is like "running into a burning house where nobody can be saved."

Unhappily, because these men tend to speak and act as the embodiment of particular ideologies or spiritual principles, rather than as spontaneously acting human beings, a good deal of the dialogue and voice-over commentary has a stilted and somewhat contrived feel to it. Large issues are under discussion, but they too often remain undigested in the body of the film. "The director," as a critic once wrote about another filmmaker, "is always trying to say more than his technique can express." Moreover, Malick has a tendency to rely on clear images to make up for amorphous or undeveloped ideas.

The characters are not given equal weight or voice. The film begins and ends with Witt, and you assume that his view of things counts for something out of the ordinary. While he has seen "another world" on the islands, he is neither a deserter nor a pacifist. He expresses love for the men of his unit--"They're my people"--and volunteers for dangerous missions. To Witt, all men are one, possessing one face and one soul. Again and again he asks himself: how did humanity's essential goodness, which he experiences firsthand in "primitive" communities, give way to its present debased and degenerate condition within "civilized" society? "This great evil," he asks, "where does it come from? How did it steal into the world? What root did it grow from? Who's doing this? Who killing us? Robbing us of life and light? Mocking us with the sight of what we might have known?"

Sgt. Welsh perhaps offers a clue, in a line that is almost thrown away, when he angrily tells his captain that the war is about "property. The whole fucking thing's about property." The film's overall sensibility brings to mind the outlook of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) the great French philosopher asserted that property brought humanity's communal existence, with its primitive simplicity and nobility, to an end; inequality, slavery and misery had arisen. "The new-born state of society thus gave rise to a horrible state of war."

This is all very interesting and perhaps potentially profound, but if that's all there were to the film--these sorts of musings--it would fade relatively quickly from memory. It doesn't, because Malick came across a crueler and more difficult situation than he found in the circumstances of even the most interesting of his American characters.

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A brief digression: Malick is what's popularly called a "cult figure." An unhappy fate! According to Ephraim Katz's film encyclopedia, Malick was born in Ottawa, Illinois in November 1943. The son of an oil company executive, he was raised in Texas and Oklahoma. After graduating from Harvard and attending Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, he went to work as a journalist for *Newsweek*, *Life* and *The New Yorker* and also taught philosophy at MIT. Deciding upon a career in filmmaking, he enrolled in the American Film Institute's Center for Advanced Film Studies.

Malick worked on a number of screenplays before he got his first opportunity to direct a film, *Badlands* --about a young couple on a murder spree--in 1973. He made his second and, until *The Thin Red Line*, only other film in 1978, *Days of Heaven* --the story of a tragic love triangle set at the turn of the century. In Katz's words, "Discouraged by the poor box-office response to the latter film, the reclusive director withdrew from sight. In subsequent years he divided his time between Paris and Texas." The reputation of his films and his artistic abilities grew as the years went by and there was no public sign of the director.

In fact, I am not an ardent admirer of Malick's first two works. While they are attractive and made with obvious care, both films, it seems to me, suffer from a certain self-consciousness and coldness and a supercilious attitude toward their primarily working class characters. I always felt Malick's supposed sympathy for and understanding of his unfortunate protagonists was problematic, more posturing than genuinely felt or, at any rate, conveyed.

He has reemerged as a far more substantial artist, with one of the few anti-war films in the recent period that's worthy of the term. War, he shows, is madness and chaos and filth and death and noise and cruelty. "War doesn't ennoble men," a narrator says. "It makes them small, mean, ferocious; it poisons the soul." The spectator is reminded and *feels strongly* that war, even the most noble and just--and this was not--is destructive to all its participants.

I would make a further and greater claim for *The Thin Red Line*. The film shows what happens to the American soldiers, the figures we identify with, in the course of the fighting. Some suffer wounds or die; some who escape physically unharmed are driven to the brink of insanity or beyond. All this is powerful and legitimate. But then Malick shows us what only art or perhaps only the cinema has the power to let us see--the human face of the "enemy."

The Japanese are more or less invisible until the Americans overrun the machine-gun bunker; they are simply silhouettes against the sky for the most part. No faces, no features. Then we see a group of them, taken prisoner, huddled on the bunker floor--half-naked, shivering, terrified, mostly young. Some of them have been brutalized by the victors. What's more, the prisoners in many ways resemble their captors. Why are these people killing each other? The Japanese actors, whose names I don't know, are brilliant. No other US filmmaker in recent years that I can think of has showed such concern for the vanquished, the humiliated, the beaten.

And later, after the Japanese encampment in the jungle is taken, another and even more devastating scene: wailing, inconsolable and half-mad prisoners, others shell-shocked and benumbed. One kisses a dead comrade; another holds himself rigid, leaning forward into space, his body like a tombstone. And in the midst of this, an American soldier who extracts teeth from dead Japanese soldiers for souvenirs, tells an uncomprehending captive, "What are you to me? Nothing." Disturbing and unforgettable images.

In my view, the film hinges on these relatively brief scenes. After sitting through them, you feel that everything up to that point has merely been preparatory, that all the previous action has been rushing toward this moment, is only truly meaningful because of it. Did the director plan things this way? Or did the force and truth of these scenes emerge only when he saw the footage in the editing process? I have no way of knowing. Nick Nolte told an interviewer, in the context of discussions he had with Malick during the shooting, "The real question of the film is: Does compassion have any place in war?" In any event, the filmmaker correctly chose to organize the entire film around these painful sequences. They form its moral and emotional and dramatic center.

In replying to a letter from a reader who disagreed with our negative assessment of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* last year, we made the following point: "What does the phrase 'anti-war' imply? Not simply that you are opposed to what is done to you and your country's army, but that you are opposed to what is done to the enemy *and what you yourself do to the enemy*."

Malick has grasped this fact and dramatized it. The scenes of the Japanese prisoners are extraordinary; I don't know of any equivalents in the American cinema. Embodied here, I have to believe, are not simply deep feelings about the character of the Second World War, but also bitterness and shame over US conduct around the globe in the past several decades. This is not the sort of thing that is likely to win a director an Academy Award. None of the critics I've read, even those who admire the film, as much as mention these sequences.

Some critics who praised *Saving Private Ryan* now claim that *The Thin Red Line* complements Spielberg's work. Any serious analysis would suggest that Malick's film essentially refutes the earlier work. It throws into relief the banality and mendacity of Spielberg's film, made with an eye to currying favor with the establishment and, with any luck, obtaining an invitation to the White House.

Many things may go into a serious artistic work. And such a work has many possible points of departure. Critics and commentators, some more perceptively than others, wrack their brains over such things. But is there anyone cynical or irresponsible enough to believe, at this point in history, that profound compassion for the suffering of others is not one of the critical components and starting points of art?

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