
 FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Apprehending Beauty

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Michel Chion (2004) *The Thin Red Line*

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When Terrence Malick's second film, *Days of Heaven*, was released in 1978, Gilberto Perez remarked that it "drew mixed and largely uncomprehending reactions from the reviewers. Some resorted to the old rule – if you don't know what it means, praise the photography – while others advanced glib and unwarranted interpretations" (1979, 97). Pauline Kael, however, pronounced the film "an empty Christmas tree: you can hang all your dumb metaphors on it" (1982, 137). Both might as well have been writing twenty years later about Malick's third film, *The Thin Red Line*.

Anticipated with perhaps excessive excitement – mostly because of Malick's "reclusive" persona and its close proximity to Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* – it was greeted with fiercely divided opinion. Professional critics as well as popular reviewers attacked and defended the film with extraordinary vigour: it was a "weird distortion" and finally "an act of dishonour" (Cohen, 1999) towards its author as well as profoundly unhistorical (Jackson, 1999) for those who sought a conventional combat film backed by a conservative ideology and necessary patriotic zeal.

For those who approached the film more philosophically it appeared more interesting, even if Tom Whalen found it to be so much "metaphysical gas" (1999, 163). Simon Critchley, for example, examined the act of looking in the film and the "being" of

many of the film's objects of fascination (like the sprouting coconut that concludes the film) but cautioned that,

There are a number of hermeneutic banana skins that any study of Malick's art can slip up on, particularly when the critic is a professional philosopher... it is extremely tempting – almost overwhelmingly so – to read through his films to some philosophical pre-text or meta-text, to interpret the action of his characters in Heideggerian, Wittgensteinian or, indeed, Cavellian terms. To make matters worse, Malick's movies seem to make philosophical statements and present philosophical positions. Nonetheless, to read through the cinematic image to some identifiable philosophical master text would be a mistake, for it would be not to read at all. (Critchley, 2002)

Until recently, Malick scholarship consisted of sporadic journal publications – even reviews were scarce, however, *The Thin Red Line* initiated a flurry of activity as well as renewed attention of the earlier films. Since 2003 several books (and chapters in books) have been published on Malick, and this sustained academic interest can only be positive. Considering the books that have been written about Malick, and this film in particular, writing about either appears difficult. James Morrison and Thomas Schur's book, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003) is a stimulating but sometimes disjointed piece, while *The Cinema of Terrence Malick* (Patterson: 2003) as a collection of essays is similarly fragmented. It is with this balance between originality of thought and difficulty of expression in mind that I will assess Michel Chion's monograph on *The Thin Red Line*.

Early in the book, Chion rightly dismisses claims against the film's historical "inaccuracy":

What matters here is that the film deliberately gives us no assessment ... of the historical impact of the battle or of the importance later accorded to the events for the course of World War II. In watching the film, we, like the characters, are plunged into the events in the present; we do not know in advance what is important and what is not. (22 - 23)

The problem with film representations of historic battles has a lot to do with narrative. It is inevitable in the service of an "exciting" narrative building to a climax that certain battlefield moments will be elevated in importance at the expense of others, when a truer account would be more like a relentless onward surge, a series of skirmishes ultimately producing victory. So, *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949) is built around the ascent of Mt. Surabachi; however, like Okinawa, this battle was an exasperating, drawn-out campaign that went on far longer than American leaders anticipated. To film the constant flushing

out of caves and dug-in Japanese entrenchments does not make for exciting viewing (as one can see in the 1964 version of *The Thin Red Line* (Andrew Marton)). Similarly, the battle for Guadalcanal was composed of numerous important battles on land and sea over a period of months, from Edson's Ridge in September 1942, where Marines held off fierce Japanese attacks, to the later campaigns in January 1943, where the army – by this stage supplementing the Marine force – finally drove the Japanese into retreat. It is thus churlish to insist on historical "authenticity"; James Jones, as an Army man, did not elaborate on the efforts of the Marine Corps to hold the island for four crucial months before the Army's arrival, so why should a film be expected to fulfil this historic function? Not only does Malick not intend the film to "educate" the viewer about Guadalcanal, I believe he has taken a cue from Jones's novel – its "special note" – and pried the narrative loose from the conventional history of that campaign.

