

1984. See also their *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 1984. For a different view, see Michael Bernard-Donals, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Between Phenomenology and Marxism*, 1994, and his 'Bakhtin and Phenomenology: A Reply to Gary Saul Morson', 1995.
20. See Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, 1990. Hereafter AA.
 21. Caryl Emerson, 1988, p. 514.
 22. Emerson, 1988, p. 517. I am aware that this characterisation of Bakhtinian theory is contentious, since his valorisation of the linguistic 'struggle' carried on in dialogue is central to many critical theorists' readings of his thought. Yet the 'struggle' he envisions still involves mutual participation and inter-illumination. For discussions of Bakhtin's thought as less discordant than it appears, see Andrew Gibson, 1996, pp. 151–6, and Chapter Four of my unpublished PhD thesis, *Wittgenstein and the Theory of Narrative*, University of London, 2000.
 23. Quoted in Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (eds), 1989, p. 155 Michael Bernard-Donals even argues that for Bakhtin, such a state of fusion is impossible. See Bernard-Donals, 1994, p. 30.
 24. Bernard-Donals, 1994, p. 25.
 25. *DA*, p. 150. 'Whether a film by Švankmajer contains black farce, blasphemy or tragedy, the erotic meaning is always shown in its negative aspect ... The destructive obsession which permeates all Švankmajer's films is ... the destruction of the object of love and, at the same time, self-destruction as a defining, dominant feature of the erotic relationship. In 'Dialogue Passionate' the couple ... go through the motions of love in which passion devours and penetrates, but also aggressively devours the loved creature.' *DA*, p. 147.
 26. Švankmajer 'creates a kind of unity between the world and ideas ... in the abstract form of the parable ... in the third episode of the film' *DA*, p. 122.
 27. Roger Cardinal, 'Thinking through things: the presence of objects in the early films of Jan Švankmajer' in *DA*, pp. 89–90.
 28. Wittgenstein, 1953.
 29. Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 83, p. 74.
 30. Wittgenstein, 1988, §430.
 31. Wittgenstein 1953, §345.
 32. 'Interview with Jan Švankmajer', in *DA*, p. 100. For Švankmajer's fascinating reflections on his clashes with authority and censorship, see *DA*, pp. 115–6.
 33. See Cardinal, 1995, p. 91.

Calm: On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*¹

Simon Critchley

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn.
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,
Imposing his separation,
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn,
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
The clouds go, nevertheless,
In their direction.

Wallace Stevens, 'The Death of a Soldier'

Wittgenstein asks a question, which sounds like the first line of a joke: How does one philosopher address another? To which the unfunny and perplexing riposte is, 'Take your time'.² Terrence Malick is evidently someone who takes his time. Since his first movie, *Badlands*, was premiered at the New York Film Festival in 1973, he has directed just two more: *Days of Heaven*, in 1979, and then nearly a 20 year gap until the long-awaited 1998 movie, *The Thin Red Line*, which is the topic of this essay.

It is a war film. It deals with the events surrounding the battle for Guadalcanal in November 1942, as the US Army fought its bloody way north across the islands of the South Pacific against ferocious Japanese resistance. But it is a war film in the same way that Homer's *Iliad* is a

war poem. The viewer seeking verisimilitude and documentation of historical fact will be disappointed. Rather, Malick's movie is a story of what we might call 'heroic fact': of death, of fate, of pointed and pointless sacrifice. Finally, it is a tale of love, both erotic love and, more importantly, the love of compassion whose cradle is military combat and whose greatest fear is dishonour. In one night-time scene, we see Captain Starros in close-up praying, 'Let me not betray my men'.

The ambition of *The Thin Red Line* is unapologetically epic, the scale is not historical but mythical, and the language is lyrical, even at times metaphysical. At one point in the film, Colonel Tall, the commanding officer of the campaign, cites a Homeric epithet about 'rosy-fingered dawn', and confesses to the Greek-American Starros that he read the *Iliad* in Greek whilst a student at West Point military academy – Starros himself speaks Greek on two occasions. Like the *Iliad*, Malick deals with the huge human themes by focussing not on a whole war, and not even with an overview of a whole battle, but on the lives of a group of individuals – C-for-Charlie company – in a specific aspect of a battle over the period of a couple of weeks.

