

**Seeking the Other Shore: Myth and  
History in the Films of Terrence Malick**

by

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Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

# Contents

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<b>Abstract</b>	
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	
<b>Reader's Note</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Chapter One</b>	
"Pressed between history and heaven"	16
Manufacturing Myth	20
"Libidinal Historicism"	29
"Building Regret": The Myth of Innocence	40
The Death of Innocence	56
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
"Quite an individual"	64
"Magical Lands": Part 1	69
"Magical Lands": Part 2	80
Competing Fantasies	87
"Marble Halls"	93
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
"Successions of beauty"	100
"The colossal indifference of nature"	106
The House on the Prairie	114
The Girl in the Tower	126
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
"Convincing rather than accurate"	134
"A moving box"	143
Displacement and Transcendence: a (de)tour to 'Nam	154
Mapping the Territory: or, Resemblance Unintended	166
"Property": or, the Pacific Frontier	177

## **Chapter Five**

“A Prisoner of Metonymy”	189
An Astonishing Encounter	194
The Fortunate Hero and “the Mother of us All”	204
“Scandalous reports of a viperous generation.”	216
“Real what I thought a dream”	227

## **Conclusion**

Remembering the Garden	237
“Seeking the other shore”	243

## **Appendices**

Appendix One	250
Appendix Two	252
Appendix Three	253

<b>Bibliography</b>	254
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<b>Filmography</b>	270
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## Abstract

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Terrence Malick is a unique director in contemporary film, an enigmatic and resolutely independent filmmaker who operates successfully within the studio system of Hollywood. His unusual career – which includes a twenty-year ‘sabbatical’ during which he appeared to have dropped out of the industry altogether – has produced comparatively little in the way of academic research, though there has been increased activity since the release of *The Thin Red Line* in 1998.

The title – ‘Seeking the Other Shore’ – provides a thematic approach to the central exploration of the thesis: myth and history in Malick’s films. As I argue in the introduction, Malick’s characters constantly seek new shores within historical realities, but in so doing they imagine returns to mythic spaces that are either in the past or unattainable in the present. The films themselves provoke us to reconsider particular myths and their historical context.

The Introduction includes a brief synopsis of Malick’s career and a critical overview of both journalistic and academic writing. A major feature of his films – their intertextuality, from poetry and novels to visual art and music – is also introduced as it plays an important part in all the subsequent chapters. With the release of *The New World* (2005), I argue that the two recent films should be seen not only as continuing the major themes of historical reality and mythic quest in his 1970s films (*Badlands*, 1973, and *Days of Heaven*, 1978), but also as expanding those themes to include colonial encounters with strangeness which underpin the emergence of America as a modern cultural and political entity.

Chapter One sets out the historical and mythic terrain upon which all of Malick’s films are built, particularly America’s nineteenth-century, post-independence character,

the idea that America is a nation constantly seeking to renew itself but is never able to outrun the terrors of its previous incarnation, the sins of its fathers. In the section, 'Manufacturing Myth' I use definitions by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Richard Slotkin to begin the conversation between history and myth, finding that myth is constructed, laid claim to, and used continuously, and whose claims and uses are inevitably contested. Myths based in history, are, in Richard White's words, "historical creations", and it is this ideological tension between myth and history that one finds in Malick's films. History provides the context for explorations of America's mythic character, myths of innocence, renewal, ambition, and robust individualism.

Chapters Two through Five examine the feature films in chronological order. *Badlands* is discussed in terms of its hybrid genre (drawing on the western and the road movie), before I investigate Holly and Kit's "competing fantasies" – their different views of their adventure and the land through which they travel. *Days of Heaven* represents a complex examination of the Turnerian myth of the frontier and its transformation at the turn of the twentieth century. Malick's use of period photography is observed as is the influence of American literary naturalism. However, a more significant discussion emerges around the art of Edward Hopper and his modernist interpretation of America coming to terms with its twentieth-century character. The analysis in this section includes *Badlands*, and illuminates the influence of Hopper on both early films.

*The Thin Red Line* poses something of a problem as it appears to depart from the first two films and *The New World*, which follows eight years later. As a combat film, it is part of a fairly well-defined and fiercely debated genre, while its largely male cast and multiple voiceovers differ from the single adolescent female voiceovers of Holly and Linda. However, it challenges the norms of the combat genre in significant ways, particularly in its balancing of personal experience (Malick's screenplay is a subtle

adaptation of James Jones's war novels) with historical context (the viewer is alerted, as one rarely is in this genre, to the world outside of the battle).

In *The New World*, Captain John Smith literally seeks the other shore and, like Private Witt in the previous film, encounters a division within himself. In reaffirming the mythic romance between Smith and Pocahontas, Malick opposes the ambition of Enlightenment discovery (in the turbulent heart of Smith) with the sure sense of humanity's relationship with nature (in the calm spirit of Pocahontas). Once again, the film's historical context is the bedrock for its examination of myth, though as the revelatory conclusion, shows, Malick reaches for more spiritual meaning than affirming or revising the historical record.

The four feature films that constitute Malick's directorial career thus far are all concerned with fundamental American myths; however, they are also unusual interpretations these myths. Young girls narrate the stories of violent men possessed by the possibilities of a frontier that has passed while young men struggle to come to terms with the extreme violence of battle and the overwhelming strangeness of their surroundings, no matter how 'right' the cause. These are myths born out of history and rendered as cinematic revelations by Terrence Malick.

# Abstract

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Terrence Malick is a unique director in contemporary film, an enigmatic and resolutely independent filmmaker who operates successfully within the studio system of Hollywood. His unusual career – which includes a twenty-year ‘sabbatical’ during which he appeared to have dropped out of the industry altogether – has produced comparatively little in the way of academic research, though there has been increased activity since the release of *The Thin Red Line* in 1998.

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Finally, I really cannot thank my parents enough for their love, support, and unflagging belief in me. With my deepest love I dedicate this to them.

## Reader's Note

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All dialogue quoted from films has been personally transcribed unless otherwise stated. Also, for the sake of fluency all actors' names relevant to the thesis are contained in the Filmography, pages 270-275.

## Introduction

“How do we get to those other shores, those blue hills?”

Private Bell, *The Thin Red Line*

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As an artist, Terrence Malick is often described through absence rather than presence, known more for the time during which he has not made films, than for the films he has made. His twenty-year “sabbatical” has earned him the journalistic sobriquet of “the JD Salinger” of the movies,<sup>1</sup> encouraged by his reluctance to give interviews (none published officially since 1975).

Fortunately (or perhaps unfortunately) Malick’s career is not as mysterious as one is often led to believe: rather than a wayward recluse who spent twenty years in the wilderness, it now seems more as if Malick is just a man who, as one contemporary director says, “could live without the movie process for great lengths of time.”<sup>2</sup> This, however, has not stopped the Malick mythologies from distorting the record of his filmmaking as well as the criticism of his films. His reticence has fed journalistic and academic curiosity, with fans and scholars all seeking to find hidden or obscure information that might ‘explain’ either Malick the filmmaker or individual films. In an age of information surfeit and instant access, especially in the field of popular film, he is something of an anomaly: he is a locked box and the search is on for the hidden key.

Linking Malick to the protagonist in James Jones’s novel *From Here to Eternity* (in advance of *The Thin Red Line*’s release), Helen Thorpe suggested: “Like Prewitt, Malick has

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<sup>1</sup> Kroll and Sawhill, ‘20-Year Fadeout,’ who add that the term has become “a mantra,” (1998), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Producer-director Rob Cohen in Kroll, and Sawhill, ‘20-Year Fadeout’ (1998), 65.

baffled admirers by refusing to practice an art in which he is preeminent.”<sup>3</sup> And yet this “preeminence” is at odds with the curiously marginal position Malick occupies in the recent history of American film; at once recognized as a member of the vanguard of New Hollywood in the 1970s (a classmate of David Lynch in the AFI’s first graduate film program in 1969), but often reduced to, literally, a footnote in the record of that generation (scattered references through texts by, for example, Robert Ray, and a few asides in Peter Biskind’s *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*).<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious observation to make is that a large majority of material has appeared just prior to, and after the release of, *The Thin Red Line* in 1998. Obvious, because the film reignited interest in a filmmaker who seemed to have no reason to ‘disappear’ to begin with: both *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978) were, with a few notable exceptions (like Pauline Kael) critically well received. After such a long hiatus, *The Thin Red Line* was something to talk about, damned and praised in equal measure (often in the same review), but most significantly, it was a large, ambitious film with a high-profile cast, and suffered (or enjoyed) the coincidence of being made and released contemporaneously with Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*. Had Malick returned with a smaller film, both in scale and profile, one wonders whether the explosion of critical opinion would have been as intense. With the release of *The New World* in 2005, Malick seems to be ‘back’ with projects slated (*Tree of Life*) for production and producer credits steadily accumulating.

If one scrutinizes his film career a little more closely, one comes to a partial understanding of not only his evolution as a filmmaker, but also the reasons for his relative

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<sup>3</sup> Thorpe’s interesting piece for *Texas Monthly*, ‘The Man Who Wasn’t There’ (1998) is perhaps the best at relating Malick’s character to the filmmaking process.

<sup>4</sup> Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* (1985); Biskind, *Easy Rider, Raging Bulls* (1998).

popular obscurity up to *The Thin Red Line*, and the explosion of the Malick myth thereafter. Three other films involving Malick form part of his early record, yet strangely, none are currently available. *Lanton Mills*, Malick's 18-minute short film shot at the AFI, was screened in conjunction with *Badlands* in 1974, but "sometime thereafter ... the institute filed a stipulation that [the film] was not to be screened."<sup>5</sup> Stranger still is the case of Malick's first filmed script, *Deadhead Miles*, a road movie of sorts made in 1972, but only screened some ten years later. Apparently this is no longer available in any format, while another script written around the same time, and filmed in 1974 as *The Gravy Train* (d/ Jack Sharrett), is also officially "unavailable."<sup>6</sup> One film scripted by Malick that did receive release was *Pocket Money* (1972) directed by Stuart Rosenberg, and starring Paul Newman and Lee Marvin.

Malick also worked on scripts (including an early draft of *Dirty Harry* (1971)), produced scripts for unmade projects (*Sansho the Bailiff*, for example), unofficially 'doctored' scripts on and off during his hiatus, and has been busy enough between *The Thin Red Line* and his recent release *The New World*, producing several films in the last six years.<sup>7</sup> Such information is the stuff of the industry papers, but it does demonstrate how the myth of the dreamy recluse has grown, partly through a willingness among fans and foes alike to build one, and partly because Malick himself seems uninterested in dispelling it. In retrospect, Malick was probably wise to 'skip' the 1980s given the travails of fellow '70s auteurs like Scorsese, Coppola, Lynch, and Cimino, and to re-emerge at a time when that 'Renaissance'

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<sup>5</sup> Morrison and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Endurance* (1999, d/ Leslie Woodhead, Bud Greenspan), a documentary on Ethiopian long-distance runner Haile Gebrselassie; *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* (2000, d/ George Butler); *Xingfu shiguang [Happy Times]* (2000, d/ Yimou Zhang); *The Beautiful Country* (2004, d/ Hans Peter Moland); *Undertow* (2004, d/ David Gordon Green); and most recently, *Amazing Grace* (2006, d/ Michael Apted). In addition, he has a story credit for *The Beautiful Country*, as well as a screenplay credit for Sergei Bodrov's film *Bear's Kiss* (2002).

character<sup>8</sup> – or at least a savvy reconstitution of it – is back in vogue.

Malick's films illustrate a distinctive vision that operates in creative tension with the Hollywood tradition of narrative filmmaking, genre, and the star system. Hollywood's adroit recuperation of 'independent' style through the use of genre and generic hybridity – and here I mean genre as a system in which "marketing" mediates the relationship between producer and consumer<sup>9</sup> – confirms repeatedly its status as an industry in the sense that it markets new styles by subsuming them with established genres (Bollywood packaged as romantic comedy, or martial arts incorporated into the police procedural, for example). Malick's films, as I will show, constantly resist such formalizing gestures, though their marketing reveals attempts, even as far back as *Badlands*, to forge them into more recognizable products. The poster for *Badlands* shows Kit and Holly in silhouette against a bloodshot sunset, the light casting an *Oz*-like glow over the tree that frames the image, and their car visible beside them. She sits, resting against his leg; he stands, hand on hip, a rifle resting across his shoulders. The blurb goes, "In 1959, people were killing time; Kit and Holly were killing people." This could not be further from both the detail and the mood of the film. Kit in his "*Giant*" pose in the film is solitary, juxtaposed with abstract cutaways of nature; his subsequent cuddling with Holly in the back seat of the car is awkward, to say the least, and nowhere in the film is the date explicitly mentioned. The poster recommends to us a road-movie of outlaw lovers on the run, much like *Gun Crazy* (1949) or *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).

*The Thin Red Line* – a combat movie, to be sure, but quite clearly a challenge to the model – also found itself shoe-horned into grossly simplistic media contexts. Collective

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<sup>8</sup> Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance*. (1980).

<sup>9</sup> Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies* (1996), 160.

frustration at the film's disobedience towards the combat movie tradition found embarrassingly global expression when General Colin Powell was called on to introduce *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan* together at the Academy Awards in 1999 as sterling examples of the American war film.

Despite being nominated in seven categories at the Awards, Malick's presence was signified by a stock photograph from the shoot showing his smiling, bearded face. His 'reclusive' identity is thus, paradoxically, dependent on his status as a major Hollywood director; the industry enlists the subsidiary industries of film and celebrity journalism to promote his unwillingness to engage with them.

The result is that articles on Malick have invariably been skewed away from the films themselves and towards the director. His philosophical background, for example, has been the cause of both curious supposition and accusations of pretension. For some there is the possibility of a relationship between Malick the filmmaker, and Malick the philosopher who studied under Stanley Cavell, translated Martin Heidegger and, for a time, considered a PhD at Oxford;<sup>10</sup> while for others, Malick's films abound with half-realized ideas and meditative New Age musings, so much "metaphysical gas" as Tom Whalen has written. Indeed, Whalen later hedges his bets when he says, "I'm not sure what to make of Malick's changing Jewish Captain Stein to Greek Captain Staros, except that it allows Tall and Staros to quote Homer in Greek. Perhaps, too, it has something to do with Malick's philosophy background?"<sup>11</sup>

Hwanhee Lee finds that "the lack of much critical work on Malick's films is partly

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<sup>10</sup> Critchley, 'Calm - On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*' (2002); Lee, 'Great Directors' (2002); Vivian, 'The Question of Cinema' (2005); and particularly Furstenau and MacAvoy, 'Terrence Malick's Heideggerian Cinema' (2003). Cavell himself makes this observation in his revised edition of *The World Viewed* (1979), xiv-xvii.

<sup>11</sup> Whalen, "Maybe all men got one big soul" (1999), 163, 164. See also Cohen, '*The Thin Red Line*' (1999); Klawans, 'Saving Private Malick' (1999).

due to the fact that (besides the lack of outputs) it is hard to articulate the motivations or concerns behind them.”<sup>12</sup> Reviewing *Badlands*, Pauline Kael froths that Malick has “perceived the movie – he’s done our work instead of his” (her emphasis), and perhaps cannily anticipates the head-scratching that has surrounded Malick’s films when she writes: “I felt as if I were watching a polished Ph.D. thesis that couldn’t help making the professors exclaim ‘Brilliant!’”<sup>13</sup> Kael’s frustration is indicative of a particular aspect of Malick criticism. There is general agreement among critics that his films *look* beautiful, but what some find provocative, inquisitive, and maybe poetic, others see as cumbersome, whimsical, and portentous: Gilberto Perez wrote at the time of its release that *Days of Heaven* “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.”<sup>14</sup> Kael was as unimpressed by *Days of Heaven* as she was by *Badlands*. “The film is an empty Christmas tree,” she wrote “you can hang all your dumb metaphors on it,” a response that troubled Martin Donougho in 1985 (when it must have seemed as if Malick was gone for good): “the most puzzling thing is that there has been little attempt to understand [*Days of Heaven*] at all, as if there were no problem in perceiving what it means.”<sup>15</sup> Some writers, such as Stephen Hunter of the *Washington Post* seem to store up their bile, exhausting an accumulated vocabulary of punning and sarcasm in their reviews.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps it is Malick’s reticence that draws such

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<sup>12</sup> Lee, ‘Great Directors’ (2002).

<sup>13</sup> Kael, ‘Sugarland and Badlands’ (1976), 306, 304.

<sup>14</sup> Perez, ‘Film Chronicle: *Days of Heaven*’, (1979), 97. Perez’s review drew a spluttering response (shot through with inaccuracies) from the journal’s main film reviewer, Vernon Young and, in turn, a reply from Perez, illustrating vividly how heated the critical differences over Malick’s films often become. Young and Perez, (1979), 326-331.

<sup>15</sup> Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies* (1982), 137; Donougho, ‘West of Eden’ (1985), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Hunter, ‘The Thin Long Movie’ (1999). Hunter did not much like *The New World* either. ‘On the Far Horizon, The New World Slowly Emerges’ (2006).

Parkeresque sniping, a catharsis of frustration knowing that he will not respond.

This critical battle over Malick's oblique approach to filmmaking is a symptom of his unusual backstory, and helps construct the image of Malick as a detached intellectual outsider. Malick's relationship to film before his enrolment in the AFI graduate program in 1969 is not clear: amongst other things, he was a Rhodes Scholar, a philosophy lecturer at MIT, and sometime magazine writer (contributing sporadically to *The New Yorker*, and unproductively for *Life* and *Newsweek*). And while Scorsese, for example, talks feverishly about his love of film in innumerable interviews and documentaries, Malick's passion for film appears obscure, and his approach to a career in film almost dismissively matter-of-fact: in an interview after the release of *Badlands*, Malick said "I'd always liked movies in a kind of naïve way. They seemed no less improbable a career than anything else."<sup>17</sup>

If Malick is often assumed to be reclusive, he is also regarded as a bookish nature-lover – “a guy who goes off and watches birds”<sup>18</sup> according to producer Mike Medavoy – constantly fascinated by the beat of insects' wings, or the appearance of light striking a surface. On the set of *Days of Heaven*, Sam Shepard describes Malick “setting up this complicated shot and turning around to watch a flight of geese go across the sky – he stopped everything and had everyone turn the camera around to get the geese.”<sup>19</sup> It is a commonplace observation, now bordering on banality, that Malick is a “visual poet”<sup>20</sup> and that *The Thin Red Line*, in particular parts, resembles a National Geographic film.<sup>21</sup> As

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<sup>17</sup> In Walker, 'Malick on *Badlands*' (1975), 82.

<sup>18</sup> In Kirkland, 'The Master Malick returns' (1999).

<sup>19</sup> In Michael Almereyda, 'After the Rehearsal' (2004).

<sup>20</sup> For example, Harvey O'Brien writes in a review of *Days of Heaven*: “As in *Badlands*, Malick has fashioned a cinematic poem of the American landscape.” (2000).

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, 'The Thin Red Line' (1999). Director of Photography on *The Thin Red Line*, John Toll, comments that Malick put together a third unit specifically to shoot “anthropological footage” on Guadalcanal, headed by Reuben Aaronson “who had done a lot of *National Geographic* shoots.” In Pizzello, 'The War Within' (1999), 62.

essentially parts of the same myth, neither is invalid, but they have become the mitt in which to catch the speculative pitches hurled in Malick's direction. There is an overwhelming desire amongst critics to wax poetic about the look of his films, with their "sumptuous" and "ravishing" cinematography, yet whether positively or critically intended, these descriptions can mask other less visually obvious ideas in all three films: "the straightforward plotline of the combat film fades before the visual delights of Malick's luxurious pastoralism."<sup>22</sup> Doherty's comment makes the mistake of considering pastoral only in terms of the visual and, as John Orr has made clear in his wide-ranging survey of the cinema after Pier Paolo Pasolini's famous address, 'Cinema of Poetry', the poetic in film involves many discourses, from new approaches to cinematography and location shooting, to the experimental subjectivities of Godard and Kieslowksi.

