Terrence Malick, **THE THIN RED LINE** (1998, 170 min.)

Directed by Terrence Malick
Based on the novel by James Jones
Screenplay by Terrence Malick
Produced by Robert Michael Geisler, Grant Hill, John Roberdeau
Original Music by Hans Zimmer
Cinematography by John Toll
Film Editing by Leslie Jones, Saar Klein and Billy Weber

Nick Nolte…Lt. Col. Gordon Tall
Jim Caviezel…Pvt. Witt
Sean Penn…1st Sgt. Edward Welsh
Elias Koteas…Capt. James 'Bugger' Staros
Ben Chaplin…Pvt. Bell
Dash Mihok…Pfc. Doll
John Cusak…Sgt. Storm
Woody Harrelson…Sgt. Keck
Miranda Otto…Marty Bell
Jared Leto…2nd Lt. Whyte
John Travolta…Brig. Gen. Quintard
George Clooney…Capt. Charles Bosche
Nic Stahl…Pfc - Beade
Thomas Jane…Pvt. Ash
John Savage…Sgt. McCron
Will Wallace…Pvt. Hoke
John Dee Smith…Pvt. Train
Kirk Acevedo…Pvt. Tella
Penelope Allen…Witt's Mother
Simon Billig…Lt. Col. Billig
Mark Boone Junior…Pvt. Peale
Norman Patrick Brown…Pvt. Henry
Arie Verveen…Pvt. Charlie Dale
Jarrod Dean…Cpl. Thorne


1984-1985 “E/R” (22 episodes), 1982 And They Are Off, and 1978 “Centennial”


gone through drastic changes while he walked the earth for twenty years, and the new corporate chiefs preferred market-friendly blockbusters to offbeat art pictures. With support gathered from Fox 2000 and some independent production companies, Malick started shooting in June 1997, wrapping up a hundred days and more than a million feet of film later, on time and on budget. The result is a masterpiece—a Malick masterpiece, telling a powerfully written, superbly acted story that casts new light on his characteristic themes of nature and culture, thought and language, humanity and inhumanity, paradise lost and transcendence found.

Malick’s legendary refusal to do interviews or comment on his work makes it hard to answer certain basic questions, such as why he wanted to film James Jones’s 1962 novel to begin with. Based on Jones’s own experiences, The Thin Red Line takes place on Guadalcanal, the strategically located Pacific island where Allied troops confronted Japanese forces by land, sea, and air between August 1942 and February 1943. This was a costly but pivotal campaign, marking the transition to offensive operations that brought victory for the Allies in the Pacific theater. Taking a grunt’s-eye view, the novel follows a company of infantrymen who arrive as reinforcements when the fighting is well under way. The story is long, dense, deterministic, and grim, combining realistic descriptions of combat with intimate accounts of soldiers’ thoughts and impressions. The first time I read it, I found it more cumbersome and conventional than Jones’s earlier and better war novel From Here to Eternity (1951), and although its psychology seems truer and more complex to me today, its major differences from Malick’s previous pictures—including its faraway setting, historical background, and large cast of characters—make it an unexpected choice for such a quintessentially poetic filmmaker.

It’s likely that a couple of key factors drew Malick to the novel. One was his fascination with ordinary people in extraordinary situations. Many critics have discussed Malick’s intellectual bent, his training in philosophy, his study of German thinker Martin Heidegger, his brief professorial career. What rarely get mentioned are more routine parts of his biography—playing high school football, working as a farmhand, writing for popular magazines like Life and Time—that reflect an interest in unremarkable folks. Almost every man in The Thin Red Line is an everyman, lost in the bewilderment, struggling to survive under conditions as baffling as they are horrific. Among the most important to the film are Lieutenant Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte), who hopes the fighting will get him a promotion; First Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn), a battle-weary man whose pragmatism borders on cynicism; and Private Witt (Jim Caviezel), whose perception of a transcendent spark in even the most hardened and afflicted people is at the narrative and philosophical center of the film. Malick’s sympathy goes out to some characters more than others, but his sensitive portrayals testify to his profound engagement with all of their lives.

David Sterritt: The Thin Red Line: This Side of Paradise (Criterion Notes)
The Thin Red Line, arguably the greatest war film ever made, ended two decades of silence from Terrence Malick, cinema’s wandering auteur. The silence wasn’t entirely self-imposed, since during this time he tried to launch a few productions—including a tale of nineteenth-century psychoanalysis and a Jerry Lee Lewis biopic—that didn’t reach the shooting stage. But mainly he appears to have bided his time, gathering ideas and inspirations while living in Paris and Los Angeles, then rejoining the industry for his most ambitious project to date—a World War II epic as poetic and philosophical as his previous pictures, Badlands (1973) and Days of Heaven (1978), and larger in scale than both of them combined.