To non-Americans – and perhaps to many contemporary Americans as well – the significance of Guadalcanal might not be familiar. It was the key battle in the war against Japan, in a campaign that led from the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 to American victory and post-war imperial hegemony. If we cast the Japanese in the role of the Trojans, and Guadalcanal in the place of Troy, then *The Thin Red Line* might be said to recount the pre-history of American empire in the same way as Homer recites the pre-history of Hellenic supremacy. It might be viewed as a founding myth, and like all such myths, from Homer to Virgil to Milton, it shows both the necessity for an enemy in the act of founding and the often uncanny intimacy with that enemy. Some of the most haunting images of the film are those in which members of Charlie company sit face-to-face with captured Japanese soldiers surrounded by corpses, mud, and the dehumanising detritus of battle.

Malick based his screenplay on James Jones' 500 page, 1963 novel, *The Thin Red Line*.³ Jones served as an infantryman in the US Army in the South Pacific, and *The Thin Red Line*, though fictional, is extensively based on Jones' wartime experiences. Jones was following the formula he established in his first book, the 900 page, 1952 raw blockbuster, *From Here to Eternity*, which deals with events surrounding the bombing of Pearl Harbor.⁴ A highly expurgated version of *From Here to Eternity*, starring Burt Lancaster, Deborah Kerr, Montgomery Clift and

Frank Sinatra, won the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture in 1953. Malick's movie won just one Oscar, to Hans Zimmer, for best original score.

A curious fact to note about Malick's *The Thin Red Line* is that it is a remake. Jones' book was turned into a movie directed by Andrew Marton and starring Keir Dullea and Jack Warden in 1964. This is a low budget, technically clumsy, averagely acted, and indeed slightly saucy movie, where the jungles of the South Pacific have been replanted in Spain, where the picture was shot. But it is a good honest picture, and there are many analogues with Malick's version, particularly the dialogues between Colonel Tall and Captain Stein.

The narrative focus of the 1964 picture is on Private Doll who is an independently-minded existentialist rebel, closer to a young Brando than Albert Camus, who discovers himself in the heat of battle through killing 'Japs'. The guiding theme is the insanity of war, the thin red line between the sane and the mad, and we are offered a series of more or less trite reflections on the meaninglessness of war. Yet, in this respect, the 1964 film is much more faithful to James Jones's 1963 novel than Malick's treatment, with its more metaphysical intimations. In the 1964 movie, the existential hero finds himself through the act of killing. War is radical meaninglessness, but it is that in relation to which meaning can be given to an individual life. Doll eventually crosses the thin red line and goes crazy, killing everyone in sight, including his own comrades.

The novel is a piece of tough-minded and earnest Americana, somewhere between fiction and reportage, that at times brilliantly evokes the exhausting and dehumanising pointlessness of war. The book's great virtue is its evocation of camaraderie, the physical and emotional intensity of the relations between the men in C-for-Charlie company. Some of the characters are finely and fully drawn, in particular Fife, Doll and Bell, but I don't think it is too severe to say that James Jones is not James Joyce. Yet, in this regard, the novel serves Malick's purposes extremely well because it provides him with the raw narrative prime matter from which to form his screenplay. For example, the central protagonist of Malick's version, Witt, brilliantly played by Jim Caviezel, is a more marginal figure in Jones' novel. He drifts repeatedly in and out of the action, having been transferred from Charlie company to Cannon company, which is a collection of brigands and reprobates, but he is eventually readmitted to Charlie company because of his exceptional valour in battle. He is depicted as a stubborn, single-minded, half-educated troublemaker from Breathitt County, Kentucky,

motivated by racism, a powerful devotion to his comrades, and an obscure ideal of honour. Although there is an essential solitude to Witt's character that must have appealed to Malick, the latter transforms him into a much more angelic, self-questioning, philosophical figure. Indeed, the culminating action of Malick's film is Witt's death, which does not even occur in the novel, where he is shown at the end of the book finally reconciled with Fife, his former buddy. Fife is the central driving character of Jones' novel, together with Doll, Bell and Welsh. I have been informed that Malick shot about seven hours of film, but had to cut it to three hours to meet his contract. Therefore, the whole story of Fife – and doubtless much else – was cut out. Other of Malick's characters are inventions, like Captain Starros, the Greek who takes the place of the Jewish Captain Stein. And, interestingly, there are themes in the novel that Malick does not take up, such as the homosexual relations between comrades, in particular Doll's emerging acknowledgement of his gay sexuality.