Key history films of the 1970s, for example, such as Herzog's *Aguirre*, Malick's *Days of Heaven*, and Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, can be seen as 'poetic' by virtue of their lyric style and sparse dialogue. Equally, their narratives convey stories of the past with a precise naturalistic detail, a lucid concern with time, place and culture. For that reason we might place them closer to fiction than poetry, especially in its modernist forms, where in the English language Imagism has had such a powerful impact.<sup>23</sup>

Orr makes two interesting points here: he unequivocally pronounces *Days of Heaven* a "history film", and recognizes the dynamism of the film in suggesting its affinity with both poetry and prose. In a later chapter, Orr writes that in *Days of Heaven* "history and the dream of history fuse to give a new meaning to montage," a significant claim as it links the themes in Malick's films to his innovative, sometimes radical, deployment of cinematic

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<sup>22</sup> Doherty, *Projections of War* (1999), 310. Indeed, *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* have received many awards and nominations for their cinematography, and the cinematography on *Badlands* is frequently a major part of any critique of the film.

<sup>23</sup> Orr, *Contemporary Cinema* (1998), 1-31, 6.

history and myth, while not unique in Malick, certainly marks him out as an individual voice – sometimes anathema – in Hollywood film.

Against the tendency of writing biased in favour of Malick's visual style, are texts that approach the films from more theoretical positions, specifically focusing on cinematic technique. For example, Bersani and Dutoit, in an illuminating, though observationally flawed text, set off from Lacan's reading of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* to examine Malick's use of close-ups in *The Thin Red Line* as a way of linking cinematic aesthetics and subjectivity in the representation of good and evil, "the *jouissance* of 'the blindest fury of destructiveness'." Though the authors refer to the film's beauty in various contexts, their emphasis on close-up shot scale and performance – "the face as pure viscosity" – moves the discussion away from the landscape as natural theatre for human striving and suffering, a feature of much writing on *The Thin Red Line*, and combat films in general.<sup>25</sup> Bradford Vivian sees *The Thin Red Line* as nothing less than "an unrelenting questioning of cinematic reality" which "enables scrutiny of the deft techniques with which conventional films typically reconcile the intrinsic paradoxes of their own medium."<sup>26</sup> Thus, while Hunter finds Malick's "penetration of deeper issues ... jejune,"<sup>27</sup> for others, the films challenge the way we interpret films in fundamental ways through his innovative editing, juxtaposition of sound and image, and the use of voiceover.

In the comforting and often uncritical consensus that Malick is a "cinematic poet" there is a conflation of the visual artist, and the visionary artist which does much to gloss over some of the more interesting facets of his films. How, for example, do we begin to investigate the significant differences between the facts of the Starkweather-Fugate killing

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<sup>25</sup> Bersani, and Dutoit, *Forms of Being* (2004), 126, 146.

<sup>26</sup> Vivian, 'The Question of Cinema' (2005), 252, 265.

<sup>27</sup> Hunter, 'The Thin Long Movie' (1999).

over some of the more interesting facets of his films. How, for example, do we begin to investigate the significant differences between the facts of the Starkweather-Fugate killing spree, and *Badlands*, so clearly based upon that event? And, what is the function of the voiceovers, particularly in the first two films, where they frequently undermine or counterpoint the visual “beauty” depicted on the screen? Questions such as these have been sporadically investigated in journal articles, and are more coherently addressed in the first book-length study on Malick by James Morrison and Thomas Schur. However, in many cases, these investigations, while being important in developing a literature on Malick, remain closely argued studies of particular aspects of one of his films. For example, Jimmie E. Cain Jr.’s article on the intricate links between Malick’s screenplay for *The Thin Red Line*, and the novels of James Jones makes crucial points overlooked by many critics who rushed to see the infidelity in Malick’s adaptation.<sup>28</sup> There have been some good papers on *Days of Heaven* dealing particularly with sound and voiceover,<sup>29</sup> and *The Thin Red Line* has predictably produced several articles on Malick’s film as part of the revival of the World War II combat film in the 1990s, as well as reviews in historical journals.<sup>30</sup> A second book on Malick, this time a collection of essays edited by Hannah Patterson, offers useful discussion on aspects of Malick’s films not often dealt with in previous articles – Malick’s use of sound and music for example<sup>31</sup> – while Michel Chion has contributed a volume on *The Thin Red Line* to the BFI’s Modern Classics collection.<sup>32</sup> Most recently, *The New World* has drawn again on historical discourses, this time in relation to Native American studies,

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<sup>28</sup> Cain, “Writing in his musical key” (2000).

<sup>29</sup> Crofts, ‘From the “Hegemony of the Eye” to the “Hierarchy of Perception,”’ (2001); McGettigan, ‘Interpreting a Man’s World’ (2001); Wonda, ‘A Gaze Unbecoming’ (1994); Zucker, C. “God Don’t Even Hear You” (2001).

<sup>30</sup> Hodsdon, “Where does war come from?” (1999); MacCabe, ‘Bayonets in Paradise’ (1999); Polan, ‘Auteurism and War-tourism’ (1999). See also reviews by Morrison and Doherty. For reviews in historical studies journals, see Cohen, Cull, Jackson, Millett, and Stevens (all 1999).

<sup>31</sup> *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*, edited by Hannah Patterson (2003).

producing a mix of general journalistic opinion and specialized historical critique.<sup>33</sup>

Embedded in a number of comments and studies there are indications pointing to the fruitfulness of an interdisciplinary approach towards Malick. In a rare interview, Malick says that the influences on *Badlands* were not so much films as novels, like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Hardy Boys*,<sup>34</sup> and early drafts of *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *The New World* all open with literary extracts.<sup>35</sup> J. Hoberman sees *The Thin Red Line*'s "austerely hallucinated battlefield vision" as "an exercise in 19th century transcendentalism,"<sup>36</sup> while John Orr, in a letter to *Sight and Sound*, writes that the film "[blends] the two themes of human strife and the American search for wilderness, a triumph which not only echoes Malick's previous films but places him on a par with Whitman, Thoreau and Fenimore Cooper."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Morrison and Schur, referring to D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, write that

[*Days of Heaven*] takes up, one by one, nearly all the important themes Lawrence sounds [,] bringing together the democratic scope of Whitman, the rarefied self-consciousness of James, the slangy argot of Twain – all shot through with a sense of landscape out of Winslow Homer by way of Whitman or Cather.<sup>38</sup>

Harvey O'Brien, in a review of *Days of Heaven*, moves beyond a simple statement of

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<sup>32</sup> Chion, *The Thin Red Line* (2004). See also my review of Chion's book: Rijdsdijk, 'Apprehending Beauty' (2006).

<sup>33</sup> Good general articles: Sterritt, 'Film, Philosophy, and Terrence Malick's *The New World*' (2006); Mookas, 'Before and After' (2005). Articles from historical perspective: Boehm, 'Brave New World' (2006); Zitz, 'Stafford History goes to Hollywood' (2005).

<sup>34</sup> In Walker, 'Malick on *Badlands*' (1975), 82. Huck Finn is also cited in an exchange concerning Linda Manz's performance in *Days of Heaven* in Thorpe, 'The Man Who Wasn't There' (1998).

<sup>35</sup> Respectively, Hamlin Garland's *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1961, first published in 1899); William Manchester's *Goodbye Darkness* (1981); and 'A Short Account of the British Plantations in America' from an edition of *London Magazine* in 1755.

<sup>36</sup> Hoberman, 'The Wars Within' (1998).

<sup>37</sup> Orr, 'Soldier, soldier' (1999), 64. Michel Chion comes to a similar conclusion: "I have never read any interview with Malick, or any accounts from those who have worked with him, that establishes a knowledge of and like for Thoreau, Emerson or Whitman. But it is hard not to think of them." *The Thin Red Line* (2004), 15.

<sup>38</sup> Morrison and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 43.

chronological context, suggesting an interpretation in line with Frederick Jackson Turner's "closing of the frontier" and an echo of Jeffersonian agrarianism: "Set in early twentieth century North America, it represents a moment of hesitation between the advance of industrialization and the death of the rural ethos."<sup>39</sup> Here one finds a desire to view the film as more than a costume drama, a doomed love triangle set against the backdrop of a bygone era. American visual art, too, often appears in examinations of Malick. Edward Hopper's melancholic modernism is evident in both *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, particularly in the farmhouse of the latter, which also recalls Andrew Wyeth's unsettling painting *Christina's World* (1948). Even the shots of Bell's wife in *The Thin Red Line* – looking out of a window or out to sea – recall Hopper's anxious, solitary women.

To some extent, appending the lists of American artists, poets, and writers to an interpretation of Malick's films is an interesting name game, a fun cultural excursion that while suggestive, is endlessly so. Morrison and Schur argue that "Malick wears his influences so much on his sleeve that they become something like floating signifiers, bringing meanings of their own that buttress the work's imposing originality," and yet they conclude that the parallels one could draw with other artists "may only go to show how fruitless is the search for influences on Malick's work to an understanding of his films."<sup>40</sup> The danger is, to purloin a phrase from Dana Phillips, that while "under the spell" of a Malick film, one "evoke[s] rather than interpret[s] it."<sup>41</sup> The contextual nature of this thesis proposes many references, but not in the service of guessing the contents of the bookshelf in Malick's study.

With that in mind, my mode of interpretation and research models are as follows:

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<sup>39</sup> O'Brien, Review of *Days of Heaven* (2000).

<sup>40</sup> Morrison and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 29, 30.

<sup>41</sup> Phillips, 'History and the Ugly Facts of Connac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*' (1996), 436.

in seeking to contextualize Malick's four feature films to date within the frames of myth and history, my argument is that to understand the films requires a knowledge of the cultural myths and histories upon which the narratives are based. These are some of the central myths in American culture – nature as godlike and subservient; America as Eden and wasteland; the corruption and attempted recuperation of innocence; the way of the hero and the essential value of family and community – and yet are, in some senses, profoundly historical. By this, I mean that they challenge our attitudes towards the past by articulating moments of transition: the narratives insist on histories – whether of the characters or the environments they inhabit – that exist before they open and continue after they end.

As I will show in the first chapter, myths both court and resist change; over time they are attacked and often defended with equal vigour, seen broadly, for example, in the revisionism of the American West in the second half of the twentieth century which sought to re-examine a whole host of myths around slavery, racism, industrialization, entrepreneurship, land ownership, and individual heroism. History, too, is constantly subject to the elasticity of reinterpretation – either through the testing of new hypotheses or the discovery of additional materials – and the vicissitudes of academic debate. Within the context of this thesis, my interest in history is limited to its representation on film, though I would like to move beyond the “history on film” debates initiated by Robert Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin (among others) in the mid 1980s.<sup>42</sup> The intention is not to interpret Malick's films as “history films” but rather to see within them a tension between myth – in Richard Slotkin's words “the language in which a society remembers its

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, the forum discussion *American Historical Review*, Rosenstone and others (1988), 1173-1227. Also, see the cumbersome though wide-ranging collection of essays in Carnes (ed) *Past Imperfect* (1996).

history"<sup>43</sup> – and history as a process of social change over time.

This approach to film analysis is thus explicitly historical and, in film terms, explicitly auteurist, in that it seeks to enrich the understanding of the films of a single director who, it is argued, displays in those films a unique cinematic vision. In taking this approach I acknowledge (and identify for future investigation) specifically filmic discourses relating to, for example, Malick's peculiar use of montage (echoing Eisenstein's remarkable discourse on landscape and music in *Nonindifferent Nature*), voiceover (including debates around the female voice in Kaja Silverman and Sarah Kozloff),<sup>44</sup> and sound (the relationship between sound and noise, and the sound "in the service of heightened realism").<sup>45</sup>

The thesis leans more toward *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*. There are two reasons for this, the first being simply that there is little sustained scholarship, so far, on the latter film (the most explicitly 'mythic' of all the films). Secondly, I believe there has been a tendency in Malick scholarship to forge links between the first three films – especially for the sake of auteurist confirmation – when it seems that the two recent films indicate a definite change in direction. This approach on the part of researchers could be a symptom of anxiety (plotting Malick's directorial trajectory in case he 'disappears' again), and is obviously a fact of publishing (assessing a filmmaker at a particular point in his, or her, career). Robert Silberman proposes: "Just as three points define a plane in geometry, so three films may define a personal style in the cinema," before going on to describe the

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<sup>43</sup> Slotkin, *Gunslinger Nation* (1992), 655.

<sup>44</sup> Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988); Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers* (1988). Articles by Joan McGettigan ('Interpreting a Man's World,' 2001) and Janet Wondra ('A Gaze Unbecoming,' 1994) initiate discussion in this field.

<sup>45</sup> Sound and noise: Doane, 'Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing' (1985); Altman, 'The Evolution of Sound Technology' (1985). "Heightened realism": Schreger, 'Altman, Dolby, and the Second Sound Revolution' (1985), 349.

“central importance” in Malick of “landscape and the natural world.”<sup>46</sup> This is not untrue. Silberman’s analysis of *The Thin Red Line* is illuminating and he could likely utilize his argument to make similar claims about *The New World*. However, there are aspects of the two recent films that are fundamentally different from the two 1970s films – the multi-vocal voiceover and the more explicit engagement with history, for example – which I think point towards a more ambitious philosophical and artistic project.

The metaphors of searching and travel which inform the title are central to all of the films, and central to the themes of myth and history. Malick’s characters constantly seek new shores within historical realities, but in so doing they imagine returns to mythic spaces that are either in the past or unattainable in the present. The films themselves provoke us to reconsider particular myths and their historical context which, in itself, is a not uncommon project for filmmakers. However, I shall explore how Malick’s extraordinary approach to film form itself, and his sustained commitment to myth and history on film has – after more than thirty years – grown more complex and more challenging. Myth and history are at the heart of a body of work that is unique within the contemporary establishment of commercial narrative film.

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<sup>46</sup> Silberman, “Terrence Malick, Landscape, and “This War in the Heart of Nature” (2003), 160.

## Chapter One

### “Pressed Between History and Heaven”

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In his lectures on *Walden*, Stanley Cavell describes in Henry David Thoreau a “mood at once of absolute hope and yet of absolute defeat,” his own and his nation’s:

His prose must admit this pressure and at every moment resolutely withstand it. It must live, if it can, pressed between history and heaven.<sup>1</sup>

For Cavell, this history is the “knowledge that America exists only in its discovery and its discovery was always an accident ... the obsession with freedom, and with building new structures and forming new human beings with new minds to inhabit them; and ... the presentiment that this unparalleled opportunity has been lost forever.”<sup>2</sup>

Malick’s most recent film, *The New World*, is punctuated by examples of this pressure. When Captain Newport warns, “we must be careful not to offend the Naturals,” the irony is so heavy the narrative almost buckles under the weight, and it is compounded when Smith proclaims (in interior monologue) “we can make a new start, a fresh beginning.”<sup>3</sup> Idealism and thudding irony are snags Malick must chart and navigate around, lest his film be the dull repetition of an acknowledged

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<sup>1</sup> Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (1992), 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> In trailers of the film – but absent from the shorter, second cut of the film – Newport pronounces even more portentously “let not America go wrong in her first hour.”

history. What sets Malick apart as a filmmaker, however, is his subversion of narrative conventions, his quest for ambiguity rather than closure and, as this thesis will argue, his constantly fascinating engagement with the tension between myth and history.

A second nineteenth-century allusion that is instructive to interpreting Malick's films is found in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, 'Circles.'

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end.<sup>4</sup>

Jonathan Levin sees in this metaphor a cycle of constant reinterpretation: "Each horizon represents a newly emerging unity made available to experience and at the same time subject to reformation on the basis of further experience."<sup>5</sup> In the narratives of Malick's films there is always a new beginning at the conclusion; the moment of closure is really the beginning of a new 'adventure,' not a sequel – which in narrative terms reconstitutes the successes of the original text's formula – but an ongoing experience. In Emerson's words:

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.<sup>6</sup>

Malick's films are adventures that end ambiguously, destruction followed by faint hope, new life, or a new destination not yet known. In holding out the possibility of starting over, Malick's narratives insist on the transition into new states as well as the cyclical nature of the world around us, rather than the restored equilibrium of the classic three-act narrative. His characters, and the adventures which they initiate (or are drawn into), are episodes in a continuing narrative that is not just larger

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<sup>4</sup> Emerson, 'Circles' (1983), 403.

<sup>5</sup> Levin, *The Poetics of Transition* (1999), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Emerson, 'Circles' (1983), 403.

than them, but provides the context for their lives and deaths.

*Badlands* concludes with Holly gazing out of the window of the airplane that will take her and her murderous partner, Kit, to court where he will be sentenced to death and she will, eventually, marry her lawyer's son. She is literally caught between the recent past of her misadventures and the future life of possibly satisfied domesticity which, though she – the girl in the plane – cannot know it yet, is the narrative conclusion of her story. Like Ishmael at the end of *Moby Dick* – adrift in a coffin on the open sea but a survivor because we are reading his tale – Holly looks forward to a new life even as she is flown off to stand trial for murder. Safety beckons, along with the possibility of erasing the past and it seems a long time since she and Kit were enthusiastically setting up house in the forest, before their killing spree really began. The world of gold-tinged clouds seen out of the airplane window is the fantastical end to a dreamy episode in her young life that leaves her with nothing. However, in the strange knowledge of certainty in Holly's narration is the offer of a new life, the great American opportunity for her to start from scratch.

In *Days of Heaven*, Linda is a wanderer once more, though now in the company of an unnamed older girl instead of her brother. Her future seems even less promising than at the outset, yet her optimism seems undimmed, so much so that she is more concerned for the flighty older girl than for her own wellbeing. In *Badlands*, Holly's sureness of narration convinces us of the outcome of her story beyond the film's narrative, but uncertainty characterizes Linda's narration at the end of *Days of Heaven*. As she, Bill and Abby set off for Texas, she chimes, "In fact, all three of us have been going places, looking for things, searching for things, going on adventures," as if she is narrating a travelogue. At the end, as she walks along the tracks following the older girl (who aims "to beat the hell out of some tree or something"), Linda says:

This girl, she didn't know where she was goin' or what she was gonna do. She didn't have no money or nothin'. Maybe she'd meet up with a character. I was hopin' things would work out for her; she was a good friend of mine.

Though she is in the shot, Linda's voice seems to come from elsewhere, as if the other girl is off on her own, no doubt meeting up with a 'character', as she does throughout the film.

In *The Thin Red Line*, a blossoming coconut promises the recrudescence of nature burned, exploded and killed by the warfare of man. However, while the jittery Private Train might venture: "I figure after this the worst is going to be gone, it's time for things to get better," the increasingly bloody history of the Pacific campaign in World War II forces us to conclude otherwise. However, in ending the film with three seemingly disconnected images of island realism (boys in two canoes, two parrots, and the coconut) Malick refuses the moral or even humanist affirmation that almost always concludes a war film. The fighting men have been left to their uncertain futures and Malick recharges the Edenic myth with which he opened the film. Similarly, *The New World* may recount the story of Pocahontas and Captain Smith; but it is also about the story's power as a myth of first contact, and ends by reasserting the more fundamental myth (that transcends the particulars of American history) of humankind seeking their place in the natural world.

So, in a sense, one can view Malick as having inherited the great American writers' curse: freedom, but at a cost; no victory without defeat; a nation constantly being born again but never able to outrun the terrors of its previous incarnation, the sins of its fathers. America's origin lies in its "deep newness of spiritual renovation" in Robert Hughes's words, its opposition to old Europe so profound that, "Newness became to Americans what Antiquity was to Europeans – a sign of integrity, the mark of a special relationship to history. It became mythic."<sup>7</sup> In other words, all the times America has been 'born again' it has recycled its myth of origin. Myth and history are in conversation, reminding us of how each counters and often produces the other. What follows is an account of how I interpret myth and history, both separately and in conversation.