More importantly, Chion focuses on the humanity of Malick's film, the deep respect Malick accords all life (this approach to filmmaking is a rarity in contemporary American films found perhaps also in John Sayles). Yet Chion bravely argues (by countering the most persistent criticism of the film) that,

this film does not use images and sounds, history, the suffering of flesh and spirit, sensations and colours, cries and silences as a pretext to run away from words or to dilute their meaning in some great ambiguous mush. (72)

He concludes: "The beauty of things, woven together with the beauty of voices and words, becomes once more alive and human" (73).

I am much in agreement with Chion's succinct and elegant conclusion. However, there are strengths and weaknesses in the argument that finally arrives at this point. A strength of Chion's book is the way he contextualizes brief moments and apparently incidental shots, as he does when he links memory and experience:

This Pacific island to which the American soldiers have come to make war plunges them into a natural environment where they often find they are smaller than the plants, the grass, like the children they once were, like Witt as a boy looking at a big haystack during harvest, in a remembered image that we see of him as a child. (38)

The fluidity of the prose produces the most convincing illumination of this brief inserted shot I have read. Chion also challenges the prisons of interpretation where images must convey specific meanings: "in Malick's work...there is no parallelism, let alone any metaphorical use of animals (such as: man is crocodile)" (42). While there may be room for

debate here – consider the image of the struggling chick inserted amid the initial slaughter of young men – I think Chion is pushing in the right direction when he says:

Human, plant or animal, we all live in the same world. But that's all we can say. It is in the image of this world of superimposition and juxtaposition, this world of parataxis, of where ties of cause and effect and relationships between cohabitants are problematic, that Malick's cinema is built. (42)

Perhaps the central theme of the book is the relationship in Malick's films between solitude and "illusory fusion - the painful realisation that one has gone through the most gruelling ordeals with another person, 'together', and that now it's over, the destinies are cruelly separating" (32). Taking his cue from Malick's use of a Charles Ives musical motif in *The Thin Red Line*, Chion argues that "like Ives's music, Malick's film places diverse elements side by side, without seeking to answer the question posed by their juxtaposition" (12). This leads to the claim that Malick makes use of parataxis, or "the juxtaposition of different elements without the use of terms to create a temporal, causal or logical relationship between them" (13). This might strike some as a linguistic loophole that explains away the disjointedness of Malick's direction which (in)famously tends to take shape in the editing process rather than on the set. However, I like Chion's argument here because it fosters a creative understanding of Malick's complex use of voice, speech, sound, and image. Importantly, Chion recognizes that Malick's framing of individual characters is as important as post-production voiceovers: "Malick's shooting and editing constantly emphasise that every person is alone in their skin, their hopes, their fear and their position." (33)

Chion's discussion of the voiceovers is no surprise, and I found myself reconsidering an introductory comment in his book, *The Voice in Cinema*:

By what incomprehensible thoughtlessness can we, in considering what after all is called the talking picture, "forget" the voice? Because we confuse it with speech. From the speech act we usually retain only the signification it bears, forgetting the medium of the voice itself. (1991, 1)

As he points out in several places, our often unthinking understanding of the relationship between speech and voice is challenged in all of Malick's films. In a stunningly fluid scene on the island in *The Thin Red Line*, we hear Witt's voice and assume that it is still a voiceover until Malick bridges to Witt in conversation with Hoke, another AWOL soldier. Consider also how Malick problematizes our traditional empathy with narrators and

heroes in *Days of Heaven* by drowning out the conversation between Bill and the forge foreman (is Bill justified in taking offence and attacking the man?) and then passing narratorial control onto Linda, Bill's adolescent sister. Chion also alerts us to the one-sided nature of many conversations in Malick's films, like those between Bill and the Farmer in *Days of Heaven* (where Bill's burning material ambition and frustration become manifest) and Witt and Welsh in the brig in *The Thin Red Line*. In fact, "Many dialogues in Malick's films are in fact thus monologues, allowing the words to resonate in the silence of the 'interlocutor' – and echoing the intermittent interventions of the narrative voice of inner monologue" (60).

The most provocative consequence of this reading depends on who one "hears" in the film's final voiceover. It is a critical commonplace (which Chion follows) that the final voiceover in the film is spoken entirely by Witt. However this has always troubled me as much aurally as interpretatively: why do viewers automatically assume it is Witt, and what in the film supports such an assumption?