It would appear that Malick has a very free relation to his material. But appearances can be deceptive. For Jones, there was a clear thematic and historical continuity between *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line* and Malick respects that continuity by integrating passages and characters from the former book into his screenplay. For example, the character of Colonel Tall is lifted from the earlier novel and, more importantly, Prewitt in *From Here To Eternity* becomes fused with Witt, becoming literally pre-Witt. As Jimmie E. Cain has shown in an invaluable article, Prewitt's speculations about his mother's death and the question of immortality are spoken by Witt in the important opening scenes of *The Thin Red Line*. After having repeatedly consulted Gloria Jones, the late novelist's wife, about the slightest changes from novel to screenplay, she apparently remarked, 'Terry, you have my husband's voice, you're writing in his musical key; now what you must do is improvise. Play riffs on this'.⁵

Malick crafts the matter of Jones' work into a lyrical, economical and highly wrought screenplay. Whilst there are many memorable passages of dialogue, and some extraordinarily photographed extended action sequences, the core of the film is carried by Malick's favourite cinematic technique, the voiceover. This is worth considering in some detail, for, as Michael Filippidis has argued, the voiceover provides the entry point for all three of Malick's films.⁶ In *Badlands*, the voiceovers are provided by Holly (Sissy Spacek), and in *Days of Heaven* by the child Linda (Linda Manz). The technique of the voiceover allows the character to assume a distance from the

cinematic action and a complicity with the audience, an intimate distance that is meditative, ruminative, at times speculative. It is like watching a movie with someone whispering into your ear.

If the technique of the voiceover is common to all three films, then what changes in *The Thin Red Line*, is the subject of the narration. *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* are narrated from a female perspective and it is through the eyes of two young, poorly-educated women that we are invited to view the world. In *The Thin Red Line*, the voiceovers are male and plural. The only female characters are the wife of Bell who appears in dream sequences and whose only words are 'Come out. Come out where I am'; the young Melanesian mother that Witt meets at the beginning of the film; and the recollected scene of Witt's mother's death-bed. Although it is usually possible to identify the speaker of the voiceover, their voices sometimes seem to blend into one another, particularly during the closing scenes of the film when the soldiers are leaving Guadalcanal on board a landing craft. As the camera roams from face to face, almost drunkenly, the voices become one voice, one soul, 'as if all men got one big soul' – but we will come back to this.

The Thin Red Line is words with music. The powerful effect of the voiceovers cannot be distinguished from that of the music which accompanies them. The score, which bears sustained listening on its own account, was composed by Hans Zimmer, who collaborated extensively with Malick. The latter's use of music in his movies is at times breathtaking, and the structure of his films bears a close relation to musical composition, where leitmotifs function as both punctuation and recapitulation of the action – a technique Malick employed to great effect in *Days of Heaven*. In all three of his movies, there is a persistent presence of natural sounds, particularly flowing water and bird-song. The sound of the breeze in the vast fields of ripening wheat in *Days of Heaven* finds a visual echo in what was the most powerful memory I had from my first viewing of *The Thin Red Line*: the sound of the wind and soldiers' bodies moving through the Kunai grass as Charlie company ascend the hill towards the enemy position. Nature appears as an impassive and constant presence that frames human conflict.

Three hermeneutic banana skins

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. Before turning more directly to the film, let me take my time to discuss three of them.

First, there is what we might call the paradox of privacy. Malick is clearly a very private person who shuns publicity. This is obviously no easy matter in the movie business, and in this regard Malick invites comparison with Kubrick who, by contrast, appears a paragon of productivity. Of course, the relative paucity of biographical data on Malick simply feeds a curiosity of the most trivial and quotidian kind. I must confess to this curiosity myself, but I do not think it should be sated. There should be no speculation, then, on 'the enigmatic Mr Malick', or whatever.

But if one restricts oneself to the biographical information that I have been able to find out, then a second banana skin appears in one's path, namely the intriguing issue of Malick and philosophy. He studied philosophy at Harvard University between 1961 and 1965, graduating with Phi Beta Kappa honours. He worked closely with Stanley Cavell, who supervised Malick's undergraduate honours thesis. Against the deeply-ingrained prejudices about Continental thought that prevailed at that time, Malick courageously attempted to show how Heidegger's thoughts about (and against) epistemology in *Being and Time* could be seen in relation to the analysis of perception in Russell, Moore and, at Harvard, C.I. Lewis. Malick then went, as a Rhodes scholar, to Magdalen College, Oxford, to study for the B.Phil in philosophy. He left Oxford because he wanted to write a D.Phil thesis on the concept of world in Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and was told by Gilbert Ryle that he should try and write on something more 'philosophical'. He then worked as a philosophy teacher at MIT, teaching Hubert Dreyfus's course on Heidegger when he was away on study leave in France, and wrote journalism for *The New Yorker* and *Life* magazine. In 1969, he published his bilingual edition of Heidegger's *Vom Wesen des Grundes* as *The Essence of Reasons*.⁷ Also in 1969 he was accepted into the inaugural class of the Center for Advanced Film Studies at the American Film Institute, in Los Angeles, and his career in cinema began to take shape.