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<sup>7</sup> Hughes, *American Visions* (1997), 21-22.

## Manufacturing Myth

But nevertheless the gap which exists in our mind to some extent between mythology and history can probably be breached by studying histories which are conceived as not at all separated from but as a continuation of mythology.

Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>8</sup>

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Myth is, at once, an immensely powerful and deeply problematic word. It becomes increasingly slippery and elusive the more it is used, insisting on its ephemeral nature with each attempt to restrain it with a given meaning. Richard White writes that, “in its everyday sense, myth means falsehood,” but qualifies this by adding; “in a second, deeper sense, however, myths are not so much falsehoods as explanations. Myths are stories that tell why things and people are what they are.”<sup>9</sup> It is a very basic distinction, but one I remark on at the outset because so much of narrative film is received at a popular level. Consider this sensational example relating to the Disney film *Hidalgo* (2003).<sup>10</sup> After marketing the film as a “true story” – a ruse immediately unmasked by various commentators – a senior Disney spokesperson said, in an interview:

No one here really cares about the historical aspects. Once a picture has been shot people move on to others. We're like a factory ... If it transpires that the historical aspects are in question I don't think people would care that much. *Hidalgo* is a family film – it has little to do with reality.<sup>11</sup>

As Scott Thill points out, “What matters in the end is who manufactures the myth,” in this case,

<sup>8</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (2001), 37.

<sup>9</sup> White, *It's your misfortune and none of my own* (1991), 615.

<sup>10</sup> In which American, Frank T. Hopkins, competes in a gruelling cross-country horse race against Arabic riders in the Sahara desert.

<sup>11</sup> Thill, ‘Disney's *Hidalgo*’ (2004).

“two mythmaking machines – Disney and Hopkins himself, who seemed to have been as deeply invested in perpetuating his possibly fictitious exploits – competing for the imagination of the populace.”<sup>12</sup>

Richard Slotkin devotes an entire study to American myths in his sequence of books, *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), identifying their essentially ideological character, not so much in their origins but in the continuity and control of myths: “The ideology of a class striving for ascendancy will seek to appropriate the moral authority of the myth.”<sup>13</sup> Myth is therefore not something that *is*, but something that is constructed, laid claim to and used continuously, and whose claims and uses are inevitably contested. Lévi-Strauss’s conception of the relationship between myth and history is interesting in this regard as he seeks to link “societies without writing and without archives” – for whom mythology aims “to ensure [that] ... the future will remain faithful to the present and to the past” – to contemporary societies defined by writing and “scientific history.” From this anthropological perspective, “mythology is static, we find the same mythical elements combined over and over again, but they are in a closed system, let us say, in contradistinction with history, which is, of course, an open system.”<sup>14</sup>

However, Slotkin questions the idea of “mythic archetypes” which, in a structuralist vein, hold that myths are “generated by structural mechanisms that transcend the capabilities of individual authors.”<sup>15</sup> As an example, he questions an analysis of the ‘Custer myth’ – race conflict and individual heroism coalesced in the myth of the ‘last stand’ – as a nexus of archetypes drawn from various loci in the Western tradition:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* (1985), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (2001), 34.

<sup>15</sup> Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* (1985), 26. To be fair, Lévi-Strauss sees mythology working in concert with the individual historical account to produce “a better understanding” of history (*Myth and Meaning*, 2001), 36.

The archetypal qualities of the Custer story are unquestionably significant as factors in its persistence. But as an explanation of the history of the Custer myth, archetypalism mystifies as much as it explains.<sup>16</sup>

In the first book in the series, *Regeneration Through Violence*, Slotkin produces a formulation for myth that draws on both the explicitly historical and cultural, as well as the more anthropological approach of Lévi-Strauss.

Myth, as I have defined it, is a narrative formulation of a culture's world view and self-concept, which draws both on the historical experience of that culture and on sources of feeling, fear, and aspiration (individual and universal / archetypal) deep in the human subconscious and which can be shown to function in that culture as a prescription for historical action and for value judgment.<sup>17</sup>

Here, the (Jungian) psychological aspects of the definition are framed by historical continuity: myths are derived from history, and act as "prescriptions for historical action" which distinguishes this view from one that argues for commonalities across cultures and time periods. Proffering the example of Daniel Boone, Slotkin argues that his story (or initially his story as told by Filson) illustrates not only colonial attempts to civilize the wilderness, but also functions to represent the "land's destiny as the creation of God" and the colonists' sense of belonging there.<sup>18</sup> John Tosh theorizes that

The process of tradition-making is particularly clear in newly autonomous nations, where the need for a legitimizing past is strongly felt and the materials for a national past are often in short supply. Within two generations of the War of Independence Americans had come to identify with a flattering self-image: in taming the wilderness far away from the corruptions of the old society in Europe, their colonial forebears had developed the values of self-reliance, honesty and liberty that were now the heritage of all Americans: hence the enduring appeal of folk-heroes such as Daniel Boone.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* (1985), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (1975), 294.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>19</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (2000), 11.

The result is a tension that lies at the heart of most representations of history in art, but one that is particularly acute in film, as I will argue later: “myths may be antihistory, but myths themselves are also historical creations.”<sup>20</sup> It is this relationship between myth and history that is constantly renegotiated, whether it is a painting like Benjamin West’s *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770, which I discuss in chapter five), or films like *Braveheart* (1995), *Forrest Gump* (1994), and *The Patriot* (2000). The effectiveness of these mythic representations is explicitly evident in President John F. Kennedy utilizing the language of the frontier to launch the race to the moon, or President George W. Bush’s frequent invocation of gunfighter terminology to embolden his calls to fight “the war on terror.”

My focus in this thesis is on specific American myths as they appear in Terrence Malick’s films, within the framework of the negotiation between myth and history outlined above. While one can argue that *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* are deliberately historical – seen in meticulous recreation of the mise-en-scène and their relation to accounts of historical events – *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* are harder to categorize. However, I think that all four films are concerned with history, and particularly with moments of transformation in America. While *Days of Heaven* tends toward the epic in its majestic representation of the landscape, it is also a film that, while detailing the drama of the doomed lovers, signals the transition of their society. Vernon Young sees its historical character as nothing more than a “faltering exercise ... in the Soviet-Marxist line of ‘capitalistic contradictions’” but he fails utterly to acknowledge the film’s particularly American mythic character: the death of the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal in the face of capitalist mega-production, and the outlaw making his fateful dash for new territories and new beginnings.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, John Orr finds in the film’s movement from city to country (through the shot of the train

<sup>20</sup> White, *It’s your misfortune and none of my own* (1991), 616.

<sup>21</sup> Young and Perez, ‘Letters to the Editor’ (1979, 326.

on the bridge) “the tense co-existence of natural and industrial sublime.”<sup>22</sup> As I argue in chapter four, the Farmer is not set against Bill in a traditional equation of capitalist inequality. They are, in fact, virtually the same man, cast into the transformative era after the closing of Turner’s Frontier, and on the cusp of America’s emergence from political isolation.

Of all Malick’s films, *The Thin Red Line* is the most grounded in an identifiable genre – the combat genre. However, where many combat films reaffirm myths of ideological and moral certainty, Malick’s war film complicates this discourse of consent by emphasizing the ‘ground’ of battle literally and philosophically. Nature is not merely environment (as some critics have mistakenly asserted), but rather an ontological complex of ownership, displacement, belonging and isolation. Nature is lived in, possessed, transformed, made beautiful, made alien, both involved in, and distant from, the struggles of men in war. Though the entry of a ship into Witt and Hoke’s AWOL island retreat suggests civilization (and its bullying sibling, war) barging into Eden, there is more to the film’s fugue-like structure than the simple opposition of nature and civilization. In one of the more interesting articles on *The Thin Red Line*, John Streamas argues that

Malick prefers the mythic but ... he is most persuasive when he invokes history. Moreover, his myth, deriving from the anti-war culture of the 1970s, is inadequate against the revived myth of the global war as the Good War.<sup>23</sup>

I take issue with Streamas in chapter four – partly because I believe his understanding of myth in Malick’s films is historically too periodized – but it is worth noting here that Streamas correctly sees myths as resisting the new (for fear of being supplanted), but also as being ‘new’ themselves through their coming into being as myths over time. Like young insects waiting for their exoskeletons to harden, myths undergo a period of skulking wariness before becoming resilient to attack. Myths

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<sup>22</sup> Orr, *Contemporary Cinema* (1998), 174.

<sup>23</sup> Streamas, ‘The Greatest Generation Steps Over *The Thin Red Line*’ (2003), 138.

require a period of recognition – perhaps political rhetoric, the publication of a book, a film, a scene from a film, or an advertisement – before they are authorized and critics seek to understand their archaeology. In the case of Streamas, the Good War myth has an easily identifiable origin and process: the end of the Second World War and its accounts (notably by Studs Terkel), then revitalized in the wake of Vietnam, and now fully recuperated by popular written histories, the media commemorations of D-Day, films such as Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). In this context, Streamas sees *The Thin Red Line* as either “a shrewd corrective to the surging revival of America's Good War myth or else a luckless victim of the revival.”<sup>24</sup>

In light of the success of combat films such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002), and the ill-fated anti-military black comedy *Buffalo Soldiers* (2003), *The Thin Red Line* seems to have failed as a corrective, but as I argue in chapter five, I don't believe Malick conceived the film in that context.<sup>25</sup> However, there is no doubt its release coincided with a renaissance of the combat film in its older, more ideologically robust form. As Thomas Doherty has noted, *We Were Soldiers* is “Hollywood's first major Vietnam War film to portray American soldiers more concerned with killing the enemy than killing each other ... [it] makes Vietnam safe for the World War II combat film.”<sup>26</sup> Susan Sontag, writing amidst the vicissitudes of the ‘second’ war in Iraq, observes:

In the current political mood, the friendliest to the military in decades, the pictures of wretched hollow-eyed GIs that once seemed subversive of militarism and imperialism may seem inspirational. Their revised subject: ordinary American young men doing their unpleasant, ennobling duty.<sup>27</sup>

It is an easily bridgeable gap between this statement, and the critical and popular ecstasy that

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>25</sup> *Buffalo Soldiers* was slated for release in the week of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Centre, and was postponed more than once as distributors followed the fortunes of war in Afghanistan and then in Iraq.

<sup>26</sup> Doherty, ‘The New War Movies as Moral Rearmament’ (2005), 218.

<sup>27</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), 34.

followed *Saving Private Ryan* and those that have followed in its wake: War of Independence revenge-fantasy, *The Patriot*, the hyper-real effects and Playstation (anti)narrative of *Black Hawk Down*, the swashbuckling adventure of *U-571* (2001); and *Pearl Harbor* (2001), a nostalgic reflection on lantern-jawed machismo within the context of post-Gulf War smart bomb technology. *The Thin Red Line* is undoubtedly a part of this process. In spite of all its attempts to resist and subvert such easy categorization, its status as a Hollywood historical war film made during the period is important.

Against the mythologizing power of Hollywood, and the hagiographies and commemorations by public history media in the United States, one should recommend the following tonic by Raphael Samuel:

Ever since the 1978 *Past and Present* conference on 'the Invention of Tradition', and the publication of Hobsbawm and Ranger's influential collection of essays drawn from it, historians have become accustomed to thinking of commemoration as a cheat, something which ruling elites impose upon subaltern classes. It is a weapon of social control, a means of generating consensus, and legitimating the *status quo* by reference to a mythologized version of the past.<sup>28</sup>

Here is a clear distinction between the projects of popular and professional, or academic, history that operates at a deeper level than quibbles over biography and chronology. Films in particular, even as they are criticized by historians for inaccurate and distorted views of history, act as powerful confirmations of certain interpretations of past events.

Finally, though, the significant quality of the films noted above is innocence: an 'innocent' America provoked to war by Japan, and (only slightly less) innocent young men killed in battle. Within the context of more recent American historiography, Patricia Limerick claims that values attached to historical processes persist "even when the supporting economic and political structures have vanished," and that "among those persistent values, few have more power than the idea of

<sup>28</sup> Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, Volume 1 (1994), 16-17.

innocence.”<sup>29</sup> Seeking to move away from simplistic divisions between heroes and villains, Limerick suggests that contemporary stories of the American West have become more sophisticated:

In movies and novels, as well as in histories, the stories of men and women who both entered and created a moral wilderness have begun to replace the simple contests of savagery and civilization, cowboys and Indians, white hats and black hats.<sup>30</sup>

While I find her conclusion overly optimistic – movies, as I will show, may have tried to complicate heroes but they depend as much as ever on the binary opposition of irredeemable villains – her focus on the myth of innocence is important. Her examples of missionary Narcissa Prentiss Whitman and mass-killing gunfighter John Wesley Hardin complicate the notion of innocence because, despite appearances, in Limerick’s analysis Whitman makes an unlikely villain and Hardin an unlikely innocent. Whitman fully believes her missionary work is for good and cannot anticipate the consequences of the process which she represents (but of which her actions form only a small part), while Hardin sees the defense of personal honor and standing up for oneself as being the defense of innocence, even if it costs the life of another.

There is something of most of Malick’s protagonists in this: Kit and Bill defending Holly and Abby through violence, Witt and Welsh contesting the meaning of their actions in war, Pocahontas’s ‘conversion’ to Rebecca, and The Farmer as the American Adam, biting into his apple as truckloads of poorly paid migrant workers arrive to make him rich. Malick’s films are all, in some way, examinations of the “myth of innocence.” Fundamentally, innocence is a state of moral purity, not only without sin, but before sin; preliterate, before language teaches us to name – to separate and discriminate – and we are corrupted unavoidably by experience. In this state, making a morally right decision already represents a loss of innocence because it implies the need to judge what is right and

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<sup>29</sup> Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987), 36.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

wrong. To love, one must reach out to others – people and things – and yet in doing so, one is no longer innocent. Innocent, an adjective, can also simply mean not guilty in a legal context, but one must be aware of the differences here between adjective and noun, between being innocent, and a state of innocence. ‘Innocent’ used as a noun – the child is an innocent – introduces a different set of possibilities, as it can be referred in general terms to indicate children, or people who are *like* children. Furthermore, innocence applies to a purity of intention (paraphrasing Limerick, above), and to the simplicity of natural states. None of these terms, as will be seen, is uncomplicated or free from the burden of ideology; ‘innocence’ is called into use frequently in numerous contexts, and often under false or misguided pretenses. In the following section I will develop the myth of innocence, and its partner, nostalgia, in an examination of the historical film.

## “Libidinal Historicism”

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In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson describes the accelerating production of newness, the postmodern “addiction to the photographic image” as a symptom of “libidinal historicism.”<sup>31</sup> While Jameson goes on to investigate the “nostalgia film” as a pronounced manifestation of this “restructure[ing] of pastiche,” I would like to focus this idea on the historical film and its significance in the manufacturing and nurturing of myth.

My historiographic interest rests on two premises, the first being that film is an increasingly important producer of myth and purveyor of history, and that one should recognize its continuity in defining American identity over the past century. The second premise is that an understanding of the myths that are deeply embedded in contemporary films – so deeply embedded, in fact, that they have acquired the layers of other myths particular to film, such as the star system – requires an understanding of the historical development of these myths. William Deverell argues that

One hundred years ago, at the juncture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this country happened on the West as a vital if not the most vital component in explaining the structure of national identity. As the country exerted international influence, it turned inward in search of self-referents. The process had an inescapable logic to it: exporting America required packaging it first. That package had to be defined and explained before it could be commodified or quantified. Hence, the West as America: rugged, free, independent, ambitious.<sup>32</sup>

Deverell’s essay forms part of a collection dedicated to the centenary of Frederick Jackson Turner’s presentation, in 1893, of ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ and in quoting him,

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<sup>31</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Deverell, ‘Fighting Words’ (1996), 47.

I do not aim to ground my examination of myth and history within a regionalist debate. Indeed, the subtle shift in vocabulary from Turner's "significance of the frontier" to Deverell's "significance of the American West" demonstrates exactly the kind of process I am interested in. Turner's sense of a place defining American character has developed (and splintered) into numerous interrelated histories of the West that, while critiquing Turner's single narrative approach has complicated the continuing sense of the West as a distinct place. Deverell exhorts the reader to "[scrap] old notions, one being the arbitrary divide between nineteenth and twentieth centuries,"<sup>33</sup> and I believe that film is a crucial conveyor of momentum from one century to the next, quickly transforming the iconography of landscape painting and photography, and the literature of journalism, travel writing and novel, into vibrant and powerful new myths. As I will show, these myths have taken on new and sometimes unexpected forms on screen, partly because of the social and political environment in which films are made, and partly because of developments within the medium of film itself. Thus the intention in the following section is to construct an historical framework for the investigation of the myths, particularly as they are evident in Malick's films. This framework draws on a variety of histories, from the sociological and physical thesis of the frontier by Turner (and his critics), to new western history, environmental history, and, importantly, art history which traces the development of myths in painting, photography, and monumental art.

In analyzing the genesis of the Western movie and its continuance of 19<sup>th</sup> century frontier myths, Slotkin argues:

The power of historiographic and political hypotheses, which written history represents abstractly as the interaction of large "forces," becomes concrete on the screen in the spectacle of masses of troops in battle and crowds in violent movement. Through repeated usage, "spectacle" itself becomes a visual sign whose presence the audience would recognize as signifying the presence of "the historical."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>34</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), 241.

In emphasizing the significance of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) as a transformational film in this respect, Slotkin footnotes:

The relationship between spectacle and melodrama in Griffith's work has a consistent ideological meaning. The "melodrama" makes the individual (and his or her most intimate circle of relations) the moral center of the world; which is assaulted by "history," editorially associated "with the huge, spectacular environment and with the masses whose mob mind [is] dramatized upon the screen." In Griffith's cinematic universe ... the history made by mass movements is inherently regressive.<sup>35</sup>

The model that Griffith helped establish during film's development from sideshow fascination to grand spectacle (and from entertainment to edification) is fundamental to the historical film today.<sup>36</sup> While nostalgically promoting an idealized past before invasion or cruel fate enters the frame, Griffith emphasized the resolutely linear path of the individual progressive hero who triumphs over an evil system, personified by a singularly cruel villain. In *Birth of a Nation*, Griffith depicted a recent historical past, and based his film on an even more recent novel, creating a believable synthesis between personal drama and historical process. The result of Griffith's pioneering showmanship and cavalier history has produced two particular qualities of history on film: history as event and history as experience.

One of the ways film constructs history, according to Robert Rosenstone, is that it can convincingly communicate the "look" of the past: "period clothing does not hang limply on a dummy" but rather "expresses the moving body."<sup>37</sup> As a result, film has the potential for "the myth of facticity ... the mistaken notion that mimesis is all ... that things themselves *are* history," hence the

<sup>35</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), 708, fn34. Here Slotkin cites *Focus on D.W. Griffith*, edited by Harry M. Geduld, 1971.

<sup>36</sup> In this context, the contribution of Italian filmmakers and the Italian film industry in the first decade of the twentieth century should also be recognized. See, for example, Bondanella, *Italian Cinema* (2001), 1-6; Sklar, *Film* (2002), 55-61; and Solomon, *The Ancient World in Cinema* (2001), particularly 1-8, 47-49.

pronounced growth in the production of historical drama on film.<sup>37</sup> Because of their perceived influence over public opinion and their almost folkloric position as educational narratives, many history films become part of a fraught, though profitable, contest involving the discipline of academic history and the film industry. Appropriating a term from Richard Evans, I would suggest that this relationship is a “deaf dialogue.”<sup>38</sup> Filmmakers recruit historians to ‘recreate’ the look of the past, a patina of period authenticity, though generally the professional historian will always come second to the demands of narrative structure and character arcs. Similarly, professional historians are resistant to the idea that history can be properly depicted on screen, though they recognize that history on film is very popular because of its often epic scope.