By all accounts, it took long negotiations for a team of producers to get Malick back behind the camera. Hollywood had
Malick was also intrigued by the tremendous contrast between story and setting in the novel, where savage combat rips bodies and minds apart on a tropical island of stunning beauty. The book and film both contain hard-hitting battle sequences, especially during the company’s protracted effort to take a hill protected by a heavily armed Japanese bunker, but where Jones concentrates on naturalistic military and psychological detail, Malick gives full play to philosophical ideas as well. Opulent nature imagery is his most recognizable cinematic trademark, but crucially he finds human personalities and behavior no less “natural” than their surroundings—a fact that’s especially resonant when the environment is a jungle, where life and death, creation and destruction, are continuously and ubiquitously intertwined. At times, The Thin Red Line seems pessimistic, suggesting that forces of degeneration and regeneration are “not one power but two,” as Witt puts it, forever battling each other, with humanity caught in the crossfire. The film’s first image is of a crocodile slithering into concealment, signaling the danger and violence that dwell in nature whether or not “civilized” intruders add to the fray with murderous mechanisms of their own. Yet in the end, Malick puts forth the optimistic belief (with an almost gnostic tinge) that the cosmos is essentially harmonious, in its spiritual wholeness if not its material particularities.

“Darkness and light, strife and love,” a voice-over muses in the final scene, “are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face?” Malick’s answer is yes. The crocodile reappears only once, as a harmless captive of the soldiers, and while military violence is the narrative’s driving force, sunstruck images of grass, trees, magnificently colored birds, and idealized native Melanesians recur throughout the film as well. Neither darkness nor light can be said to win the day. Malick respects and reveres them both, regarding them less as categories of physics, biology, and art than as transcendent realities that abide within and beyond the world of appearances we inhabit. Malick agrees with Heidegger that humanity’s fundamental mistake is to use intellect and technology as means of controlling the world rather than dwelling organically with its mysteries, the most daunting of which is death. With this in mind, he weaves conflicting impulses toward nature—to harmonize with it and to prevail over it—into the very fabric of The Thin Red Line. His great creative passions—nuances of light, subtleties of camera movement, rapport between word and picture—all reflect his conviction that cinematic reality is reality, and that film, treated with due reverence and expertise, is able to absorb not just patterns of luminosity but also the transcendent essences of people, places, and things.

Malick’s devotion to cinematic sight and sound is equaled by his commitment to the aesthetics of language. The Thin Red Line is about words as much as it’s about anything; more precisely, it’s about the intimate interconnection between word and image, which Malick explores in truly audacious ways, especially in the scenes with voice-overs. The more I’ve watched The Thin Red Line, the more unsure I’ve become about how some of the voice-overs correspond with the people on the screen; so many characters have similar accents, speech patterns, and tones of voice that even a key passage like the “darkness and light” soliloquy is impossible to pin with certainty to a particular speaker. This isn’t because Malick wants to separate the characters from their words—just the opposite: he wants to underscore the fact that human beings are bathed in language at every moment, and that language may ultimately be the best, most lasting facet of human experience, able to glide and soar even when the bodies associated with it are dying and decaying in killing fields below. “Everyday language,” wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein, another modern philosopher Malick takes to heart, “is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it.” Taking this unity as a given, Malick explores not only the social functions of spoken dialogue but also the meditative functions of unspoken inner speech, often heightened and expanded by music that privileges emotional depth over linear, logical meaning.

Malick accomplishes this most movingly when words, music, and cinematography unfold in counterpoint, contrasting and converging in polyrhythmic waves. As the film approaches the two-hour mark, for instance, a relatively minor character named Private Dale (Arie Verveen) threatens a traumatized Japanese prisoner with brutal treatment. The captive, who doesn’t understand a thing Dale is saying, speaks a few soft phrases in Japanese, and in the background, Hans Zimmer’s
magisterial score quotes the interrogative trumpet line of “The Unanswered Question,” the 1906 tone poem that composer Charles Ives described as a “cosmic landscape” echoing with the unanswerable question of existence. Another superb example comes when Tall orders Captain Staros (Elias Koteas) to execute a frontal attack on the Japanese bunker and Staros refuses to obey, seeing the mission as suicidal. Their argument, conducted over portable field telephones, is filmed in a conventional back-and-forth pattern, with occasional cut-aways to other soldiers. Yet the sequence carries unconventional power, due partly to the performances—Nolte’s volcanic rage versus Koteas’s reasoning calm—but more to Malick’s superb orchestration of audiovisual details: the contrasting vocal timbres, the progressively tightening close-ups, the sunlight striking one side of Tall’s face, the bent-backed rigidity of his finger on the handset, and above all the brooding current of low strings on the soundtrack, which transforms what might have been a merely dramatic scene into something close to the musical form called melodeclamation, fusing voices and instruments into a single expressive force. Exactly when Staros begins declaring his refusal, moreover, the music relaxes its tension and moves to a higher, brighter register, again enhancing the moment’s emotional strength. This is total cinema of the highest order.