Clearly, then, Malick's is a highly sophisticated, philosophically trained intellect. Yet the young philosopher decided not to pursue an academic career, but to pass from philosophy to film, for reasons that remain obscure. Given these facts, 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.

So, what is the professional philosopher to do when faced with Malick's films? This leads me to a third hermeneutic banana skin. To read from cinematic language to some philosophical meta-language is both to miss what is specific to the medium of film and usually to engage in some sort of cod-philosophy deliberately designed to intimidate the uninitiated. I think this move has to be avoided on philosophical grounds, indeed the very best Heideggerian grounds. Any philosophical reading of film has to be a reading *of* film, of what Heidegger would call *der Sache selbst*, the thing itself. A philosophical reading of film should not be concerned with ideas about the thing, but with the thing itself, the cinematic *Sache*. It seems to me that a consideration of Malick's art demands that we take seriously the idea that film is less an illustration of philosophical ideas and theories – let's call that a *philoso-fugal* reading – and more a form of philosophising, of reflection, reasoning and argument.⁸

Loyalty, love, and truth

Let me now turn to the film itself. The narrative of *The Thin Red Line* is organised around three relationships, each composed of a conflict between two characters. The first relationship is that between Colonel Tall, played by Nick Nolte, and Captain Starros, played by Elias Koteas. At the core of this relationship is the question of loyalty, a conflict between loyalty to the commands of one's superiors and loyalty to the men under one's command. This relationship comes to a crisis when Starros refuses a direct order from Tall to lead an attack on a machine-gun position of the Japanese. Starros says that 'I've lived with these men for two and a half years, and I will not order them to their deaths' – for the carnage that the Japanese are causing from their superior hill-top vantage point and the scenes of slaughter are truly awful. Suppressing his fury, Tall goes up the line to join Charlie company and skilfully organises a flanking assault on the Japanese position. After the successful assault, he gives Starros a humiliating lecture about the necessity of allowing one's men to die in battle. He decides that Starros is not tough-minded enough to lead his men and, after recommending him for the silver star and the purple heart, immediately relieves him of his commission and orders him back to a desk job in Washington D.C.

Loyalty to the men under one's command must be subservient to the pragmatics of the battlefield.

The second relationship, based on love, is that between Private Bell (Ben Chaplin), and his wife Marty (Miranda Otto), and is dealt with rather abstractly by Malick. It is much more central to the 1964 version of the film, where it is transposed into the relationship between Private Doll and one 'Judy'. In Jones's novel, Bell is a former army officer who had been a First Lieutenant in the Philippines. He and his wife had an extraordinarily close, intense relationship ('We were always very sexual together', he confesses to Fife), and after spending four months separated from his wife in the jungle, he decided that he'd had enough and resigned his commission. As retribution, the US Army said that they would make sure he was drafted, and, moreover, drafted into the infantry as a private. All that we see of the relationship in the film, however, are a series of dream images of Bell with Marty, what Jones calls 'weird transcendental images of Marty's presence'. Then, after the battle, we hear Bell reading a letter from his wife saying that she has left him for an Air Force captain.

After the failures of loyalty and love, the theme of truth is treated in the third relationship, and this is what I would like to concentrate on. The characters here are Sergeant Welsh, played with consummate craft by Sean Penn, and Private Witt. The question at issue here is metaphysical truth; or, more precisely, whether there is such a thing as metaphysical truth. Baldly stated: is this the only world, or is there another world? The conflict is established in the first dialogue between the two soldiers, after Witt has been incarcerated for going AWOL in a Melanesian village, in the scenes of somewhat cloying communal harmony that open the film. Welsh says, 'in this world, a man himself is nothing...and there ain't no world but this one'. To which Witt replies, 'You're wrong there, I seen another world. Sometimes I think it's just my imagination'. And Welsh completes the thought: 'Well, you're seeing something I never will'.