Historical process on film thus increasingly becomes historical ‘event,’ the backdrop to a tale of innocence lost. In this formulation, character (through individual heroism and sentimentality) and history (through a collision of frequently manipulated events) intersect in suitably dramatic fashion. The individual character’s simple (and noble) life is horribly affected, and altered irrevocably by the forces of history (usually political gain at terrific human cost). Thus, for example, in *Braveheart*, the society of twelfth-century Scotland is revealed to us through the story of William Wallace (a real figure whose life is manipulated in the service of the narrative);<sup>39</sup> and *Pearl Harbor* and *Titanic* are evoked as ‘events’ through the invention of fictional figures, so that we might better understand what the event would have been like *in reality*.

If the increased sophistication of digital effects enriches the backdrop of the narrative to render it more pictorially believable, then the new technological arsenals of sound effects editing and

<sup>37</sup> Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past* (1995), 59-60 (author’s emphasis).

<sup>38</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History* (1997), 11. Evans uses the phrase in his discussion on historical epistemology and the relationship between philosophers of history and practicing historians.

<sup>39</sup> Randall Wallace, who wrote the film’s script, acknowledges that his major literary and historical source for the film was Blind Harry’s *Wallace*, composed sometime in the late fifteenth century and translated by William Hamilton in 1722. See Anderson, *Braveheart* (2005), 18, 27, 42.

reproduction have emphasized the second quality of filmed history: history as experience. For example, as a viewer, one learns very little of the history of D-Day in *Saving Private Ryan* (compared, for example, to the painstaking buildup in Zanuck's *The Longest Day*, 1962), just as one gains little understanding of the reason for United States armed forces being present in Mogadishu in *Black Hawk Down* (2001). However, in both films one is overwhelmed – and relentless marketing plays its part – by the films' attempts to recreate the reality of the experience of those who were there. Particularly in battle scenes, these two qualities – event and experience – come together to spectacular effect and form natural narrative climaxes for historical films.

*Braveheart* sees the invasion of an evil colonialist power into the simple life of Wallace through the brutally intimate custom of 'first nighting', and out of personal tragedy Wallace eventually leads the Scots against the English in pitched battle. This is history in the sweep of a sword as the terrible personal violence visited on Wallace (and, more importantly, his wife) is transformed into a nationalist campaign for freedom. Similarly in *The Patriot*, Benjamin Martin leads a quiet life of broken rocking chairs before the Revolutionary War intervenes and claims the life of (eventually) two of his sons. Significantly, Martin has no desire to fight and in a crucial early scene makes his case plainly heard to his contemporaries, including a military friend who seeks independence from Britain. Here, innocence is simplicity, seen in the film's happy slaves reminiscent of *Gone with the Wind*, and Martin's ongoing attempts to make a rocking chair that doesn't break. Of course, Martin, like Wallace, is forced to fight and his bloodthirstiness shocks everyone, particularly his own children; however, he is redeemed – especially in the eyes of the audience – by the sheer overriding evil of his British opponent (Colonel Tavington). I use the word 'opponent' deliberately to suggest that we frequently forget we are watching a film about the Revolutionary War because the narrative is so obviously about Martin's lust for revenge. In typical fashion (see also Antoine Fuqua's 'tribal' *King Arthur*, 2004), Martin and Tavington see each other on the field of battle and meet man

to man, fighting to Tavington's death which coincides synecdochically with the defeat of the British. The denouement, which sees Martin starting up a new life with his sister-in-law is meant, as far as possible, to suggest that the appalling violence we have witnessed was only in the cause of independence and the birth of a new era, and that Martin will happily return to the state he enjoyed at the film's opening. He is free, not only of the British, but also of the historical claims made upon him.

In these films one is presented with innocence as a counter to bloodshed (symbolized, for example, by the scene where Martin melts down his dead son's lead soldiers to make bullets), as well as innocence as simplicity, a state that exists before and after a period of political upheaval. Worryingly, the 'simple' image of Martin as a man who just wants to get up in the morning and build a better rocking chair is based on the real figure of Francis Marion, a man renowned not only for his military prowess, but also for his appalling treatment of slaves and Native Americans.

In *Pearl Harbor*, airforce pilots Danny and Rafe's ideal island life in Hawaii is overshadowed by, initially, the war in Europe – leading to the tragic love saga involving Evelyn – but is ultimately acted upon most directly by the attack on Pearl Harbour. Director Michael Bay's opening and concluding scenes situate the narrative within the traditional model where war turns boys into men, as he moves from the open cropland of the mid-West through America's darkest day and (another) loss of innocence, towards an attempted rebuilding of that pre-war idyll. Significantly, the images that are intercut with the approaching Japanese bombers are symbolically innocent – children playing baseball and little girls in angel costumes (all at ten to eight in the morning).

*Titanic* shares with *Pearl Harbor* a title that indicates a narrative grounded in historical 'fact' – in marketing jargon, it is what it says on the can. We know by the name of the ship that we will see its demise, just as we know by the name of the place, that we will witness its destruction, in both

cases with the terrible loss of human life.<sup>40</sup> But in both films, the historical event in question serves only as a climax to the vicissitudes of the characters' romance – we all know that the 'event' is coming to disrupt the lives of the characters. In *Titanic*, Jack and Rose's melodramatically, and increasingly heated romance (realized visually in Rose's hand pawing at the condensation on the car window as she and Jack have sex) is set up only to be interrupted by the fateful collision. And in *Pearl Harbor*, Rafe and Danny wake up in a car after their fist fight over Evelyn to the ominous sound of droning Zeroes overhead; the Japanese attack becomes the crucible for their reconciliation. History is carefully held back until the perfect moment, and then unleashed in a fury of special effects that explodes or drowns the majority of the cast.

Both films end with a wistful return to a less complicated moment. After Rose dies in the present, the audience is treated to a galling fantasy of young Rose and Jack ascending the staircase of the ship together, watched by those who persecuted their romance before the ship went down (contemporary middle-class audiences are not allowed to feel bad about the treatment of an honest working-class lad like Jack). *Pearl Harbor's* Hawksian triangle is broken by Danny's death leaving Rafe and Evelyn (with Danny's child) to reconstitute the nuclear family back on the farm where it started when Rafe and Danny were children.

The characters' loss of innocence and the 'new beginning' which ends both narratives is worked out against an event the audience is either aware of before entering (via the title) or is made aware of through subtitling and/or prologues. This relationship between personal narrative and historical 'event' is generally the right formula for the box office; despite allegations of numerous and egregious errors of basic chronology and historical fact, *Braveheart* was both a critical and popular success, and while *The Patriot* and *Pearl Harbor* may not have been quite as successful as was

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<sup>40</sup> Contrarily, *Braveheart* and *The Patriot* have titles that evoke an emotive association and nothing about the eras in which the films are set.

hoped, *Titanic* fixed the celluloid image of the perfect romance for a whole new generation of filmgoers.<sup>41</sup>

No other film in recent years has utilized this model as seductively – has been so “libidinally historicist” – with as much success as *Forrest Gump* (1994). A simple tale told by a simple man, *Gump* was either a “reassuring fantasy of a man who, in an almost mythic way, can transcend our divisions and heal the scars of the past,”<sup>42</sup> or “an orgy of forgetfulness and media glibness where obliviousness parading as purity, stupidity parading as honesty, and xenophobia and narcissism parading as patriotism triumph over gross misrepresentations of the countercultural values of the Sixties and Seventies.”<sup>43</sup> From the moment the buffeted feather drifted coyly into shot (in a mesmerizing *f/x* tour-de-force) audiences were mostly hooked, and either saw in the film’s dubious politics what they wanted to see, or decided that, in the spirit of Gump’s *savoir faire*, the film was not really about history or politics at all. Either way, *Forrest Gump* was box office chocolate and Academy gold, producing a cottage industry of *Gump*-related nostalgia (two volumes of the soundtrack) and wisdom (the book of Gump-isms).

For many, *Forrest Gump*’s ‘victory’ over *Pulp Fiction* at the 1994 Academy Awards was a triumph of values over amorality. Forrest brings up his son in a world where bigotry and promiscuity are punished, and reconciliation and compromise triumph; but the film also espoused a selective withdrawal from the world “out there” where Forrest’s mother prostitutes herself for his education, and where assassinated leaders are all the same – Wallace, Kennedy, King – a periodization free from political commitment.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> For a defense of *Braveheart* and the critical storm around the film, see Anderson, *Braveheart* (2005), 39-50; and McArthur, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots* (2003), 123-136, 160-208.

<sup>42</sup> Chumo, “You’ve got to put the past behind you before you can move on” (1995), 7.

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum in Kehr, “Who Framed Forrest Gump?” (1995), 45.

<sup>44</sup> Compare, for example, the cinematic Gump’s mantra “Mama always said, life was like a box of chocolates” with the literary Gump’s opening declaration: “Let me say this: bein a idiot is no box of chocolates.” Groom, *Forrest Gump* (1994), 9.

The broader argument is that both films represented a peculiarly postmodern approach to history, whether it was John Travolta aping himself (as the character Tony Manero from *Saturday Night Fever*), or Tom Hanks (as Gump) apparently shaking hands with President Lyndon Johnson.

Jameson writes:

Everything in our culture suggests that we have not ... ceased to be preoccupied by history; indeed, at the very moment in which we complain, as here of the eclipse of historicity, we also universally diagnose contemporary culture as irredeemably historicist, in the bad sense of an omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions; indeed, for all the styles and fashions of a dead past.<sup>45</sup>

In a perverse way, the image has become so degraded as to assume a kind of innocence, constantly redeployed in new contexts and being seen 'innocently' by new audiences. Whether liberated from the dead hands of the past, or jettisoned into a miasma of valueless drifting icons, the reconstitution of the image-in-text offers a fresh start, a chance to start over with a new audience. Tom Hanks meets John F. Kennedy. We believe we see what the Titanic looked like when it went down, symbolically reinforced by the representative last eye-witness dying during the narrative.

Innocence as either naïveté or withdrawal in all these cases becomes the natural state disrupted by history, providing the 'historical' film with its narrative shape in the traditional three-act manner. Innocence is bliss; history as event intervenes, leading the characters either to seek a recovery of that lost moment, or to forge a new opportunity to start over. In the two- or three-hour passage of a film, this becomes a seduction, a way of drawing us into the narrative via our identification with the central protagonists, and our piqued interest in recognizing the history that lurks in the background.

I would like to suggest that, in Malick's films, 'innocence' is made part of a cyclical historical process whereby a society experiences a loss of innocence, then seeks to rebuild or recapture that

<sup>45</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), 286.

'lost' moment, only to succumb to the trauma of a subsequent event. Part of this trauma is not the effect of the event itself, but the trauma of inevitability – that no matter how hard people try to resist outside interference and retain their sense of self and place, it is inevitable that such a state of untouchable isolation will be shattered. In all of Malick's films there is a tension between an intimate individuality – his characters are often seen alone, and their narration sounds like a diary or confessional – and the overriding sense that their individuality doesn't matter. Kit and Holly have the floor for a brief period, but Kit is killed by the state, and Holly returns to domestic anonymity, to the recognition that she has "no personality". Bill is another tragically ambitious man (killed by the state again) while Abby melts into a crowd of soldiers and Linda skips off into an uncertain future. In *The Thin Red Line*, Witt earns the remembrance, and a furtive tear, from the pragmatic and cynical Welsh, but once again it is a film about individuals being overwhelmed by the event in which they find themselves. This is, of course, true of most war films which seek to depict the immensity of war and the destruction of young lives, but in Malick's war film there is no Stryker (*Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949)), Miller (*Saving Private Ryan*), or Welsh (in the 1964 version of *The Thin Red Line*) – no 'father' to die so that the troops might discover their true selves and the value of the father's sacrifice. Colonel Tall, like General Patton, excoriates us on the nature of military leadership in battle, but Tall is not left to walk off poetically, fulfilling his belief in his reincarnation as a great warrior on the battlefields of ancient Greece. In *The New World*, we are probably more emotionally invested in Pocahontas than any of Malick's characters, but this is as much a product of her manipulation and destruction by political forces as her individual identity. Smith is mostly a cipher, even his final words to Pocahontas (now Rebecca Rolfe) take the form of a seafaring metaphor: "Did you find your Indies, John?" she asks, to which he replies, "I may have sailed past them."

Each of Malick's films leaves us with its society in flux, and individuals on the move: Holly onto a fateful meeting with her attorney; Abby and Linda along the railroad tracks, one way or

another; the men of Charlie Company steaming off to another island and another battle; and Rolfe with his young son returning to a colony whose peaceful coexistence with the Powhatan is built on his wife, now dead. These characters move along with the current, leaving behind those who literally didn't make it, overwhelmed by a world in which they have little choice. Malick's films evade the firm grasp of historical periodization by failing to state an explicit time period, and yet they suggest enough through material embedded in the narrative to evoke a time and a place. Thus, while it is tempting to say that the films depict the "loss of innocence" of a particular age, such a deduction really repeats the superficial understanding of innocence as outlined briefly in the case of the Hollywood historical film above. I shall now examine the myth of innocence and its relation to history more fully.

## “Building Regret”: The Myth of Innocence

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Arthur Schlesinger Jr., in his formulation of the cyclical nature of America’s history, not only questions the idea of innocence in American history, but, crucially, also identifies the recurrence of such beliefs.

We carelessly apply the phrase “end of innocence” to one or another stage of American history. This is an amiable flourish when not a pernicious delusion. How many times can a nation lose its innocence? No people reared on Calvin and Tacitus could ever have been very innocent. No nation founded on invasion, conquest and slaughter was innocent ... The Constitution did not assume the innocence of man, not even those men blessed enough to be Americans.<sup>46</sup>

In rejecting the oscillation of history between opposite positions of “tradition” and “counter-tradition”, Schlesinger (via his father) opts for a cyclical model, a spiral “in which the alternation proceed[s] at successively higher levels and allow[s] for the cumulation of change.”<sup>47</sup> What is particularly significant about this model is that, like Emerson’s horizons, in completing the cycle one does not return to the original state but, instead, moves ineluctably upward. This is the essential American problem: a need to ‘progress’ in the world, challenged by a desire to move back, to return to a time and place that was new, released from the dead grip of Old Europe. Of the Revolutionary moment, Donald Pease writes:

Everyone who fought in the war did so for the sake of national freedom. But after the war Americans had to invent an identity for the nation, and a national character to match it. When the mythos of the Revolution made it necessary for them to give up their personal pasts for the sake of the new nation, it left them with no sense of

<sup>46</sup> Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cyclical of American History* (1986), 10.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

national interest other than this act of dispossession. Consequently, many Americans based their American identity on the inability to distinguish their personal identities from the national identity.<sup>48</sup>

For Pease, this is a formative moment where identity is caught between the inexorable onward march (western expansion and “Manifest Destiny”, for example) and the anxious need to remain new, to always be ‘at the beginning.’ Such moments of anxiety, tests of national identity, have arisen frequently since the Revolutionary War, as have the beleaguered attempts to recover what was lost; to capture, if not original innocence (a revision in the nineteenth century of the Calvinist doctrine of original sin), then some kind of innocence at least.

In his famous essay, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History,’ Frederick Jackson Turner sees in the evolution of the frontier the most American facet of American history.

Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.<sup>49</sup>

As Henry Nash Smith has observed, Turner’s “hypothesis” not only sought to explain America politically and economically but also identified America’s unique character as indigenous by countering two prevailing attitudes at the time.

Turner maintained that the West, not the proslavery South or antislavery North, was the most important among American sections, and that the novel attitudes and institutions produced by the frontier, especially through its encouragement of democracy, had been more significant than the imported European heritage in shaping American society.<sup>50</sup>

Nature’s bounty and the possibility of its cultivation lay at the heart of American democracy; the

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<sup>48</sup> Pease, *Visionary Compacts* (1987), 23.

<sup>49</sup> Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ (1962), 1.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land* (1978), 250.

land itself forced a change on the men and women who settled it and who were of the right character, having left Europe to escape its choking aristocratic grip.<sup>51</sup> It is important to recognize that Turner's historiography is itself mythic in the sense that his thesis (the Frontier as a model of political, economic and social development) has become subsumed by the proclamation with which it is associated (the 'closure' of the frontier as an historical event). The timing of its appearance – at the moment of America's grand entrance as a world industrial power at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 – suggests Turner's impeccable anticipation of a turning point in American culture and identity. In fact, Slotkin points out:

As a purely material entity, the Frontier was far from closed. More public land would be taken up and brought into production between 1890 and 1920 than during the supposed heyday of the western frontier in the decades that followed the passage of the Homestead Act (1862).<sup>52</sup>

Francis Jennings contends that the entire thesis is a fallacy: Europeans had settled on the west coast and in what is now Canada long before the westward advance, in Turner's words, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization."<sup>53</sup> Jennings literally maps out the colonial incursions into North America, including the Spanish, who were in California "when the American Revolution was beginning 3,000 miles away," and the French colonists who had moved up the St Lawrence and Mississippi Rivers before the Jamestown and Plymouth colonies of the English were established.<sup>54</sup> Two aspects of Jennings's rebuttal of Turner are worth noting here: firstly, that Turner's 'civilized advance' is really the movement of "the sovereignty and political administration of the British crown followed by the government of the United States." Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, is the

<sup>51</sup> For a discussion on women's views of settlement, see Kolodny, *The Land Before Her* (1984).

<sup>52</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), 30.

<sup>53</sup> Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1962), 3.

<sup>54</sup> Jennings, *The Founders of America* (1994), 173. Jennings's map 'Major Paths of Entry by Europeans' appears on page 174.

ideology supporting Turner's "free land".

Turner adopted his point of view so completely that he waved aside the entire human population of North America by word magic. In his writings the land became simply wilderness, more specifically "free land," which a disciple correctly translated into "land free to be taken."<sup>55</sup>

Jennings concludes brusquely: "It should be evident from even so cursory a review that Turnerian 'frontier history' is a myth that must be rejected and ignored by students of history," though one might add that it should not be ignored by students of myth.<sup>56</sup> In fact, it should not be ignored at all, if only because the Frontier is more significant now as a mythic space than as a historical theory. Alun Munslow eloquently integrates the mythic cast of Turner's thesis into contemporary interpretations of the colonial advance:

Turner *manufactured* what, in another context, the American urban planner Edward W. Soja has referred to as a historical geography of capitalism, and created as history a frontier experience which Michel Foucault might cast not as a utopia but as a heterotopia – a real place of cultural displacement and cultural creation.<sup>57</sup>

In terms of his thesis, it is notable that Turner couches his proposal in the language of evolution, for example, when he writes: "The United States lies like a huge page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution."<sup>58</sup> The Frontier becomes more than a shifting geographical zone, or even an historical process: it is a unique testing ground for social and historical hypothesis. Turner also believes in the palimpsest, a metaphor he applies throughout to explain the development of states as they evolve through various stages of agricultural settlement to industry. "As successive terminal moraines results from

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 175, 172-173.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>57</sup> Munslow, *Discourse and Culture* (1992), 7 (my emphasis).

<sup>58</sup> Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1962), 11.

successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it," Turner writes, introducing the geological metaphors that also characterize the essay.<sup>59</sup>

In a sense Turner's thesis is also cyclical as he sees in the westward advance not only an ever-growing distance from Europe, but also the constant reinvention of American life at the edge of the frontier.