Riveting scenes like these are reminders that The Thin Red Line is not a philosophical tract. It’s an action picture, albeit an unorthodox one where the fighting doesn’t start until halfway through and major stars (John Travolta, George Clooney) turn up in tiny roles, thanks to Malick’s apparently intentional postproduction excising, not only to reduce the running time but also to undermine the hegemony of the Hollywood star system. The film’s philosophy comes mainly through the voice-overs, which spend more time asking questions than propounding answers. Malick even takes an amusing swipe at intellectual pretentiousness. On the battlefield, Tall boasts to another officer that he read Homer in Greek during his West Point years, but Malick has made it plain that Tall is a thoroughly shallow individual, pretty much clueless about anything more meaningful than nailing the promotion he has “eaten untold buckets of shit” to engineer. He can say that cos rhododaktylos means “rosy-fingered dawn,” but he’s as philosophical as one of those buckets.

Of the many gratifications offered by The Thin Red Line, one of the most enjoyable is teasing out the amazingly wide range of references—literary, poetic, musical, cinematic—that Malick weaves through it. Some allusions are hard to miss, such as the skulls in a ruined Melanesian village that recall avatars of Malick weaves through it. Some allusions are hard to miss, such as the skulls in a ruined Melanesian village that recall avatars of Mizoguchi’s classic Sansho the Bailiff (1954), another film juxtaposing savagery and redemption. If this connection seems like a stretch, recall that Malick loves Mizoguchi’s cinema so much that he wrote a stage version of Sansho the Bailiff, produced (without critical or commercial success) at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1993. Tracing all the connotations of this visual echo would take half an essay in itself, and The Thin Red Line bristles with such evocations, not to mention its multifaceted dialogue with Malick’s earlier films, its anticipation of his 2005 epic The New World, and its implied commentary on the war and historical-epic genres. For sheer cultural richness, it has few rivals in modern film.

Before closing, I want to return to the often-quoted “darkness and light” soliloquy in the final scene. “Oh my soul,” it concludes, “let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.” It’s a curious passage that doesn’t make literal sense. The soldier is asking to be in his soul, and for the soul to look out through his eyes, which is an impossible trick unless you do the kind of topological math that makes doughnuts and teacups identical; the statement that all things are shining seems equally amiss, considering the horrors we’ve been witnessing for almost three hours. But in this film’s context, the voice-over seems right and lucid. Purist, perfectionist, and obsessive planner though he is, Malick remains a radically intuitive artist, guided by personal visions as surely as The Thin Red Line is haunted and blessed by dematerialized voices of another kind. Neither words nor pictures can lay bare the mysteries of existence, he seems to say, but their combination in cinema can help us know the mysteries are there and sense the truths that underlie them.

Malick’s intuitive approach explains why The Thin Red Line starts with unanswerable questions—“What’s this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself?”—and ends with a verbal paradox, accompanied by free-flowing images that frame the narrative without dictating its meanings or restricting its ideas. The final image is the most enigmatic of all: a small clump of soil, or perhaps a broken coconut shell, in a pool of calm water, holding a stalk of new life that reaches toward the sky with its shoots and toward the earth in its shimmering reflection. Is it a symbol of all things shining? An intimation of immortality in a world inundated with death? A response to the film’s opening questions, saying that nature can harmonize with itself after all? It’s impossible to decide, or even to know what all
the choices are. And this is precisely what makes it one of the most intensely memorable film images I’ve ever seen.

Writing about Malick several years ago, I quoted Wittgenstein’s observation that “the world and life are one,” which could be Malick’s motto. More than any of his peers, he focuses less on the psychological self than on what Wittgenstein calls the “philosophical self,” defined as “the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world—not a part of it.” Among the many achievements of his towering war film, none is more enthralling than its transformation of Jones’s messy, muddled soldiers into carriers of the metaphysical “spark” that Witt sees in Welsh (to Welsh’s own amazement) and that Malick sees in all his characters, even those who look most godforsaken to ordinary eyes. The title of The Thin Red Line means a number of things. In one of the epigraphs of Jones’s novel, it’s a line of military heroes praised by Rudyard Kipling; in the other epigraph, it’s the porous border “between the sane and the mad” mentioned in an old midwestern saying. These meanings are pertinent to the film and book alike, but for Malick the phrase has deeper resonances. To him, the thin red line is ultimately the limit of the world. Film is the only medium that lets him glimpse it, and lets us glimpse it with him, as cinema enters our souls and we look out through its eyes, feeling Witt’s elusive spark within ourselves.

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