Welsh is a sort of physicalist egoist who is contemptuous of everything. Jones writes,

Everything amused Welsh...Politics amused him, religion amused him, particularly ideals and integrity amused him; but most of all human virtue amused him. He did not believe in it and did not believe in any of those other words. (p. 24)

Behind this complete moral nihilism, the only thing in which Welsh believes is property. He refuses to let Starros commend him for a silver

star after an act of extraordinary valour in which he dodged hails of bullets to give morphine to a buddy dying on the battlefield, and quips, 'Property, the whole fucking thing's about property'. War is fought for property, one nation against another nation. The war is taking place in service of a lie, the lie of property. You either believe the lie or you die, like Witt. Welsh says – and it is a sentiment emphasised in the book and both versions of the film – 'Everything is a lie. Only one thing a man can do, find something that's his, make an island for himself'. It is only by believing that, and shutting his eyes to the bloody lie of war, that he can survive. Welsh's physicalism is summarised in the phrase that in many ways guides the 1964 version of the film and which appears briefly in Malick: 'It's only meat'. The human being is meat and only this belief both exposes the lie and allows one to survive – and Welsh survives.

Facing Welsh's nihilistic physicalism is what we might call Witt's Emersonian metaphysical panpsychism, caught in the question, 'Maybe all men got one big soul, that everybody's a part of – all faces are the same man, one big self'. Witt is the questioner, the contemplator, the mystic, perhaps even the holy fool. Much of what he says is in the form of questions – the very piety of thinking for Heidegger – and not the assertions propounded by Welsh. Unflinchingly brave in combat, with absolutely no thought of his own safety and prepared to sacrifice himself for his comrades, Witt views all things and persons with an impassive constancy, and sees beauty and goodness in all things. Where Welsh sees only the pain caused by human selfishness, Witt looks at the same scenes and feels the glory. He is like a redemptive angel looking into the souls of soldiers and seizing hold of their spark. It is this metaphysical commitment which fuels both Witt's selfless courage in combat and his compassion for the enemy. In one of the most moving scenes of the film, he looks into the face of a dead Japanese soldier, half-buried in the dirt – which speaks to him with a prophecy of his own fate – 'Are you loved by all? Know that I was. Do you imagine that your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness, truth?' In their final dialogue, Witt says that he still sees a spark in Sergeant Welsh. The truth is, I think, that Welsh is half in love with Witt, and behind his nihilism there is a grudging but total respect for Witt's commitment. Welsh cannot believe what Witt believes, he cannot behold the glory. And yet, he is also unable to feel nothing, to feel numb to the suffering that surrounds him. As a consequence, he is in profound pain. In tears, at the foot of Witt's grave, Welsh asks, 'Where's your spark now?', which might as well be a question to himself.

As in the two other relationships, there seems to be a clear winner and loser. As Welsh predicts in their second dialogue, the reward for Witt's metaphysical commitment will be death. Loyalty to one's men leads to dismissal from one's position, loyalty in love leads to betrayal, and loyalty to a truth greater than oneself leads to death. Yet, Malick is too intelligent to make didactic art. Truth consists in the conflict, or series of conflicts, between positions; and in watching those conflicts unravel, we are instructed, deepened. This conflict is particularly clear in the depiction of war itself. For this is not simply an anti-war film and has none of the post-adolescent bombast of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the cloying self-righteousness of Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), or the gnawing, sentimental nationalism of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). One of the voiceovers states, 'War don't ennoble men. It turns them into dogs. Poisons the soul.' But this view has to be balanced with a central message of the film: namely, that there is a total risk of the self in battle, an utter emptying of the self, that does not produce egoism, but rather a powerful bond of compassionate love for one's comrades and even for one's enemy. The inhumanity of war lets one see through the fictions of a people, a tribe or a nation towards a common humanity. The imponderable question is why it should require such suffering to bring us to this recognition.