The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people – to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life ... Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area.<sup>60</sup>

Turner's words hint at the importance of the relationship between city and frontier; "the complexity of city life" suggests, again, a kind of cultural Darwinism, an irreversible and natural movement towards greater civilization that previously did not exist in these areas before the Frontier swept over the western horizon. Slotkin describes the specific economic dependence of the city on the new frontier:

Each new Frontier not only extended the American Metropolis, it made possible a progressive improvement: an increase in wealth, an occasion for technological invention, a new source of productive resources, a new outlet for the productions of the Metropolis itself.<sup>61</sup>

Here the word 'progress' becomes important; one should note the shift from its meaning of "movement towards a destination" to "advance or development towards completion, betterment;

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* (1985), 36.

improvement.”<sup>62</sup> Slotkin acknowledges the context in which it is used – “progressive improvement” – whereas in Turner, one finds that progress in itself *means* improvement:

Stand at the Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file – the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer – and the frontier has passed by.<sup>63</sup>

Turner’s use of the word ‘advance’ is also worth noting. In ‘The Significance of the Frontier,’ Turner uses the word (or variations thereof) thirty-one times, and it is a trait that is not as apparent in his other essays. The word carries within it two linked but also different meanings: one is the notion of physical advancement of a line, the literal westward movement of pioneers; while the other meaning is one of evolutionary ‘advancement’ or development. It lends the essay a particularly aggressive tone that seems to hammer home the belief that the West needs such advancement, ironic given that the essay is really about the ‘closing’ of the frontier. The result is a feeling of frustrated energy, not a cautionary tone that would seek to arrest the ferocious transformation of the landscape. Turner feels that the ‘significance of the frontier’ lies more in the birth of robust Americanism than the actual physical state of that frontier, and the future of the ‘new land’ now that the frontier is closed. And so, while Turner concludes that “the frontier has gone and with its going has closed the first period of American history,”<sup>64</sup> he also looks forward confidently:

He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (1990), 953.

<sup>63</sup> Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History,’ 12.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Acknowledging this dynamic sense of the Frontier – investing physical place with national ‘character’ – is crucial to understanding the significance of Turner’s thesis. Munslow writes that “the ideological colonisation of the past in the shape of the appropriation of certain myths and symbols remains a necessity for those wishing to reconstruct the present,”<sup>66</sup> and the Turnerian era of American history is a vital stage in the construction of America’s sense of self in the turbulent decades of the early twentieth century. On the eve of World War I, one finds Turner still zealously proud of American exceptionalism but cautious in his anticipation of America’s place in a changing world.

The swift and inevitable current of the upper reaches of the nation’s history has borne it to the broader expanse and slower stretches which mark the nearness of the level sea. The vessel, no longer carried along by rushing waters, finds it necessary to determine its own directions on this new ocean of its future, to give conscious consideration to its motive power and to its steering gear.<sup>67</sup>

Turner also noted America changing within its borders. “The national problem is no longer how to cut and burn away the vast screen of the dense and daunting forest; it is how to save and widely use the remaining timber ... No longer is it a question of how to avoid or cross the Great Plains and arid desert. It is a question of how to conquer those rejected lands by new method of farming ...”<sup>68</sup> For the contemporary reader, Turner’s caution is no great comfort; natural resources are terminal, and it is frightening to think how quickly land becomes “rejected” after the displacement of its original inhabitants.

The inevitable process of reviewing and revising the nineteenth-century rhetoric of westward ‘advance’ also involves looking closely at those who saw the dangers in such a belief at the time.

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<sup>66</sup> Munslow, *Discourse and Culture* (1992), 7.

<sup>67</sup> Turner, ‘The West and American Ideals’ (1962), 290-291. This essay was originally a Commencement Address given at the University of Washington, June 17, 1914.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 293-294.

Albert Boime neatly articulates the paradox of Thomas Cole's wealthy patrons being so enamored of his paintings that they destroyed the vistas he depicted:

On the one hand, their conditions for success depended on the razing of the wilderness and the cultivation of a splendid civilization, while with each inch of cultivated soil a little piece of their innocence disappeared. There was no way not to glorify the material development as progress, and there was no way to avoid its results.<sup>69</sup>

Boime suggests at this early point in his argument that such an unavoidable conflict is a “losing game”, but it is a loss perceived by Cole and not by his patrons. Indeed, for Robert Hughes, “it was Cole who introduced in painting the terms of the great debate over natural resources which has preoccupied Americans ever since.”<sup>70</sup> Cole's most famous project – a series of five paintings called *The Course of Empire* (1831-1836) – charts the evolution and destruction of man in nature, “an individual voyage through life, in which mortality is recognized through the discovery of the untameable forces of nature.”<sup>71</sup> Such recognition is not seen in the developers, prospectors, surveyors, and pioneers of Boime's study for whom nature is conquered and put to better use: by his conclusion – which culminates in a stinging attack on Mount Rushmore – one has the sense that the “debate over natural resources” was never a debate at all. For example, Matthew Maury declared in 1852 that

The Amazon is not only a great country, but it is a glorious wilderness and waste, which, under the improvement and progress of the age, would soon be to blossom like a rose. We have, therefore, but to let loose upon it the engines of commerce – the steamer, the emigrant, the printing press, the axe, and the plough – and it will teem with life.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze* (1991), 8.

<sup>70</sup> Hughes, *American Visions* (1997), 146.

<sup>71</sup> Zapotka, *The American Landscape* (1995), 14.

<sup>72</sup> In Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze* (1991), 67.

Moreover, Maury states that “our people of the Mississippi [have a] right” to develop the Amazon, displaying the limitless ambition of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and its age of “improvement and progress.” Between Maury’s aggressive expansionist claims, and Thomas Hart Benton’s enthusiastic declaration that westward pioneers should “pierce the Rocky Mountains, and hew their highest crag into a statue of Columbus”<sup>73</sup> (manifested in spirit by Gutzon Borglum at Mount Rushmore almost a hundred years later), one is presented with at least a part of American nineteenth century society that was not concerned with “little pieces of innocence” and soil cultivated an inch at a time. Boime best articulates his thesis when he writes:

The magisterial gaze resolved the paradox of “the machine in the garden,” linking the pastoral ideal with the wild and civilized zones as part of a visual and, therefore, historical transition. The need to retain the pastoral fantasy to counter the capitalist hegemony lies behind the drive to find new frontiers: each realization of civil and technical society betrays the fantasy, and hence the pressure to discover new ones – including the latest in outer space – to begin the lie all over again.<sup>74</sup>

The “lie” of the new frontier is not only in the service of discovering new utopias of unspoiled wilderness, but also serves a nostalgic function, as Boime argues in his discussion of Jasper Cropsey’s 1865 commission *The Valley of Wyoming* (significantly, the site of a massacre in 1778):

If the implications of conflict with the Native Americans are evaded, Cropsey invokes nostalgia for the primitive to infuse his work with the feeling of the sublime. The systematic destruction of the Native Americans in Pennsylvania may be justified by reducing them to the barbarians of the Wyoming Massacre episode and at the same time be exploited as a silent signifier of the good old days that can never be recovered.<sup>75</sup>

It is important to note here the close relationship between the American landscape artists of the nineteenth century, and the topographical expeditions which constantly mapped out new territory to

<sup>73</sup> In Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze* (1991), 146.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-114.

settle, initially for land prospectors, and then for railway developers. The vast canvases served multiple functions; depicting the detail of the land, complementing the scientific survey maps with an artist's gaze, and baldly advertizing the land to eager developers in the East. It is no accident that two of the most influential 'schools' of the time – the Rocky Mountain and Hudson River schools – were not only landscape schools, but were named after specific geographical features.

One technological development seems to lie at the nexus of the need to record the American landscape and the desire to represent it, or Cole's paradox as stated above. Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock writes in the preface to her 1967 dissertation *The Influence of Photography on American Landscape Painting, 1839-1880* that

By the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only landscape painting could compete successfully with photography for American popular interest. This it did by adopting the aesthetic of the photographer, recording the American scene and the spectacular views of other continents with meticulous detail and scientific precision.<sup>76</sup>

She explains this rapid development of photography as resulting from a number of interrelated issues, among them the "idea of America as a nation newly conceived and free of outworn traditions and conventions; an almost pantheistic reverence for nature as emanation of God's creativity," and "a predilection for the specific and recognizable view, above all for the scenery that bolstered the national pride."<sup>77</sup> The overlap of painting and photography in the realization of these artistic goals is such that they begin to work in concert, with some painters using photographs as the basis for their paintings, or even becoming photographers themselves. Significantly, like many of the major landscape painters who accompanied survey expeditions, early photographers like Carlton Watkins were linked to those interested in exploiting the land, either through mining or the growth of

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<sup>76</sup> Lindquist-Cock, *The Influence of Photography on American Landscape Painting* (1977), v.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

railways.<sup>78</sup> Thus, depictions of the land recorded its appearance as realistically as possible, and also represented to the patron what had been overcome in the transformation of raw wilderness to capitalist wealth.

It can be argued that, either through the extreme photorealism of painters like Bierstadt and Church, or through photography itself, nature – no matter how high or far – could no longer resist the inquisitive human eye. Indeed, such an undressing of nature is suggested by another of the famous landscape painters of the day, Asher B. Durand, when he says that the artist should

Scrupulously accept whatever she (nature) presents him, until he shall, in a degree have become intimate with her infinity, and then he may approach her on more familiar terms, even venturing to choose and reject some portions of her unbounded wealth.<sup>79</sup>

Though early ‘photographs’ were widely disseminated and commercially popular, the practice of photography still remained the preserve of specific individuals for much of the second half of the nineteenth century: cumbersome, time-consuming, and complicated, photography was not properly democratized as a process until the late 1880s with the development of flexible paper roll film and the release of George Eastman’s Kodak camera. The development of photography is thus closely allied with the advance of the frontier, becoming an art form for the people at about the time the frontier closes, and, in Turner’s optimistic terms, democracy is fully realized.

At the time of photography’s nascency the medium must have seemed like, if not a loss of innocence, then certainly a kind of corruption. What was left that could not be captured – an aggressive and acquisitive term – by the camera? Worse still, by 1894 with Röntgen’s invention of

<sup>78</sup> Phillips, ‘To Subdue the Continent’ (1996), 18.

<sup>79</sup> Lindquist-Cock, *The Influence of Photography on American Landscape Painting* (1977), 24. This is not far from the theory outlined by Linda Williams (from Freud and Foucault) in *Hard Core* that pornography is the outcome, at least socially and psychologically, of male desire to know the “secret of her mechanism,” 53. Williams links this to the fetishization of the human (particularly female) body that flickers at the very first moments of the film medium, a further ‘undressing’ based, once again, on the scientific impulse to understand more about the realities of the world by seeing them in detail with one’s own eyes. “With the invention of cinema ... fetishism and voyeurism gained new importance and normality through their link to the positivist quest for the truth of visible phenomena,” 46. For a full discussion, see *Hard Core* (1989), 34-57.

the X-ray, a method had been developed whereby one could even look inside the human body. The physical and mental integrity of the individual human being was rapidly eroding, rendered vulnerable by science (through technology and psychology), and now becoming a fragmentary system to be fixed by medicine and psychiatry. This was a far cry from the Frontier individual – robust and resilient bodies and souls like Daniel Boone – who had pioneered the new West. The hardy frontier adventurer (including both army cavalymen and landless Indian warriors) was now performing in the trickshot circus of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show which wowed audiences in Europe and at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, or else was increasingly part of a living urban mass, part of a workforce.<sup>80</sup> Turner's colonist, reduced to "planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick" was now a man who built a machine to build machines.<sup>81</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century America was, no doubt, more American than ever, but it was an achievement that had come at a price. For one, the nation had been properly born only out of a most destructive and costly Civil War, a conflict that signalled the emergence of mechanized warfare and a process that would promote the United States to world dominance after World War I, the apotheosis of the mechanized war. The Civil War was an archetypal American dispute – the rights of the individual, or groups of individuals versus the will of the federal government, statehood versus nationhood. Thus a man chose to obey the laws of Virginia, but not those imposed upon him by the government, metonymically represented by Washington, now the city, no longer the man who significantly returned to a simple agrarian life after leading his country to freedom from European rule.

Nearly a century after Turner's landmark thesis, his "wave of civilization" becomes the "heliotropic plague" of "itinerant degenerates bleeding westward" in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood*

<sup>80</sup> Technically, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show operated independently from the Exposition. See, for example, Larson *Devil in the White City* (2004), 133, 222-223, 250-251, 284, 286, 327, 381.

<sup>81</sup> Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1962), 4.

*Meridian* which parodies the nineteenth-century Western novel while fusing the myths of the frontier with bloody apocrypha.<sup>82</sup> McCarthy's project (as with many other writers, artists and filmmakers) is to demythologize the western frontier, to challenge the power of myth to "affirm as good the distribution of authority and power that ideology rationalizes."<sup>83</sup> However, there can be no myth-less frontier now, and so each new depiction and reevaluation is an engagement with a behemoth, an engorging mythology that is no longer a narrative but a "constellation of compelling metaphors."<sup>84</sup>

Slotkin's dialectical construction of the Frontier myth is most explicitly evident in the following passage that also introduces an element that is central to Malick's work:

The "Frontier" was the border between a world of possibilities and one of actualities, a world theoretically unlimited and one defined by its limitations. On one side of the line lay great wealth, and a suspension of normal limitations of law and probability, a dreamworld in which infantile omnipotence became a possibility for the grown man; on the other side lay relative poverty, the necessity of labour and sacrifice, the requirement of sharing.<sup>85</sup>

This division seems especially apt in *Days of Heaven*, even though the film takes place after the Frontier "closes." Bill, in particular, attempts to live this ideal frontier existence, after escaping the industrial hell that the Metropolis has become. Borne by rail to a new life, his desire for wealth is made possible by scheming to inherit the Farmer's bonanza through the reinvention of himself and his relationship with Abby and Linda. In a dreamy episode he walks through the fields in the evening as if he owns them, his contemplation juxtaposed with shots of a herd of quietly grazing bison. However, that dream is violently undone, destroying the Farmer, his farm, and Bill, who, when he runs, has no new territory into which he can flee, to begin again once more.

<sup>82</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (1986), 78.

<sup>83</sup> Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* (1985), 19.

<sup>84</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973), 6.

<sup>85</sup> Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* (1985), 45.

It is also worth noting Slotkin's use of inverted commas for "Frontier" indicating the difference between Frontier as place, and "Frontier" as myth, a mark of the contemporary ambivalence with which the 'progressive' late nineteenth-century idea of the frontier is viewed. In 1920, there is evidence of this ambivalence in Turner himself. A student taking notes in his class writes of the conquered Indians – "failure to use resources will submit people to subordination of a superior type which does" – yet also records Turner's belief that the occupation of the Black Hills was a betrayal of the Sioux.<sup>86</sup> However, from a contemporary perspective, Turner's essay seems poised somewhere between the righteousness and self-belief of the settlers – a kind of innocence in the firm belief that something wholly new was being forged in America – and the realization of what has been lost that gathers steam as the individual ideal of the frontier is ploughed under in the twentieth-century by technological developments created by the pioneer generations. As Richard Rodriguez notes sourly, "they broke their backs to build our regret," a succinct encapsulation of successive generations trying and, of course, failing to recapture what was lost.<sup>87</sup>

Turner's conceptualization of the frontier is important in film, not because his writing is particularly visual, or because early filmmakers were interested in the history of the West, but because he helped forge a coherent sense of a place that transcended the mundanities of geography. In 1896, Turner had written:

The West, at bottom, is a form of society, rather than an area. It is the term applied to the region whose social conditions result from the application of older institutions and ideas to the transforming influences of free land.<sup>88</sup>

Cinema, emerging just after his frontier essay, quickly demonstrated its powerful mythologizing capacity, putting in place fixed images of the West. These consisted not only of stereotypical

<sup>86</sup> John M. Gaus in Bogue, 'The Course of Western History's First Century' (1996), 10.

<sup>87</sup> Rodriguez, 'Ralph Lauren's Teepee' (1996), 52.

<sup>88</sup> Turner, 'The Problem of the West' (1962), 205.

depictions of the West's inhabitants, but also the dramatic landscapes that characterized outsiders' views of the West which had accumulated mythic value through the art of Church, Bierstadt, Remington, and the photography of Watkins (among many others). For example, a critic wrote in 1909 that "Cowboys, Indians and Mexicans must be seen in proper scenic backgrounds to convey any impression of reality."<sup>89</sup> Buscombe makes this link explicit in his examination of John Ford when he asserts that "Ford's framing of the landscape to exert maximum contrast between its vast distances and the smallness of the figures that populate it is a clear echo of nineteenth-century photographic practice."<sup>90</sup> In even more revisionist terms, this desire to integrate character and landscape in political as well as aesthetic terms, remains strong as director Walter Hill says in an interview about his 1994 film *Geronimo: An American Legend*:

I was very concerned that this movie be about the characters and the landscape they're in. I figured that the compression would put the characters inside their geography and in context. You couldn't tell this story without the landscape being one of the main characters. When Geronimo says, "Why isn't there enough room for us?" and the audience sees the incredibly vast, empty landscapes, it becomes a much more poignant question.<sup>91</sup>

Hill's phrase "inside their geography" suggests a kind of Turnerian determinism, as does the idea of the landscape being a character in the film.

It is tempting to see in Malick's films a strain of revisionism, a director challenging some American myths that have operated so forcefully in film. Though not "westerns" in the generic sense, his first two films are both very much about the West, engaging with the place (in Turner's sense) and the cinematic myths of the place. *Badlands* quietly critiques the construction of the hero when it shows the distance between the celluloid rebellion of James Dean, the 50s epitome of film

<sup>89</sup> Buscombe, 'Inventing Monument Valley' (1995), 87.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>91</sup> Pizzello, 'Capturing *Geronimo* on Location' (1994), 48.

cool, and Kit's real frustrations with smalltown life. More obviously, *Days of Heaven* maintains the sweep of classic melodrama while detailing the tension between land-owning capitalists and the migrant poor. However, *Days of Heaven* is no *Matewan* because that part of the film dealing explicitly with labour and capital is subsumed by the symbols and myths that structure the film – the various Biblical stories and the narrative movement of the film towards conflict at once apocalyptic (the fire on the farm) and global (America joining World War I).

*The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* are also, in more complex ways, about the Frontier in Turner's spatio-mythic sense. While the former transplants the Frontier into the minefield of post-Vietnam World War II 'recuperation' – his young Americans abroad for the first time – the latter moves back to putative origins of the Frontier, the first English settlement on the east coast. Here one meets proto-Americans in the democratic Smith, the conciliatory Pocahontas, and the entrepreneurial Rolfe. Both films are also more explicitly about encounters, at turns fragile and brutal as the proto-American and the modern American confront other cultures, where in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, the protagonists seek the other shore in modern America itself.

## The Death of Innocence

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The accumulated horrors of the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the Depression and World War II should, in all likelihood, have finally overcome the exceptionalist belief in American innocence. Yet innocence had particular currency in the early days of the Cold War in the 1950s. In his essay 'Hiss, Chambers, and the Age of Innocence,' Leslie Fiedler pronounced: "American liberalism has been reluctant to leave the garden of its illusion; but it can dally no longer: the age of innocence is dead."<sup>92</sup>

Reinhold Niebuhr, juxtaposing innocence explicitly with guilt, wrote in 1952:

This vast involvement in guilt in a supposedly innocent world achieves a specially ironic dimension through the fact that the two leading powers engaged in the struggle are particularly innocent according to their own official myth and collective memory.<sup>93</sup>

Significantly, innocence, though openly the object of skepticism, is also a term of reference, and this 'debate' was no more directly addressed at the time than in R.W.B. Lewis's 1955 book, *The American Adam*.

The helplessness of mere innocence has been a primary theme of novelists in almost every decade, and a source of bewilderment to our political and diplomatic historians. The dismissal of the past has been only too effective: America, since the age of Emerson, has been persistently a one-generation culture. Successive generations have given rise to a series of staccato intellectual and literary movements with ever slighter trajectories.<sup>94</sup>

With his metaphors of cycles and trajectories, Lewis sounds a similar note to Schlesinger's model,

<sup>92</sup> Fiedler, *An End to Innocence* (1972), 24.

<sup>93</sup> Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (1952), 19.