Chion weaves a fascinating thread into his argument that begins with the tentative claim that "perhaps the death of an individual is what allows the flame to move from one to another." (8) This stems from Welsh's private utterance over Witt's grave, "Where's your spark now?" and picks up on the quite common observation of the link between Witt and "sparks", both as words and images. Remarking on Malick's unconventional use of film stars in the film (such as George Clooney and John Travolta), Chion concludes a section by stating: "This is not a film of anti-heroes, it is a film in which the function of hero is a baton that is passed around." (21) Finally, in a discussion on "Trace, Death and Immortality", Chion again picks up this theme: "The immortality of which Witt spoke at the start of the film, and which he did not see when his mother died, is this anonymous transmission of the spark of life" (66).

The idea of silent transition – here, Witt's spark moving onto another soldier after his death – is a recurrent theme in Malick's films. In *Badlands*, Holly survives Kit and marries the son of her attorney while Kit is executed; and in *Days of Heaven*, Abby survives her betrayal of the Farmer and her association with Bill before she is last seen meeting a group of young soldiers leaving to fight in World War I. While it is normally the women who continue onward after the violent deaths of the male characters, the all-male environment of the combat film still bears a similarly strong sense of transition (It is worth noting that, even here, the significant female figure of Marty Bell leaves him for another man).

The penultimate scene is marked by two important spoken events: the presence of Pfc. Train and, more obviously, the final voiceover. Pfc. Train makes two appearances in the film, firstly below decks on the ship as C-for-Charlie wait to disembark, and secondly in this scene at the end. Chion, despite his generally good powers of observation, makes a substantial error in noting on two occasions in the book that this soldier is Gaff, who is actually played by the moderately famous John Cusack. (33, 60)

In his first appearance Train is nervous and scared, rambling on while Welsh tries to shave. Eventually, Welsh interrupts the panicky monologue, and asks his name. After responding, Train says, “the only things that are permanent, is dyin’ and the Lord. That’s it. That’s all I gotta worry about. This war ain’t goin’ to be the end of me, an’ it ain’t goin’ to be the end of you neither.”

In the landing craft at the end, just before we see Welsh standing among the men, a voice slowly emerges on the soundtrack. It is not a voiceover, and soon we see it is Pfc. Train once more, only this time the passive “interlocutor” is Dale. Train is more optimistic, though no less anxious, it seems: “I’m determined now, I’ve been through the thick and thin of it. I may be young but I’ll live plenty of life, and I’m ready to start living it good.” So far, the war hasn’t been the end of either Welsh or Train, even though, in a different context, we know that it is still early days.

A more affirming sense of optimism is possible if one reassesses the final voiceover, splitting it between Witt and Doll, as below:

WITT: Where is it that we were together? Who were you that I lived with, walked with? The brother, the friend.

DOLL: Darkness and light, strife and love, are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made. All things shining.

Viewed on the page as text, one does not get the sense of the scene’s rhythm, how the camera constantly moves, “finding” faces on the landing craft, and also the gaps between the phrases of the text so that the passage almost becomes as poem (as Chion notes).

It is significant that the camera in this scene constantly picks out Doll, first as he walks – one man in a long line of men – towards the ship, then walking on board the ship, and finally seen alone on an upper deck. He is the focus of a third of the scene’s duration, and the emphasis on him is pronounced towards the end of the scene when, after Train’s

monologue, the voiceover is the aural focus. Also, the tone of the monologue shifts, from Witt's past tense reminiscence, to Doll's present tense question, "Darkness and light, strife and love, are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face?"

In this context, I believe Malick has chosen Doll, in Chion's words, to take the baton of hero. Doll's transformation from cocky pistol-stealing private, through nervous grunt, to platoon hero is perhaps the film's most obvious example of character growth. Given Witt's constant association with sparks, both verbally and visually, I think Chion's reading is valid, and Malick is not so pessimistic to allow Witt's passing to affect no-one.

After the burning of the Japanese camp, we see little of Witt. In the trucks of men going to pick up liquor and the groups of men waiting for mail, Witt is absent, or is seen in isolation. Doll, however, takes a whole crate of liquor back to his unit which, to me, signals his growth from the scared soldier who interiorizes his first kill so vividly, to a soldier who has grown in confidence and earned respect from his comrades. Soon after this, it is Doll's voice we hear as two men scuffle on the ground: "War don't ennoble men. It turns 'em, into dogs."