Immortality

I would like to stay a little longer with the character of Witt and consider in detail one scene from the movie, namely the instant of his death. Witt, like all the male protagonists from Malick's previous movies, goes to his death with a sense of acceptance, willingness even. In *Badlands*, Kit (Martin Sheen), desires nothing more than the glorious notoriety of death and we assume at the end of the picture that he is going to be electrocuted. In *Days of Heaven*, the Farmer (Sam Shepherd) is told by his doctor that he is going to die, and it is this overheard conversation that prompts Bill (Richard Gere), into planning the deception of a marriage with his partner, Abby (Brooke Adams). After Gere stabs Shepherd to death in a smouldering wheat field, one has the sense that this is exactly what the Farmer desired. Similarly, when Bill is gunned down at the end of *Days of Heaven* – in an amazing shot photographed from underwater as his face hits the river – one has a powerful intimation of an ineluctable fate working itself out. In short, Malick's male protagonists seem to foresee their appointment with death and endeavour to make sure they arrive on

time. Defined by a fatalistic presentiment of their demise, they are all somehow in love with death. Yet, such foreknowledge does not provoke fear and trembling; on the contrary, it brings, I will suggest, a kind of *calm*.

There is an utter recklessness to Witt and he repeatedly puts himself in situations of extreme danger. He is amongst the first to volunteer for the small unit that makes the highly dangerous flanking move to destroy the Japanese machine gun position, and the action that leads to his eventual death at the end of the film is very much of his own making. So, to this extent, Witt fits the death-bound pattern of Malick's male protagonists. Yet, what is distinctive about the character of Witt is that at the core of his sense of mortality lies the metaphysical question of immortality. This is established in the opening scenes of the movie in the Melanesian village, when he is shown talking to an unnamed comrade who has also gone AWOL. Against the recollected image of his mother's death-bed, he says,

I remember my mother when she was dying, all shrunken and grey. I asked if she was afraid. She just shook her head. I was afraid to touch the death that I seen in her. I couldn't find anything beautiful or uplifting about her going back to God. I heard people talk about immortality, but I ain't never seen it.

The point here is that Witt is afraid of the death that descends over his mother, he can't touch it, find any comfort in it, or believe that it is the passage to her immortal home in bliss. Witt is then profiled standing on the beach, and he continues, less sceptically, and this time in a voiceover,

I wondered how it'd be when I died. What it'd be like to know that this breath now was the last one you was ever gonna draw. I just hope I can meet it the same way she did, with the same...calm. Because that's where it's hidden, the immortality that I hadn't seen.

It is this pause between 'same' and 'calm' that I want to focus on, this breathing space for a last breath. For I think this calm is the key to the film and, more widely, to Malick's art. The metaphysical issue of the reality or otherwise of immortality obviously cannot be settled and that is not the point. The thought here is that the only immortality imaginable is found in a calm that can descend at the moment of death. The eternal life can only be imagined as inhabiting the instant

of one's death, of knowing that this is the last breath that you are going to draw and not being afraid.⁹

With this in mind, let's look at the instant of Witt's death. Charlie Company are making their way, very precariously, up a river, and the whole scene, as elsewhere in Malick, is saturated with the sound of flowing river water. Phone lines back to HQ have been cut, enemy artillery fire is falling all around them and is getting steadily closer. The company is under the command of the peculiarly incompetent Lieutenant Band, who is leading them into an extremely exposed position where they will be sitting ducks for an enemy attack. Rather than retreating, as he should have done, Bard hurriedly decides to send a small scouting party up the river to judge the proximity of the enemy. He chooses the terrified Fife and the adolescent Coombs, and then Witt quickly volunteers himself. After progressing a little way up the river, they are seen by the enemy and Coombs is shot, but not fatally wounded. Witt sends Fife back to the company and the wounded Coombs floats back downstream. In an act of complete selflessness, Witt allows himself to be used as a decoy and leads off a squad of Japanese soldiers into the jungle. Witt then suddenly finds himself in a small clearing surrounded on all sides by some twenty Japanese troops. Breathless and motionless, he stands still whilst the Japanese squad leader screams at him, presumably demanding that he defend himself. Witt remains stock still, recovers his breath and then realises that he is going to die. The scene seems agonisingly long, the music slowly builds and there is a slow zoom into Witt's face. He is...calm. Then the camera slowly zooms out and there is a brief cutting shot of him half-heartedly raising his gun as he is gunned down. Malick then cuts to images of nature, of trees, water and birds.