<sup>94</sup> Lewis, *The American Adam* (1955), 9.

but the dominant force in Lewis is the dialectic:

There may be no such thing as “American experience”; it is probably better not to insist that there is. But there has been experience in America, and the account of it has had its own specific form. That form has been clearest and most rewarding when it has been most dialectical.<sup>95</sup>

However, it is this forceful dialectic that Lewis felt had retreated in the first half of the twentieth century, producing a “dullness of unconscious repetition [as] we regularly return, decade after decade, and with the same pain and amazement, to all the old conflicts, programs, and discoveries.”<sup>96</sup> The myth of American exceptionalism – individual growth and success unburdened by institutional interference and exploitation – staggered weakly after a decade of Depression and New Deal policy, and the gradual yet reluctant involvement in catastrophic world affairs between 1939 and 1941. The American Adam’s (re)emergence in the 1950s can be seen as a reaction against the terror of World War II (as well as a mark of success in the conflict) and the paranoia of the Cold War, as if history’s fearsome tread is countered by the need, to quote Warren Susman, for “the stabilizing and utopian function of myth.”<sup>97</sup> Susman, in his 1964 essay, ‘History and the American Intellectual,’ seems somewhat dismayed by the models and mythologizing of Lewis (among others), identifying, in the two preceding decades, a “singularly antihistorical spirit among the leading figures of our intellectual life” which “has been praised as marking the end of innocence or the end of ideology.”

Thus our own age retreats from history or derives intense excitement from what is often called “history” in its most brilliant mythic or theological forms ... The escape from history leads us to the world of myth. And yet, surprisingly, in terms of my definition of myth, the new mythic vision seems almost anything but utopian, seems to offer no happy goals for man or culture. We are left with a mythic past, an anxious

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>97</sup> Susman, *Culture as History* (1984), 22.

present, and an anti-utopian, Orwellian future.<sup>98</sup>

Though the target of Susman's criticism here is historical writing, he also addresses the emergence of the Beat Generation, Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, as well as the autumn of literary modernism. In terms of "history in its most brilliant mythic forms" he could well be writing about the emergence of colour cinema in Hollywood during the same era: the "mythic past" of *Gone with the Wind*, the "anxious present" of *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), and the "anti-utopian Orwellian future" of a range of films, most obviously postmodern 'horrors' like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blue Velvet* (1986).

*Badlands* is a film caught between the "anxious present" and the "Orwellian future" in my adaptation of Susman's rhetorical pattern; a bleak tale of innocence as horror, as the disassociated Kit and Holly kill without much remorse, their path punctuated with various historical and cultural footnotes. More importantly, *Badlands* is a referential work caught in a chronological period that is both brief (in duration) and expansive (in terms of the momentous political developments that define the time). On the one hand, a Terrence Malick film – the emergence of an artist's developing vision – it is also a product of the time: a film made in the wake of the Starkweather Fugate incident would more likely have taken the form of a B-grade horror or exposé on juvenile delinquency.<sup>99</sup> However, after the watershed years of the late 1960s – which saw the creation of the American Film Institute (in June of 1967), the release of, notably, *Bonnie & Clyde* and *In Cold Blood* (both 1967), and the creation of the new MPAA classification system (introduced in November 1968) – filmmakers had far more range to explore violent and unsettling stories, both thematically and in terms of the depiction of violence.

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 26, 24-25.

<sup>99</sup> Apparently a cheap exploitation film, loosely based on Starkweather and Fugate, was made in the early 1960s, called *The Sadist*. Thank you to Adrian Martin for this contribution on Yahoo's Terrence Malick forum.

Though he refuses to report the year in which the narratives are set, and eschews subtitles or prologues, one could say that historical 'dialogues' exist in Malick's films. In *Badlands* 1950s "delinquency" is in dialogue with America's Vietnam trauma: there is an acknowledgment of the public violence of the time (seen on television at home and abroad) and also an ironic approach to the Cold War seen in the droll references that occur in the film's dialogue. Even though Kit models himself on James Dean, this is not a way of reading his character psychologically; rather Kit becomes a cypher for a generation of possible James Deans, a litmus test for American society at the end of the '60s. Through Kit, we can see the peripheral effect of the Cold War coupled with his frustration at being unable to enter the modern consumer society, remote evidence of which he sees even in Fort Dupree. In one of the film's most perceptive images, we see Kit as a cowboy on a feedlot, as detached from the real origins of the cowboy life as he is from the kind of jobs available in the changing society.

Kit and Bill are both men lost in their historical time. A hundred years earlier, both would have had direction given to them by the creed of Manifest Destiny; they would be pioneers, maybe not the most successful, but pioneers nonetheless, capable of finding a place for themselves, capable too of moving on and finding another, should the need arise. In the industrialized early twentieth century, and the consumer age of the late 1950s, Bill and Kit are hoping for the impossible – a return, a chance to go back to before the event that has cut them off from what seems tantalizingly close at hand. For Bill, the frontier has 'closed' only twenty years earlier, and in *The Farmer* he sees a man of extraordinary wealth and of a similar age. Surely, a chance to make space for himself cannot be that far off? Kit is close enough to James Dean to *be* James Dean and yet he is a garbageman in a tiny South Dakota town: Kit's is the frustration of the country kid who didn't get to Hollywood and make himself a star. Of course, he becomes a different kind of star, a celebrity of sorts, confused between the act of orchestrating his own arrest and killing people "because it's okay to leave no

witnesses” as Holly sensibly narrates. Both acts are indicative of the influence of the movie mythology: the ruthless outlaw killer who plays for keeps by murdering any witnesses and who is mythologized at the moment of his capture.

Malick’s protagonists are products of this particular adamic discourse of American myth. Charles Maland writes that the American Adam, “like the original Adam before the fall ... was an innocent – optimistic about the possibilities of man’s place in nature, untested by experience, and often either unaware of or skeptical about the shaping and limiting constraints of human community.”<sup>100</sup> This applies to all Malick’s major protagonists, particularly to the soldiers of Charlie Company in *The Thin Red Line*.

If the American Adam offers a cultural context for Malick’s men, then the ferment of the early 1970s – Hollywood’s single authentic ‘Golden Age’, according to Pauline Kael – provides a specifically filmic context.<sup>101</sup> More than a triumphant period for auteurs, the period from *Bonnie and Clyde* to, perhaps, *Raging Bull* produced unrelentingly bleak characterizations of male violence, emotional frailty, and comprehensive failure: bourgeois misanthropes like Bobby Dupea in *Five Easy Pieces*, doomed detectives like Jake Gittes and Harry Moseby (*Chinatown* and *Night Moves*), and desperate sociopaths like Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*) and Kit Carruthers. In an essay expressing the zeitgeist of the period, Thomas Elsaesser argues that

The significant feature of this new cinema is that it makes an issue of the motives – or lack of them – in its heroes ... [T]his has implications for the narrative form and thereby for how one sees these films, both in relation to classical Hollywood cinema and to its apparent opposite, the European cinema of the 1960s. The contradiction – or tension – lies in the combination of the unmotivated hero and the motif of the journey...<sup>102</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Maland, ‘The American Adam’ (2003), 561.

<sup>101</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (1994), 322.

<sup>102</sup> Elsaesser, ‘The Pathos of Failure’ (2004), 280.

In Kit's insouciance and directionless flight there is something of the playful existentialism of Godard's early films (especially *A Bout de Souffle*, 1959, and *Weekend*, 1967), yet *Badlands* is classically American in its characterization and aesthetics. This tension between uncertain motivation and enigmatic expression, and the constant quest is also discernible in Bill and, more recently, Private Witt and John Smith. Smith, renowned historically for outspokenness and self-promotion is made into an 'inner' man whose views on everything from democratic ideals to love, are tersely expressed in interior monologue. As is the case with Private Witt, this inner fire occasionally erupts in furious action before subsiding again to secret solitary rumination. Out of the historical John Smith, Malick forges another Adam: a character not doomed to die (like Malick's previous Adams), but who will fail to master the historical forces, and beyond those, the natural forces that surround him. Instead, the unashamedly innocent Pocahontas perishes, the first of Malick's women to do so, though her death is also significant because it signals the historical inevitability of the destruction of her culture.

Each of the chapters that follow is an examination of themes established in this chapter – myths of innocence and return, and their engagement with the historical context of the narratives. The following chapters also explore the films' dense intertextuality which, I believe, is central to a full interpretation of Malick's filmmaking. For example, in chapter two, the generic hybridity of *Badlands* is discussed, while chapter three (on *Days of Heaven*) addresses the work of several artists, but particularly Edward Hopper, as well as American literary naturalism.

*The Thin Red Line* poses something of a problem; at once typically Malick, it is also different to the other three feature films he has directed thus far in terms of genre and location. While *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven* and *The New World* figuratively look west, *The Thin Red Line* heads east, and its explicit identity as a combat film marks it apart from the other films which evade easy categorization. The particularly charged historical nature of the combat movie genre has produced the majority of the film's criticism, and to investigate this aspect of the film, I have examined several

written accounts of the Pacific campaign during World War II. However, in *The Thin Red Line's* oriental context lie remnants of the frontier myth, and in Witt's quest for an understanding of our relationship with nature and humanity's inescapable duality of 'being' and individual purpose – "All faces are the same man, one big self. Everyone looking for salvation by himself, each like a coal drawn from the fire" – the film also looks forward to the major concerns of *The New World*: How do we stop ourselves from destroying what we have found? How do we give up who we are for the possibility of starting over? More prosaically, the intent of many European explorers who landed in America, and many commercially minded pioneers who headed west in the nineteenth century, was to find a route to the Indies (and later, to China). Heading west was really to find the East.

The difference between the two early films and the two recent films is significant, though not a completely new direction on Malick's part, rather a deepening and expanding of his thematic concerns of the 1970s. The quests of Kit, Holly, Bill, Abby and Linda have become explorations of entirely new cultures for Witt, Smith and Pocahontas. The mountains of Montana, and the Texas prairie are born in the nineteenth century, but are unattainable to Kit and Bill in the twentieth century. In *The Thin Red Line*, the "blue hills" which Bell invokes – a metaphor for "other shores" – comes by way of Ernest Hemingway's Nick Adams,<sup>103</sup> and with them one finds a strain of romanticism that continues into *The New World*. James Jones was also aware of the metaphor, as he expounds in a letter to Lowney Handy in 1949: "We are both 'romantics.' And must continue to be. It is in the conflict of wanting the 'blue hills,' and never getting them, that the art we are both capable of comes out. Still, we must believe in the 'blue hills.'"<sup>104</sup>

Malick's films have kept contact with the prevailing filmmaking tendencies of the period, yet

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, Hemingway's short story 'The Big Two-Hearted River: Part 1' where Nick looks off to the "blue hills that marked the Lake Superior height of land. He could hardly see them, faint and far away in the heat-light over the plain. If he looked too steadily they were gone. But if he only half-looked they were there, the far-off hills of the height of land." In *The Short Stories* (1997), 196.

<sup>104</sup> In Carter, *James Jones* (1998), 28.

constitute a singular cinematic vision. In each film, Malick calls up an historical epoch, only to cast his characters adrift within it. They are trapped in a moment of frustration where it is impossible to go back, to return to a more innocent time, and yet where acting to change the path of their lives is damned by consequences which are fully recognized. Each film is also a journey, an unfulfilled or inexorable quest for places both imagined and tangible: Malick's characters all realistically have a chance of finding their blue hills or their Indies, but these dreamlike realms are part of an endless striving that ends in death for those with the courage to seek them.

## Chapter Two

### “Quite an individual”

TROOPER

You're quite an individual, Kit.

KIT

Think they'll take that into consideration?

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*Badlands* is a film full of strange and unresolved conflicts. It invokes history only to rewrite it, makes relentless killers out of juvenile lovers, and names its geography only to confound the spaces it inhabits. It is as much a fiction as an adaptation of the notorious killing spree of teen lovers Charles Starkweather and Caril-Ann Fugate who, between January 21 and January 29, 1958 killed ten people in Nebraska and Wyoming.<sup>1</sup> While the overarching narrative is similar, the locations, the lovers' ages, and the sequence of events are altered such that one can only speculate as to why Malick chose the story in the first place.

Casual assumptions about the film and its apparent source material have placed the film in a number of contexts, often leading to misinterpretation and misuse in the development of a particular argument. For example, Nicole Rafter, writing from a criminological perspective, uses *Badlands* in a discussion on environmental theories of crime on film.

The boy Holly falls in love with, Kit, is similarly a product of his environment, a trash collector so poor he bums cigarettes and peddles junk from garbage cans. (Later, working in a stockyard, he learns to kill steers.) Almost inevitably, the two run away and begin killing people.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, the distinction between the two characters is profound. Holly gives us an insight into her

<sup>1</sup> Starkweather, it was later revealed, had also killed a gas-station attendant a month before.

<sup>2</sup> Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror* (2000), 53.

childhood in the opening voice-over, but we have no idea where Kit comes from. We know that Charles Starkweather, on whom Kit is based, came from a large poor family, but Malick makes no attempt to indicate this in the film. Kit throws trash today, works in a stockyard the next – who knows what he was doing yesterday? Secondly, if he really needs the money from peddling junk, he doesn't try very hard. After trying to pawn the boots for a dollar ("they're worth twenty new") Kit gives them to co-worker Cato rather than keeping them and trying to sell them later. Thirdly, there is no evidence in the montages of Kit in the feedlot that he kills steers. He medicates them, feeds them, and, to be sure, is less than compassionate towards them – in one scene he pushes a steer's head back with his boot, and in another he walks over a dead cow lying on the ground.

Lastly, and most crucially, Kit intends to run away with Holly. Holly's father interrupts them and Kit eventually shoots him (admittedly not by accident), necessitating their flight. Certainly, they kill others unnecessarily (Cato and the young couple who are left for dead after Kit's nervous, inexpert 'assassination'), but the point of the film is surely their interaction with those they meet, and the reason why, for example, they don't kill people (like the people at the Rich Man's house). Rafter's simplistic misreading is closer to original events involving Starkweather and Fugate; Kit becomes another case study of psychopathic rebellion and latent violence. More usefully, Morrison and Schur write that "Malick seems more interested in the small portion of the story that is representative of some common experience than he is in the very great deal of what's aberrational about it."<sup>3</sup>

It would be tempting to see Holly and (particularly) Kit, as products of a postwar culture where rebellion masks conformity, and culture is increasingly commodified, seen in their decision to adopt celebrity names, Holly reading celebrity gossip, and Kit's aping of James Dean. However, I think Malick likes his protagonists too much – there is none of the judgmental sternness towards them one finds in critiques of consumer culture by – to shift registers –

<sup>3</sup> Morrison and Schur *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 73.

Adorno or Jameson, for example. Neither is there the fatalism with which Kubrick surrounds most of his doomed protagonists. *Badlands* suggests the process by which a young working class man in a smalltown backwater affects the behaviour of a movie star, or how an adolescent girl gets carried away with a taboo romance modelled on her idols in the scandal magazines: "Rumor: Frank Sinatra and Rita Hayworth are in love. Fact: True, but not with each other."

Jon Lewis certainly sympathizes with a broad Frankfurt School approach when he writes: "when Kit, the stand-in for Starkweather, is introduced, it is through her eyes (clouded as they are by the teen magazines she reads incessantly). 'He was handsomer than anybody I ever met,'" she says in characteristic deadpan, "he looked just like James Dean."<sup>4</sup> Malick himself demurs on this point when he says:

Her kind of cliché didn't begin with pulp magazines, as some critics have suggested. It exists in Nancy Drew and Tom Sawyer. It's not the mark of a diminished, pulp-fed mind, I'm trying to say, but of the 'innocent abroad.'<sup>5</sup>

*Badlands* might be contextualized by its postwar setting but it has in common with Malick's other films a direct relationship with earlier forms of American written and visual culture. Moreover, Lewis, like Rafter, conflates the action of *Badlands* to suit his claim. We meet Kit directly, and when he meets Holly, we see her from his point of view as he crosses the street. The narration quoted comes later in their relationship, after he has quit his job as a garbageman. Lewis's reading works if one understands the narrative as a whole but, in so doing, it overlooks the deliberate placement of events in the narrative.

Within the context of film criticism, *Badlands* has accumulated critical meaning clustered around two theoretical positions: a broadly gender-oriented approach stemming from the unusualness of Holly's voiceover (not just a female, but a girl, and in a traditionally masculine-dominated genre); and a broadly genre-oriented approach (the origins of the outlaw couple, and

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin* (1992), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Walker, 'Malick on *Badlands*' (1975), 82.

an attempt to position *Badlands* on a line that joins *Bonnie and Clyde* to *Natural Born Killers* and other '90s homages.) However, as an influential 'road movie', *Badlands* is almost misnamed as the majority of the film is a departure from the staple road movie iconography of gas stations and diners. Even the film's (only) car chase ends on an anti-climax as Kit, after outmanoeuvring the police, comes to a halt and shoots out his tyre, preferring a memorable capture to a solitary death. And while the marketing might suggest salacious movie biography, instead we are introduced to a time and place in which we find two referents to *Starkweather* and *Fugate*, rather than the individuals themselves. Avoiding the pedantry of calendar dates and costumes, Malick presents the ossified myth of James Dean made pliable by its early perversion in the person of *Starkweather*, and scatters allusions to the Korean War and the Cold War throughout the narrative. Leaving home, Kit and Holly set out into an *Oz*-like America of distant blue horizons and "magical lands."

In this chapter I propose a repositioning of the debate around *Badlands* along different lines. While acknowledging the importance of the approaches mentioned above, I aim to extend the analysis to embrace a discourse of myth, particularly as it emerges in the film's articulation of time and space. Myth, I will argue, operates in two significant ways. Firstly, the character of Kit recalls the troublesome nature of the nineteenth-century western hero, and charts his transition into the bifurcated twentieth-century screen icon. Kit's mythic origins lie in the self-promoting Captain John Smith and lone adventurer Daniel Boone, and continue through early nineteenth century avatars like Kit Carson and Davey Crockett, and the outlaw / lawmen of that century's latter half – Bill Hickock, Jesse James, Wyatt Earp, William Bonny, and John Wesley Hardin.<sup>6</sup> Though this western character finds full filmic expression in actors like William S. Hart, Roy Rogers and John Wayne, it also yields the post-war rebellion of James Dean, the outlaw increasingly divorced from his heroic frontier self. Kit is, then, the latest version of the myth and the next generation of its cinematic divergence.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Slotkin's discussion of the outlaw/lawman in early Hollywood, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), 231-237.

Myth also operates through genre with the western and the road movie reinscribing core American myths of male adventure and violence. With the establishment over time of generic consistencies in landscape and iconography, films aid in the production of new myths.<sup>7</sup> However, as much as films confirm generic traits, they also provide departure points for new genres, establish links with other genres, or wholly subvert existing genres. *Badlands* presents established tropes from both the western and road movie but also indicates the fragmentary and referential nature of these genres. Early in the film, for example, Kit tells Holly that the job at the feedlot is okay because, “at least nobody [can] get on me about wearing these boots any more”: he has found a job that, as much as possible, suits his image of himself. As I will show in this chapter, there are several moments where Malick evokes recognizable elements from these genres only to undermine them. John Ford, for example, enriches and confirms genre while Malick subverts and manipulates it. Where Ford constructs his vision of the West(ern) around the startling scenery of Monument Valley, Malick resists such deliberate iconography, opting instead for flat, almost abstract spaces. What is interesting about time and space in *Badlands* is the tension between real geography and imagined, or evoked landscape, and I will investigate this tension through references in both Kit and Holly’s dialogue to “magical lands.”

Finally, I will examine the character of Holly whose voiceover – its content, tone, and the very fact of it – introduces a third key element to the film’s mythic origins: the gothic romance. Malick evokes the boys’ adventure reminiscent of Huck Finn which (taking Leslie Fiedler’s cue)<sup>8</sup> is derived partly from the American transformation of the gothic “tale of terror”, but gives the young girl narrative agency in the unravelling of events. *Badlands*’s mythic qualities are thus cinematic, literary and historical.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Edward Buscombe’s article ‘Inventing Monument Valley’ (1995) on the ‘construction’ of John Ford’s vision of the American West.