In the shots of Doll aboard the ship, he is alone in his thoughts, firmly in a position to assume the mantle not only of reluctant platoon hero, but now also interior commentator. While Doll leaves the island a changed man, carrying something of the spark of Witt within him, Welsh, on the other hand, remains amongst the men, a little remorseful perhaps, but unchanged.

At this point, I disagree with Chion who remarks that "the surviving soldiers sail away...their particular war over." (33) This may be so in terms of the narrative, but it would be naïve not to believe that these men are now a valuable resource to any army – hardened soldiers who have fought and lived, who know what it is to kill.

The possibility that Doll's voice is present in the final voiceover is only that, a possibility. However, it demonstrates one of the difficulties in discussing the film in that arguments about the film's themes will inevitably involve, at some point, an interpretation of the voiceovers. In another section, Chion assigns a voiceover to Welsh that I am certain is not spoken in the voice of Sean Penn (33); here, I believe interpretative imagination has moved into aural error.

Like Leo Bersani and Ulysee Dutoit's chapter on *The Thin Red Line* in their book *Forms of Being* (2004) Chion's discussion of the voiceovers is provocative and fruitfully

extends the debate over Malick's use of the voiceover in general, even if, as I do, one disagrees with the authors' observations of the film.

A greater complaint I have with Chion's book is the sometimes puzzling construction of argumentative sequences. A lot of the time, Chion's argument is composed of stimulating thoughts that are strangely developed. For example, the short section, "Monologues are Islands of Words" is interesting as an idea, but the section begins as an attempt to discuss the claim that *The Thin Red Line* is an *Iliad* which "it has often been called" (50). I don't think it has been called an *Iliad* that often which is a weak departure point for an analysis that concludes by discussing the difficulty of translating the final monologue into French. The following section – "The Voice and the moving box" – is, however, far stronger discussing the frequent lack of alignment between what Malick shows us, and what we hear in the voiceover. Chion makes a marvellous connection between Tall's gloomy comment, "Shut up in a tomb. Can't lift the lid," and Welsh's "echo," "you're in a moving box" and contextualizes both within a broader claim that a core theme in the film is solitude and the inability of characters to communicate constructively.

Though it might be a problem of translation (and Chion notes his frustration at the difficulty in communicating what he means through this process), the logical flow of some passages is difficult to follow. Takes this paragraph, for example:

In *The Thin Red Line*, the sunlight permeates everything. It pours into the hollow of the brig where Witt is detained; it is also present in the light of the match that Witt burns in his cell, and in the candle before which Staros prays alone; it is the light of fire. Light in Malick's work often comes as a shock, an intrusion, a pursuit, breaking and entering, sometimes rape. (37)

In my thinking, sunlight and firelight are very different, yet here they are conflated into a broader inquiry into Malick's use of light. Witt's match-burning in the brig explicitly links to later scenes involving his "spark" and the spark he sees in Welsh; and this is very different, for example, to the shots of sunlight filtering through the trees.

Chion's three examples – Bell's recce of the Japanese position where sunlight exposes the grass, and two drawn from *Days of Heaven* (Bill's dropped glass and the Hopper-like exterior shots of the Farmer's house) – are linked by the statement: "the camera angles and movements in *The Thin Red Line* emphasise that the characters can be seen from any point in space. The world of the film is 360 degrees open." But what does this have to do with Witt and Staros's firelight moments?

These observations are more puzzlement than complaint. In his introduction Chion remarks:

In writing [some initial comments] I was gradually overcome by the embarrassing sense of having nothing more to say, of having already encompassed all the thoughts inspired in me by this sublime film, which I could happily sit and admire in childlike silence. (8)

It seems that this book is trapped between the delivery of a sustained argument (in a tight 87 pages) and the understandable desire to fly out in different directions with fascinating inquiries. *The Thin Red Line* tends to do that to a writer, and it is difficult to move forward without pulling in (or reaching out for) tantalizing references and parallel ideas. As an introductory text on the film, the book offers several interesting paths of investigation, but it perhaps exposes more issues than it discusses. For those familiar with Malick, it usefully extends a growing body of work, but provokes the sense, once again, that a more comprehensive text on this singular director is now needed.

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