What is one to make of this? Obvious philosophical parallels can be drawn here. For example, Heidegger's notion of *Angst* or anxiety is experienced with the presentiment of my mortality, what he calls *being-towards-death*. In one famous passage from the 1929 lecture, 'What is Metaphysics?', a text that Malick surely knows as it is directly contemporary with *The Essence of Reasons*, Heidegger is anxious to distinguish *Angst* from all sorts of fear and trembling. He says that the experience of *Angst* is a kind of *Ruhe*, peace or calm.¹⁰ Similarly, in Blanchot's tantalisingly brief memoir, *L'instant de ma mort*, the seemingly autobiographical protagonist is described at the point of being executed by German soldiers, a fate from which he eventually escapes. He describes the feeling as 'un sentiment de légèreté extraordinaire, une sorte de

béatitude'.¹¹ One also thinks of Wittgenstein's remark from the *Tractatus*, 'the eternal life belongs to those who live in the present'.¹² One could go on amassing examples. To interpret Malick's treatment of death in line with such thoughts is extremely tempting, but it would be to slip up on one or more of those hermeneutic banana skins discussed above. It would be to offer ideas about the thing rather than *der Sache Selbst*.

At the core of *The Thin Red Line*, then, is this experience of calm in the face of death, of a kind of peace at the moment of one's extinction that is the only place one may speak of immortality. This experience of calm frames the film and paradoxically provides the context for the bloody and cruel action of war. In particular, it frames the character of Welsh, who cares for Witt and his 'beautiful light' much more than he can admit, but persists to the end of the film in his belief that everything is a lie. His final words are, 'You're in a box, a moving box. They want you dead or in their lie'.

All things shining – the place of nature in Malick

Why do I claim that calm is the key to Malick's art? To try and tease this out, I would like to turn to the theme of nature, whose massive presence is the constant backdrop to Malick's movies. If calm in the face of mortality is the frame for the human drama of *The Thin Red Line*, then nature is the frame for this frame, a power that at times completely overshadows the human drama.

The Thin Red Line opens with the image of a huge crocodile slowly submerging into a weed-covered pond – the crocodile who makes a brief return appearance towards the end of the film, when he is shown captured by some men from Charlie company, who prod it abstractedly with a stick. Against images of jungle trees densely wrapped in suffocating vines, we hear the first words of the movie, spoken by an unidentified voice,

What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself, the land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two.

Obviously, the war in the heart of nature has a double meaning, suggesting both a war internal to nature, and the human war that is being fought out amid such immense natural beauty. These two meanings are brought together later in the film by Colonel Tall, when he is in the

process of dismissing Starros from his commission and justifying the brutality of war,

Look at this jungle, look at those vines, the way they twine around the trees, swallowing everything. Nature is cruel, Starros.

Images of trees wrapped in vines punctuate *The Thin Red Line*, together with countless images of birds, in particular owls and parrots. These images are combined with the almost constant presence of natural sounds, of birdsong, of the wind in the Kunai grass, of animals moving in the undergrowth and the sound of water, both waves lapping on the beach and the flowing of the river.

Nature might be viewed as a kind of *fatum* for Malick, an ineluctable power, a warring force that both frames human war but is utterly indifferent to human purposes and intentions. This beautiful indifference of nature can be linked to the depiction of nature elsewhere in Malick's work. For example, *Badlands* is teeming with natural sounds and images: with birds, dogs, flowing water, the vast flatness of South Dakota and the badlands of Montana, with its mountains in the distance – and always remaining in the distance. *Days of Heaven* is also heavily marked with natural sounds and exquisitely photographed images, with flowing river water, the wind moving in fields of ripening wheat and silhouetted human figures working in vast fields. Nature also possesses here an avenging power, when a plague of locusts descend on the fields and Sam Shepherd sets fire to the entire wheat-crop – nature is indeed cruel.

Although it is difficult not to grant that nature is playing a symbolic role for Malick, his is not an animistic conception of nature, of the kind that one finds lamented in Coleridge's 1802 'Dejection: An Ode': 'Oh Lady! We receive but what we give/And in our life alone does nature live'. Rather, in my opinion, nature's indifference to human purposes follows on from a broadly naturalistic conception of nature. Things are not enchanted in Malick's universe, they simply *are*, and we are things too. They are remote from us and continue on regardless of our strivings. This is what is suggested by the Wallace Stevens poem cited in epigraph to this essay. A soldier falls in battle, but his death does not invite pomp or transient glory. Rather, death has an absolute character, which Stevens likens to a moment in autumn when the wind stops. Yet, when the wind stops, above in the high heavens the clouds continue on their course, 'nevertheless,/In their direction'. What is central to Malick, I think, is this 'neverthelessness' of nature, of the fact that human death is absorbed into the relentlessness of

nature, the eternal war in nature into which the death of a soldier is indifferently ingested. That's where Witt's spark lies.