<sup>8</sup> Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1970), 119-151.

## “Magical Lands”: Part 1

HOLLY (v.o.)

We took off at sunset, on a line toward the mountains of Saskatchewan, for Kit a magical land beyond the reach of the law.

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Kit’s “magical land beyond the reach of the law” is an explicit link to both the western and the film noir (in its desperado form) seen, for example, in Joseph H. Lewis’s *Gun Crazy* (1949), and Raoul Walsh’s *High Sierra* (1941). In both films the doomed fugitives – Bart Tare and Mad Dog Earle – make their final stand high in the mountains, hunted like animals (ironically, in Bart’s case, he becomes the mountain lion that he fails to shoot as a boy in the film’s establishing scenes).

Malick offers us no such drama or telling metaphor. Kit’s surrender is as half-baked as his dude-like cowboy persona when he meets Holly, and the prospect of a mountain showdown falls apart as Holly deserts him at an oil rig on the plains. His final flight is a comic quest for celebrity – Kit has no real conception of freedom, even at the most critical moment.

KIT

Hi.

SHERIFF

Hold it right there.

KIT

I could’ve held off an army if I could’ve gotten behind a rock in the mountains.

DEPUTY (o.c.)

Oh yeah?

KIT (nodding)

Long as my ammo held out. Right there’s where you caught me.

Kit’s side of this exchange is partly an oblique nod to movie gangsters’ last stands, but more

importantly is a confirmation of the paradox he cannot resolve within himself. As long as he is on the run, he cannot see his infamy reflected in the faces of others and, without Holly, he cannot share in the outlaw life. He stages his surrender so that he can say, “there’s where you caught me” – the place marked, and the moment witnessed by those who caught him. It is only in capture that Kit can assume his identity; it is his final persona (one that will take him to his death) after a series of unsuccessful attempts at personae worn (often literally) like changes of clothes. Kit’s most triumphant moment comes when, after some banter in the police car, the young Deputy turns to the older Sheriff and says: “You know who that sombitch looks like? You know, don’t you? I’ll kiss your ass if he don’t look like James Dean.” Kit the killer has ‘become’ James Dean, and he couldn’t be happier. Morrison and Schur observe that “Kit’s narcissism becomes a form of charisma, and although we are not encouraged to be charmed by him, the officers who have arrested him genuinely seem to be.”<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted that Kit is as charmed with them. Whether he’s promising to spread the word about the heroic actions of the police after his arrest, coveting a trooper’s hat on the plane, or even encouraging one is not sure who to “listen to your parents and teachers” on his dictaphone recording, the underlying truth is that Kit is simply not a rebel. He has the rebel posture: from the first moment we meet him, he expresses the rebel’s sulky resentment of ‘they’: “Well. I got some stuff to say. Guess I’m kind of lucky that way. Most people don’t have anything on their minds, do they?”

Soon after, when he mentions his surname (Carruthers), he adds, “Well, nobody asked me what I thought. They just hung it on me,” and when Holly suggests that they report the shooting of her father, Kit mumbles: “They’re not going to listen to me.” ‘They’ are not only figures of authority: in an interesting moment, Kit says to Cato: “We’re thinking of going down to Texas. Holly wants to visit some of her people down there, but after that I don’t know. They say Mexico’s nice.”

<sup>9</sup> Morrison and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 21.

Like bandits of old, Kit talks up flight to Mexico, yet he and Holly never get much further than the next state. He is at pains to cultivate his outsider status, and yet, on his garbage route, he shows patronizing concern for the woman who doesn't pay her bills and, most notably, solemnly speaks into the dictaphone at the Rich Man's house: "Try to keep an open mind. Try to understand the viewpoint of others. Consider the minority opinion, but try to get along with the majority opinion once it's accepted."

By representing himself as the aggrieved outsider (seen, for example, in his unconvincing attempts to justify his killing of various people) Kit also alludes to the mythology of the social bandit who is chased down by a dispassionate and often openly corrupt system. The shot that shows Kit and Holly walking manacled to the aeroplane backed by a phalanx of state troopers is an echo of the photograph showing a captured Gregorio Cortez surrounded by the men who hunted him amongst whom, in Richard White's words, he was "apparently a celebrity."<sup>10</sup> He has the inclination towards the western outlaw but, like his other incarnations, it exists purely on the level of attitude. The denouement of *Badlands* is Malick's most telling counter to the assumption that anti-social behaviour is necessarily rebellious.

Holly claims that Kit "dreads the idea of being shot down alone without a girl to scream his name" and, in this light, *Badlands* becomes the droll alternative to Bonnie and Clyde's frenetic demise in Arthur Penn's 1967 film. John Orr identifies in Penn and Malick's films – now critical siblings – both the continuities and the disruptions evident in American film at the time. Older myths of the nineteenth-century frontier, and the movie iconography it spawned, were shattered – as much by Henry Fonda's chilling corruption of his film star image in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) as by Sam Peckinpah's brutal yet elegiac *The Wild Bunch* (1969) – preparing the way for the 'revisionism' of *Little Big Man* (1970), *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972).

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<sup>10</sup> White, *It's your misfortune and none of my own* (1991), 619.

At opposite ends of the *auteur* spectrum, Penn and Malick share one crucial thing. They lay bare ... the process of American myth-making as a practice of historical becoming, precisely because they show the movement of history into myth in the arena of spectacle, spectacle that can be murderous, destructive and tragic. Thus there is no romantic nostalgia for the myth of an 'old West' foundering on the modernity that drives films as different in tone as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* or *The Wild Bunch*.<sup>11</sup>

*Bonnie and Clyde's* 'shock' lies in Penn's reckless concatenation of historicity and invention as he adapts the true story of the outlaw couple and strips the Depression era of its pervading gloom and the sermonizing tendency of its clenched-teeth optimism (seen, for example, in John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*, 1940). Times are hard but Bonnie loves Clyde, is the film's implicit *non sequitur*. Penn also makes explicit the relationship between the western and the road movie, matching the former's more diabolical shades of misanthropy (betrayal, cold-blooded murder) to the latter's relentless movement, speed, and fatal inevitability. Timothy Corrigan sees in the road movie genre a form of hysteria, the symptoms of which are,

a failure to repress, which leads to obsessive repetition; and a crisis in representation whose excessive theatricality attempts to simultaneously accept and reject the signs of a given world, to claim at once its narcissism and a release into a symbolic reality.<sup>12</sup>

This "generic hysteria" appears especially shrill when encountering history. Seeking structural reproduction, genre battles history's persistent social change and re-interpretative tendencies, and this leads to increasingly destabilized (and in postmodern terms, hybridized) genres. Corrigan proposes:

If *Bonnie and Clyde* is based on a historical account, it is more accurately a historical account of modern perception, perception that, in the sixties, is already beginning to reduce history to the material of images, material in which a culture must obsessively act itself out in order to displace the return of more threatening histories.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Orr, 'Terrence Malick and Arthur Penn' (2003), 66.

<sup>12</sup> Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls* (1991), 142.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

Orr's "movement of history into myth in the arena of spectacle," and Corrigan's "reduc[ti]on of history to the material of images," present not only the production of myth but its consumption as well. Frederic Jameson maintains that, "it is *because* the formal apparatus of nostalgia films has trained us to consume the past in the form of glossy images that new and more complex 'postnostalgia' statements and forms become possible" (my emphasis).<sup>14</sup> Jameson defines "nostalgia films" as those that "restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation:

The inaugural film of this new aesthetic discourse ... *American Graffiti* (1973), set out to recapture, as so many films have attempted since, the henceforth mesmerizing lost reality of the Eisenhower era; and one tends to feel, that for Americans at least, the 1950s remain the privileged lost object of desire – not merely the stability and prosperity of a pax Americana but also the first naïve innocence of countercultural impulses of early rock and roll and youth gangs.<sup>15</sup>

If *American Graffiti* seeks a return to innocence, then *Badlands* is a stalking shadow over that return, a contemporary reminder of the deluded absurd twin of that innocence. While Kit and Holly do nothing to suggest their own critical opposition to various forms of 50s ideology (and, in fact, are mostly complicit with it), the film resonates with the "contentment (which is in reality complacency" that Jameson identifies with the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> Holly, a girl "without personality" (by her own admission), is trapped in a continuum of middle class aspirations and accomplishment: piano and clarinet lessons, baton-twirling and learning Spanish. Kit, even though he seldom has a job, possesses a car. Moderate expectations are mostly met, but offer little potential for change in Kit or Holly's lives. Paul Fussell angrily recalls:

In 1957 the United States, trapped in ideological rigidity by the Cold War, was the sort of place any decent person would want to leave. There was the civil defense foolishness, the assumption that nuclear war could be survived quite handily, with

<sup>14</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), 287.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

attendant follies of home air-raid bunkers and home defense exercises. There was the constant public avoidance of any idea that might seem remotely socialistic, or even contemporary.<sup>17</sup>

Against the stifling ideology of the 1950s, the '60s road movie is completely contemporary, an essay on constant flight that tries to show a new spirit of American individualism, the search for new frontiers laid over the spectral remains of the old. However, as Roberts notes, the continuities with earlier myths are strong:

As portrayed in the Western and alluded to in the road movie, frontier symbolism is propelled by masculinity and a particular conception of American national identity that revolves around individualism and aggression.<sup>18</sup>

While the Western has supplied the lifeblood of the road movie in its emphasis on frontiers, outlaws, and the iconography of nationhood in 'beginning over', there is also an entirely modern pessimism and desperation in the best road movies which go beyond Ethan's inability to fit in (framed as an ambivalent exit in *The Searchers*) or Eastwood's peripatetic 'man with no name.' David Laderman observes that the contemporary road film was influenced by "three classical film genres ... the western, the gangster film, and film noir," and that "all three of these genres predated [Jack Kerouac's book] *On the Road*."<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps it was Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* – with its opening credits playing over an endless stretch of desert road, and its beleaguered protagonist undone by fate more than mischief – that took *noir's* cynicism and opportunism out of the city and onto the road. No longer hunched under a raincoat, hat pulled low, Al Roberts is picked up staggering along the highway, unshaven, dusty, and sweating profusely. While his fateful decision is made at night, in the rain, and his misadventure comes to an unintentional yet murderous climax in the city, it is the danger of the

<sup>17</sup> Fussell, *Doing Battle* (1996), 257.

<sup>18</sup> Roberts, 'Western meets Eastwood' (1997), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Laderman, 'What a Trip' (1996), 43. In his analysis, Laderman pairs Ulmer's B-movie with Ford's more obvious classic *The Searchers*.

distance between East and West that defines the film. Building on this hybridizing lineage, *Bonnie and Clyde* is the shrieking convergence of youthful rebellion, anti-authoritarian nihilism, and robust American ambition. By the early 1970s, the epitome of the 1940s tough guy – the *noir* anti-hero – slouched out of the shadows once more in a spate of ‘new’ *films noirs*, characterized frequently by the harsh sapping heat of the California sun, and always by the detective’s failure to solve the case and/or see justice done.<sup>20</sup>

Orr claims that while other directors – Leone, Eastwood and Peckinpah – “re-invented” the Western genre, the “cynicism and brutality of their films now seem a one-sided reflection of their own age” in which “we are perversely assured that the world we have lost had no higher value than our own.” By comparison, he sees Penn and Malick’s films as “neither brutal nor cynical, but sceptical and tragic,” as they deconstruct the myths of the nineteenth-century frontier.<sup>21</sup> In *Badlands*, Malick carefully reconfigures some of the classic tropes of the Western (as he had done in his script for Stuart Rosenberg’s *Pocket Money*, 1972), but he also picks at the thread of the road movie myth, solidified by *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*. Orr makes a telling point in this regard, when he remarks on the performative relationship between Sheen, Starkweather, and James Dean.

Martin Sheen as Malick’s spectral effigy of Dean and film persona of Dean’s real life imitator, the Nebraska spree killer Charlie Starkweather, presents a double lineage: the Western ‘badlands’ and Hollywood both resurrected in a single figure.<sup>22</sup>

While *Bonnie and Clyde* in Penn’s film are an exuberant explosion of repressed youthful rebellion and pent up violence intended for an audience no longer naïve about representations of violence and sexuality, Kit and Holly are altogether more quixotic and mercurial, more seriously matter-of-fact, but less knowing: Clyde’s cigar-chomping grin compared to Kit’s sideways

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Penn’s study of morose ineffectuality and emotional inadequacy in *Night Moves* (1975) is an acute example of this development.

<sup>21</sup> Orr, ‘Terrence Malick and Arthur Penn’ (2003), 62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

glances, a single shot from Kit's firearm against the Barrow gang's spluttering Tommy guns. If *Bonnie and Clyde* introduces the new form of road movie, and *Easy Rider* is its apotheosis, then for David Laderman, *Badlands* is the transitional film that establishes a "cultural drift" from romance to irony, and from social change to psychological torment.<sup>23</sup>

Corey Creekmur argues that the "outlaw couple" road movie and the musical are the most effective genres for narrativizing the progression from nineteenth-century frontier exploration into the 'post-frontier' twentieth century America.<sup>24</sup> However, while *Badlands* might appear to exemplify the "outlaw couple" road movie, it consistently fails to fulfil the tendencies outlined by Creekmur. Yes, one could argue that Kit essentially pesters Holly into "going" with him, and that, like Clyde and Bonnie, Kit teaches Holly how to shoot, but Kit's opening dialogue with Holly is defined by everyday banality, and we never see Holly shoot anything. Similarly, parallels between outlaw activity and sexual intercourse are deflated by Malick in the scene by the river where they actually do have sex, only for Holly to register her lack of enthusiasm for the act – "Gosh, what was everybody talking about?" – and Kit's attempt to commemorate its significance by crushing their hands with a rock.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the escalation to "action-packed slaughter" is defused by Holly deserting Kit as the law catches up, and Kit allowing himself to be caught, and that with hardly a shot fired (Kit fires out the window, but does not even look where the gun is pointing).

If *Badlands* is a western without a showdown, and a road movie about the prairie, it also challenges another road movie standard that links the outlaw to (normally) his machine. Orr argues that American cinema is the American car's most powerful marketing tool, and that the road movie is instrumental in romanticizing the ownership of, and the nostalgia for, 'classic' cars. However, *Badlands* proves a bad example for his argument. "From Martin Sheen in *Badlands* to

<sup>23</sup> Laderman, 'What a Trip' (1996), 50.

<sup>24</sup> Creekmur, 'On the Run and On the Road' (1997), 91. In fact, Creekmur suggests that the outlaw couple road films are "inverted musicals."

<sup>25</sup> Clyde may be impotent, but the erotic charge when he teaches Bonnie to shoot only amplifies the sexual character of their relationship.

Viggo Mortensen in *The Indian Runner* even the most psychotic outlaws own their cars,” Orr states; “stealing can be at best an interlude.”<sup>26</sup> Kit feels no compunction about dumping his car and stealing one of the Rich Man’s, an elegant but unspectacular black Cadillac, and later attempting to swap that car for a rusty truck. Holly might be impressed with Kit’s car – curious, given that he has no job – thereby endorsing Orr’s supposition that “the phallic machine which prefaces seduction is owned,”<sup>27</sup> but the cars carry no meaning in themselves, and one could argue that Kit and Holly’s most unified experience is in the extended forest sequence where the car is not in use. If anything, Malick strives to de-mythologize the car or at least to render it a characterless utility instead of either a romantic or hellish signifier of identity (like Steve McQueen’s Mustang in *Bullitt*, and Louise’s Thunderbird in *Thelma and Louise*, or Travis Bickle’s taxi in *Taxi Driver*). *Badlands* thus draws closer to Orr’s assessment of European filmmakers like Godard who, in the 1960s, “realized any mass-produced object is disposable, transient, temporary.”<sup>28</sup> In *A Bout de Souffle* (a film whose laconic existentialism closely resembles *Badlands*), the car Michel steals is “an instrument of his nowhere motion . . . to be stolen simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Orr states that “*Badlands* (1974) is a truly post-Godardian film.”<sup>30</sup>

As in *Days of Heaven*, Malick’s sense of genre seems, at times, peculiarly European, less interested in the particularities of place and iconography than in the evocation of mood within the context of myth. Rather than internalizing place (as Ford does with his westerns) Malick’s characters frequently appear curious about the world around them, emphasized by his tendency to cut away to ‘found’ flora and fauna.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in *Badlands*, Malick chooses German-

<sup>26</sup> Orr, ‘Commodified Demons II’ (1993), 131.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 133, though it must be admitted that Orr sees Godard’s film as “one of cinema’s great contradictions” in its attraction to American culture.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>31</sup> One of the most curious moments in *Badlands* is the shot of the llama though William Johnson notes that “Malick says he hoped this scene would be too brief for the viewer to identify the animal.” ‘Review of *Badlands*’ (1974), 46.

language choral music in several scenes (notably the torching of Holly's house and the ambush of the bounty hunters) which challenges the more traditional process of scoring a film to evoke a sense of local place.<sup>32</sup>

This demonstrates how hard it is to position *Badlands* in terms of genre, especially when one analyses genre in terms of myth, reinvention and transition. It might, in concert with *Days of Heaven*, re-mythologize the western, and it might, after *Bonnie and Clyde*, reconfigure the road movie. Orr sees *Bonnie and Clyde* as partly responsible for “transforming the inarticulate rebel” as essayed by Dean “into the cute-talking brat-outlaw that served as a key model for the American New Wave of the 1970s and the US Independents of the 1990s,”<sup>33</sup> and it is true that in Clyde's cocky assuredness and Kit's surly (if confused) coolness, there is the genesis of Tarantino, Rodriguez, and the Coen Brothers' cinematic progeny.

In retrospect it is Kit's confusion that is most striking, his completely “uncool” response to crisis, and his combination of confidence and puzzlement when addressing others. Significantly, Kit's character appears a joint construction, partly the man he wants to be – evoked in what he does, what he says, and the way he represents himself – and partly the way he is presented to us by Holly in her controlling voiceover. Kit is a speaker and a doer (even if speech, on occasion, fails him as it does when he records the ‘suicide’ record), but Holly is a writer and recorder (even if, at times, what she tells us jars with what we see, for example their blossoming affair accompanied by images of Kit medicating cattle). I would go so far as to say that Kit is barely literate: frequently we see Holly reading to him, and the only time we see him reading is during the forest scene, where it is clear that he is looking at the pictures in *National Geographic*.

Kit's apparently grounded identity when we first meet him – a garbageman unafraid to speak his mind – becomes increasingly desperate and prone to fantasy as the film goes on, as he

<sup>32</sup> The contrast between folk artist James Taylor and modernist composers Carl Orff and Erik Satie in *Badlands* is repeated in *Days of Heaven* where Leo Kottke's jaunty acoustic guitar contrasts with Camille Saint-Saëns's piece ‘The Aquarium’ and thematic variations by Ennio Morricone.

<sup>33</sup> Orr, ‘Commodified Demons II’ (1993), 67.

assumes postures, adopts viewpoints, and tries to dream his way to a different life. For a while this is fine, because Holly shares the fantasy. When they first flee after killing Holly's father, we see the merging of Kit's paranoid criminal world of forged signatures, bounty hunters, murdered witnesses, and forensic investigation, and Holly's world of imagined geography and fantastical places. Holly says, in voiceover:

Kit made me get my books from school, so I wouldn't fall behind. We'd be starting a new life, he said, and we'd have to change our names. His would be James. Mine would be Priscilla. We'd hide out like spies, somewhere in the North, where people didn't ask a lot of questions.

But when her thoughts take a turn for the pragmatic, and she decides to leave Kit, we fully realize the precariousness of his confidence. Kit's "magical land" exists, but it is very much within Holly's frame of reference, and it is Holly's world of imagination to which I now turn.

## “Magical Lands”: Part 2

HOLLY (v.o.)

For days afterward I lived in dread. At times I wished I could fall asleep and be taken off to some magical land, but this never happened.