There is a calm at the heart of Malick's art, a calmness to his cinematic eye, a calmness that is also communicated by his films, that becomes the mood of his audience: after watching *The Thin Red Line* we feel calm. As Charlie company leave Guadalcanal and are taken back to their ship on a landing craft, we hear the final voiceover from Witt, this time from beyond the grave,

Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made, all things shining.

In each of his movies, one has the sense of things simply being looked at, just being what they are – trees, water, birds, dogs, crocodiles or whatever. Things simply are, and are not moulded to a human purpose. We watch things shining calmly, being as they are, in all the intricate evasions of 'as'. The camera can be pointed at those things to try and capture some grain or affluence of their reality. The closing shot of *The Thin Red Line* presents the viewer with a coconut fallen onto the beach, against which a little water laps and out of which has sprouted a long green shoot, connoting life, one imagines. The coconut simply is, it merely lies there remote from us and our intentions. This suggests to me Stevens' final poem, 'The Palm at the End of the Mind', the palm that simply persists regardless of the makings of 'human meaning'. Stevens concludes, 'The palm stands on the edge of space. The wind moves slowly in its branches'. In my fancy at least, I see Malick concurring with this sentiment.

Notes

1. This text was originally prepared to introduce a screening of *The Thin Red Line* at Tate Modern, London, May 2002. An earlier version appeared in *Film-Philosophy*. I would like to thank Keith Ansell-Pearson, Nick Bunnin, Stanley Cavell, Jim Conant, Hubert Dreyfus, Jim Hopkins and Anne Latto for confirming and providing facts about Malick and also for helpful comments on my line of argument. I would also like to thank Espen Hammer for discussing *The Thin Red Line* with me, and Robert Lang for pointing out a number of infelicities in my first draft.
2. Wittgenstein (1980), p. 80.
3. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1998 edition.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Cited in Jimmie E. Cain, Jr. (2000).
6. 'On Malick's Subjects', in *Senses of Cinema*, www.sensesofcinema.com, 2000.
7. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1969.

8. For a similar line of argument on the relation of philosophy to film, see Stephen Mulhall, 2002.
9. What is particularly intriguing is that the passages quoted above are lifted from a speech by Prewitt in *From Here to Eternity*. Jones writes,

It was hard to accept that that he, who was the hub of this known universe, would cease to exist, but it was an inevitability and he did not shun it. He only hoped that he would meet it with the same magnificent indifference with which she who had been his mother met it. Because it was there, he felt, that the immortality he had not seen was hidden.

The question is why Malick replaces 'magnificent indifference' with 'calm'. This passage was brought to my attention by Cain's "Writing in his Musical Key", op. cit. p. 6.

10. Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics?', in (1978), p. 102.
11. Blanchot, 1994.
12. Wittgenstein (1921), Proposition 6.4311.

Habitual Remarriage: The Ends of Happiness in *The Palm Beach Story*

Stuart Klawans

I begin with an observation that any number of readers must have made, that a thought is left dangling in Stanley Cavell's magisterial *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. After Cavell drops an aside about Preston Sturges's *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), he at once passes on, never again to mention that remarkable film. I can't know what Cavell might have written about *The Palm Beach Story* had he not dismissed it so quickly – so suspiciously, one might say. But I now propose to tug on the loose end he left, to discover whether it will unravel part of his argument or instead lead through a labyrinth.

If I say that the all-too-casual mention of *The Palm Beach Story* is suspect, it's because no other film would seem more appropriate to a study of 'the comedy of remarriage.' Just on the level of plot, the film meets Cavell's elaborate and elastic criteria for the genre he has invented.

Very early in the picture, the airily self-confident Gerry (Claudette Colbert) announces that she no longer wants to be married to angry, failure-haunted Tom (Joel McCrea). Or perhaps she doesn't need to be married to him, or feels she shouldn't be. Her stated reasons for leaving are open to interpretation – but while Tom and the audience are busy interpreting, she takes off. What moral and social obstacles must Tom overcome to win her again? What experiences will convince her to give herself back to him? The plot's chief work is to answer these questions, once Tom gets past his helpless indecision and resolves to run after Gerry.

Already we're dealing with themes and situations that Cavell identifies as characteristic of the genre, primary among which is the explicit posing of the question: What constitutes a marriage? Is the glue merely the habit that two people form for one another? If so, and if the habits