For better or for worse, then, [Charles Brockden] Brown established in the American novel a tradition of dealing with the exaggerated and the grotesque, not as they are verifiable in any external landscape or sociological observation of manners and men, but as they correspond in quality to our deepest fears and guilts as projected in our dreams or lived through in ‘extreme situations.’<sup>34</sup>

A radical reading of *Badlands* understands the whole narrative as a figment of Holly’s imagination, from the bleak Dickensian solitude of a dead mother, a frigid father, an untouched wedding cake, and geographical dislocation that opens the film to the golden dreaminess of clouds at dusk from the prospect of an aeroplane window at the end. In between is the illicit romance with a boy from the wrong side of the tracks “so called,” a gothic love that brings about disapproval from her father, sexual awakening, murder, but finally, marital union with the right man and the elimination of the dark lover. Kit is the half-educated knight who frees Holly from her castle imprisonment by her cruel father, but Kit’s failure to fulfil Holly’s desire for comfort and security (more than his transgression of moral laws) restrains and ultimately kills this gothic fantasy. If Kit’s “magical land” lies geographically to the north, a new frontier where he can start over, reinvent himself and maybe act out James Dean a second time, then Holly’s is more obviously imaginary, the daydreams of an awkward girl encountering danger beyond cheerleading and musical accomplishment.<sup>35</sup>

Holly’s narration troubles viewers. Her tone – often described by critics as flat, affectless, or emotionless – remains unchanged throughout and matches her tone in the film’s diegesis,

<sup>34</sup> Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1970), 146-147.

<sup>35</sup> Marsha Kinder describes *Badlands* as “*American Graffiti* turned gothic,” her broad interpretation of gothic including the richness of the film’s artistic references and the “exaggerated expressionism” of the fire sequence. See “The Return of the Outlaw Couple” (1974), 9.

problematizing the conclusion where Holly recounts her marriage to the son of her defense attorney. The fact of her narration and the adventure she experiences flow together: hers is the hindsight of wisdom but with apparently little emotional attachment. Morrison and Schur propose a fairly helpless scenario for Holly:

The whole point of Holly's voice-over narration – that odd amalgam of romantic clichés, dime-novel pieties, fervent convictions, and spacey reasonings – is to suggest a constant undercurrent of thought and feeling that never manages to intervene in, and certainly does nothing to halt, the remorseless progression of the action.<sup>36</sup>

This description does not seem to offer Holly any power at all because it folds her narration into her passive role alongside Kit. The moments where she describes a future without Kit are “uncanny” and the authors prefer to see the crux of Kit and Holly's dilemma as their “estrang[ement] from their own subjectivities.”<sup>37</sup> Joan McGettigan suggests that Holly's voiceover (and that of Linda in *Days of Heaven*) appears to be both “diegetic and metadiegetic at the same time,” and characterizes this metadiegetic position, in Holly's case, as “hovering between the diegetic world and the discourse ... of the romance novel and the home economics class.”<sup>38</sup> McGettigan's analysis of these adolescent girl narrators utilizes two frames: firstly, a classic Hollywood context that allows the viewer to see and hear all that is necessary to make sense of the narrative; and secondly, a feminist reading of voiceover (from Silverman) that emphasizes the rarity of female voiceovers, and the traditionally disempowered position of the female voice in Hollywood film. She finds that Malick explicitly challenges the first notion, stating:

The narrator's role ... seems to be that of a lure, purporting to provide us with personal insights and observations from one who was there as a character, while it in fact obscures the role of the character, stepping between us and the film fiction. Because of this distance and uncertainty, *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* deny us the easier pleasures of Classical Hollywood movies with their controllable female characters.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Morrison, and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 17.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> McGettigan, 'Interpreting a man's world' (2001), 34.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

Of the second context, McGettigan emphasizes narration in opposition to action, writing that “the most helpless and disadvantaged characters, then, become powerful as narrators.”<sup>40</sup> I agree with McGettigan’s first point, but I believe there is far more to the second than the inverting of traditional power relationships in film narrative. While both McGettigan and Hannah Patterson discuss Kit and Holly’s relationship in terms of action and passivity, they also recognize the potency of Holly’s narration that ultimately reconfigures the gender roles of the classic road movie: of film’s “outlaw couples” Shari Roberts writes that “even in films featuring female stars, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Badlands*, the actresses play integral halves of the heterosexual, anti-heroic couple, yet they remain bound up in the limitations of a male-oriented and -dominated fantasy.”<sup>41</sup> Of the early scene where Kit moseys up to Holly and introduces himself, Patterson argues:

It is highly probable that we would be inclined to see it in merely romantic terms had Malick not already introduced a more ominous note, prior to the scene, in the form of Holly’s voice-over ... Her words colour the scene, hanging portentously over it.<sup>42</sup>

McGettigan agrees, maintaining (in relation to Malick’s first two films) that “while men act, female voices interpret. While we see what men do, we hear what girls think.”<sup>43</sup> While Holly’s narration at times seems like a reflection on young love and its inevitable disappointments, the tone of her delivery masks some fascinating details and tensions. For example, her plain-spoken delivery and penchant for informative yet banal observations almost disguise the curious inconsistencies of time and place in her narration. Gradually, what emerges is her competing fantasy of magical lands, her version of the myth of innocence.

In her first voiceover, Holly lays out a territory spanning the south/north axis of the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Roberts, ‘Western meets Eastwood’ (1997), 62.

<sup>42</sup> Patterson, ‘Two Characters in Search of Direction’ (2003), 27.

<sup>43</sup> McGettigan, ‘Interpreting a man’s world’ (2001), 34.

United States, from Texas to Montana via South Dakota, and what this immediately evokes is a particular sense of American place, something of the nineteenth-century frontier. She then says: “Little did I realize that what began in the alleys and backways of this quiet town would end in the badlands of Montana.” At that moment, she and Kit are seen in frame together for the first time and the title “Badlands” comes up on the screen. The double invocation of ‘Badlands’ introduces, and emphasizes, the mythic aspect of Holly’s words, much in keeping with her bookishly romantic character such that the name of the location is more portentous than the actual content of her narration. There is also an implied movement from the prosaic (alleys and backways) to the mythic and exceptional (badlands of Montana) which feel a world away. Thus, before Kit has even introduced himself to Holly, two ‘maps’ have been laid out for their fateful journey, one broadly geographic and one mythic. It is the beginning of a narrative that, throughout, engages ambiguously with time and space.

From an implied reference to the Korean War and the story’s factual origins to its celebrity iconography, the film, in Adrian Danks’s words, “presents a potent but immaterial portrait of its period.”<sup>44</sup> The Cold War is peripherally present but vividly evoked when Holly reports that “Kit was glad to leave South Dakota behind and cursed its name. He said that if the Communists ever dropped the atomic bomb, he wished they’d put it right in the middle of Rapid City.” Time as historical context drifts into era, signalled but not specified, and one finds a similarly flexible approach in the narrative’s *fabula*. Holly’s use of “once” and “sometimes” indicates an uncertain (or deliberately vague) conception of time, though one could argue that the two experiences they relate to – eating salt grass and eating a cow – are more importantly a representation of the unpredictable nature of their flight.

Holly’s most stunningly arbitrary relating of time occurs in a voiceover that describes the panic their crimes have caused.

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<sup>44</sup> Danks, *A Death Comes as an End* (2000)

The whole country was out looking for us, for who knew where Kit would strike next? Sidewalks were deserted. Stores closed their doors and drew their blinds. Poses and vigilante committees were set up from Texas to North Dakota. Children rode back and forth to school under heavy guard. A famous detective was brought in from Boston. He could find no clues. My clarinet teacher said I probably wasn't responsible, but others said I was. Then, on Thursday, the Governor of Oklahoma sent out the National Guard to stand watch at the Federal Reserve Bank in Tulsa when word got out that Kit meant to rob it. It was like the Russians had invaded.

In this wandering narration, space and time implode. The intimacy of Kit and Holly's journey has allowed the audience to forget where the couple are, and how long it has been since they fled the burning house. Suddenly, the map comes to life again as their influence spreads to the nation's latitudinal limits; the people involved include governors, east coast detectives, and schoolteachers. "Then on Thursday ..." Which Thursday? The specificity one normally attaches to days of the week is rendered absurd in this context and one is left floundering in a flood of information that only loosely connects. Just when it seems as if the reflective narrator has taken control, the "hovering" Holly emerges to complicate exactly where and when this narration is taking place.

Kit and Holly are not lost, in one sense, because they are running away, and wherever they are beyond the reaches of the law, is where they need to be. However, they do seem adrift. They have a marker to aim at – the mountains of Montana – but these remain remarkably elusive: seen as a blue haze on the horizon, they appear similar to the mountains (one is led to believe) of Saskatchewan so that it seems wherever Kit and Holly are travelling, they're not actually getting anywhere. Their journey is one in search of a mythical place across a putatively real landscape. This curious relationship between Holly's narration of the landscape and the actual geography of those places is nowhere more evident than in the following voiceover:

HOLLY (v.o.)

That night we moved closer to the border, and clear across the prairie, at the very edge of the horizon ...

EXT. REFINERY FIRES - NIGHT

HOLLY (v.o.)

We could make out the gas fires of the refinery at Missoula, while to the south ...

EXT. CITY LIGHTS - NIGHT

HOLLY (v.o.)

We could see the lights of Cheyenne, a city bigger and grander than I'd ever seen.

Kit and Holly's flight from the fictional Fort Dupree, South Dakota, is surely one of the strangest journeys in the movies. While punctuated by the naming of places geographically real, it is visually located in a near featureless landscape, with the tearaway lovers always heading towards mountains that never appear to draw any closer. The relationship between places is never clearly established – the forest by the river, Cato's place, the Rich Man's house. Spatially disconnected, all three serve, instead, to offer us insight into Kit and Holly's character as they get to meet both rich and poor, stranger and friend, those like them, and attempt to get to know each other.

Holly's narration of the final flight into the badlands – which starts with their departure from the Rich Man's house, and ends with Holly deserting Kit before his final absurd attempt to flee – is a complex and often contradictory combination of retrospection and anticipation, *non sequiturs*, and temporal and spatial elasticity within given geographical coordinates. While Kit soldiers on towards a resigned fate, Holly grows more insular and uncertain, eventually declaring (to us), "I made up my mind to never again tag around with a hell-bent type, no matter how in love with him I was." She comes to this conclusion after "looking at the lights of Cheyenne," a moment that exemplifies Holly's dislocated sense of geographical space. The sequence described above is accompanied, first, by a shot of a refinery fire, and second, a shot of city lights. The matching of the image with its description in the voiceover suggests the contiguity of both in time and space.

At this point in the film the couple might be in Montana, or still possibly in South Dakota. But whatever the case, if one uses Rapid City, South Dakota as a central co-ordinate, it

is 1144km (715 miles) to Missoula, Montana, and 347km (217 miles) to Cheyenne, Wyoming as the crow flies. Even overlooking the mountain ranges that separate the two cities, seeing either Cheyenne or Missoula, let alone both, is simply impossible. They also lie on a roughly NW / SE axis, some 9 degrees of longitude apart. So, as an indicator of where the pair might be, Holly's narration is useless, but as a possible indicator of Holly's state of mind, her whimsical stretching of space, her words are very interesting. After all, it is while looking south, back to Cheyenne, that she feels "all kinds of things," the most important being not to "tag around with a hell-bent type" while Kit's attempts to focus north are mostly rebuffed. He tries to deflect Holly's melancholy with the promise of a trout, "soon as we get to the mountains," and later, after Holly's contemplative view of Cheyenne, he proposes a career with the Mounties, but by now, Holly has stopped listening. Overriding Holly's pragmatic observation that they might look at his driver's license, he responds unconvincingly, "Well, I'm not going to let that stop me."

If Kit's fantasy lies to the north, then Holly's words point to the south, to Cheyenne, "a city bigger and grander than I'd ever seen." Kit dreams of life in the mountains catching fish, but as we've seen earlier in the film, he's an impatient fisherman: his idea of joining the Mounties seems more apt given his respect for lawmen but this ignores the painfully obvious fact that he is a mass killer. By comparison, Holly's obvious thrill at seeing Cheyenne – even from a distance – is in keeping with her desire: to marry a successful man and lead a life of domestic acquisition. It is this separation of north and south that indicates the final conflict between Kit and Holly's competing fantasies, where her pragmatism and action triumph over his idealism and dream.

## Competing Fantasies

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Kit and Holly's flight from the Rich Man's house starts in jaunty enough fashion with Kit and Holly playing at grown-up courtesy – she waits him for him to open the door for her, while he assuages her impatience with the joking tone that has worked on her up until now.

HOLLY

I'd like to get out of here.

KIT

Soon as I start the car and fix my hat.

However, there immediately begins a series of droll ironies and matter-of-fact observations that not only subvert the genre expectations of the road movie, but point the way towards their journey's strange conclusion and the film's own enigmatic end. As they drive away from the Rich Man's house, Holly's voiceover bridges to a shot of a flat, brown, grassy plain with their car blazing directly across it: "Fearing there'd be roadblocks on the highways, we took off across that area known as the Great Plains. Kit told me to enjoy the scenery, and I did."

In the manner of a child embarking on her first real journey, Holly begins to describe the significant geographical markers of their journey, as if for the general edification of the audience. And while she claims to enjoy the scenery – a comment already rendered ridiculous by the featureless appearance of that scenery – her lack of interest is immediately confirmed by an edit which shows her with her back to the window reading from a celebrity tabloid. Not that Kit is complaining; he enjoys her reading and offers his own contributions, ironically agreeing with Pat Boone's decision to sacrifice his education for his career, where earlier he had urged Holly to take her school books with her so she wouldn't "fall behind." And again, somewhat ironically,

they seem most in tune over a story concerning two people (Rita Hayworth and Frank Sinatra) not being in love with each other.

Kit and Holly's intimacy, focused inward toward each other within the space of the car, further frustrates the generic expectations of the road movie. The genre traditionally draws together character and motivation in the literal vehicle of the automobile on the literal path of the road. Edward Dimendberg describes the road's fundamental significance as follows:

Unfolding fresh vistas for the spectator, the open road becomes a powerful allegory for continuity and progression, a historical teleology and vision of the future *projected into the landscape itself*. (original emphasis)<sup>45</sup>

This visual dynamic of the open road, "forces the gaze in its direction. Origin and goal clearly stand out."<sup>46</sup> This is convergent technologically with the guiding principles of the road movie's cinematographic style, as Corrigan notes:

If the thriller makes the camera a weapon and the melodrama makes it a family member, in the road movie the camera adopts the framed perspective of the vehicle itself. In this genre, the perspective of the camera comes closest of any genre to the mechanical unrolling of images that defines the movie camera.<sup>47</sup>

Malick's cut to Holly *not* looking at the scenery is a concise example of the film's ironic engagement with the road movie, extending the irony beyond the level of dialogue.

Folk music introduces Holly's next voiceover as she plots their path as outlaws: "through desert and mesa, across the endless miles of open range, we made our headlong way, steering by the telephone lines toward the mountains of Montana." In a rare moment of filmic agreement, the music acts in harmony with the image and narration as Holly deploys a western mythic lexicon, replete with pioneer allusions – desert, mesa, and open range. Holly urges Kit to take her to a train which, in its evocation of caravans from "The Adventures of Marco Polo," brings her

<sup>45</sup> Dimendberg, 'The Will to Motorization' (1995), 108.

<sup>46</sup> Fritz Todt (General Inspector of German Highways in the 1930s) in Dimendberg, 'The Will to Motorization' (1995), 110.

<sup>47</sup> Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls* (1991), 145-146.

back to her idea of civilization (and foreshadows her description of the lights of Cheyenne). For a brief moment, she echoes pioneer women from an earlier time explicitly associated with civilization while her male partner looks out west to the wilderness. For his part, Kit tries to find direction by spinning a bottle, and when this fails to satisfy him he mutters, "If I'm worth a damn, I'll pick the right direction. And if I'm not, well, I don't care."

Off the road and free from its allegorizing power Holly navigates by another equally powerful symbol of technological advance punctuating the featureless prairie. The telephone lines which point north will eventually carry news of their progress and, significantly, it is from an aerial perspective (the helicopter) that they are finally spotted. In an earlier scene, they steal "drip gas" from oil pipelines and it is notable that their flight ends at an oil rig, where the line essentially terminates at its source. Throughout this section of the film, the couple's car traverses territory that, while superficially open, is, in fact, defined by several tracings of human technological 'advance.'

The most significant lines that delimit the landscape are both cartographic and physical – the borders of Montana and Saskatchewan represented by distant mountain ranges, also loaded with mythic import. It is here that Holly and Kit's perceptions of the landscape differ explicitly. As mentioned earlier, Kit sees the mountains as the site for a suitably heroic last stand, and views the other side – Saskatchewan (and the separate geopolitical entity of Canada) – as the "magical land beyond the law." Like Mexico to the south, Canada becomes a territory empty of authority, a *tabula rasa* where any man can start over. Holly, on the other hand, becomes increasingly absorbed in maps, though she seems unwilling or unable to read them.<sup>48</sup> Pointing Montana out to Kit, she informs him that the state bird is a meadowlark, rather than plotting a path towards it. Later, when Kit is musing over his opportunities in Canada, Holly uses the map as a way of "not paying attention" to him.

Their divergent states are most dissonantly evident during the desert montage. Kit strikes

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<sup>48</sup> Curiously, a large wall-map of Africa is plainly visible in her bedroom in the film's early scenes.

another Dean pose – this time a deliberate evocation of an image associated with the film *Giant*. An isolated figure on a flat plain, Kit is intercut with nearly still images of a falcon, a lizard, a wild turkey, and a thunderstorm in a brief attainment of mythic western resonance. This potential fulfillment of Kit's desire to be the western outlaw is, however, undermined by the curious musical cue, 'Trois Morceaux En Forme De Poire' (Three Pear-Shaped Pieces) by Erik Satie. Meanwhile, Holly reports a conversation to us where she and Kit try to define their situation:

We lived in utter loneliness, neither here nor there. Kit said that solitude was a better word, cause it meant more exactly what I wanted to say. Whatever the expression, I told him we couldn't go on living this way.

Holly and Kit's expressions – "loneliness" and "solitude" – may be primarily similar (both are defined as being "companionless") but while solitude, in terms of reclusiveness, has the aspect of choice, loneliness has the aspect of desperation and unhappiness. Holly's struggle to describe where they are is contrasted with her knowledge of how she feels; Kit, on the other hand, is happy without a sense of time or place, so much so that he fails to understand Holly. Their intimacy here is forced and unconvincing, and they are left looking past each other out of the car windows. This failure in communication introduces the first of two scenes where Holly's voiceover is immediately followed by contiguous dialogue.

KIT (responding to v.o.)

Why not? I mean, I'm having fun. At least I'm not bitching.

HOLLY

Well, I feel kind of like an animal living out here. I mean, there's no place to bathe and no place to get anything good to eat.

The rarity of Kit responding in the diegesis to Holly's voiceover illustrates the difficulty one has in relating the time frame of the voiceover to the passage of events. The distance between Holly's voice and the events it describes closes, as if she cannot stop Kit responding to her

complaint. But while Kit finally has a chance to engage with the narration, his response is feeble in relation to the story Holly has woven around it – Holly commands the long view and their diverging paths are confirmed soon after when she decides to quit Kit.

HOLLY (v.o.)

Finally, I found the strength to tell Kit this. I pointed out that even If we got to the Far North, he still couldn't make a living

INT. CADILLAC - NIGHT

Kit and Holly's faces are strangely lit by the dash lights. Holly is absorbed in her map. The radio is on.

KIT; (responding to v.o.)

I could get a job with the Mounties, the Northwest Mounties. Hell, I got all the qualifications. I can ride, shoot and I don't mind the cold. In fact, I kind of like the cold.

Holly looks up from the map.

HOLLY

What?

KIT

Nothing ... I was just running off at the mouth ... as usual.

HOLLY

I'm sorry. I wasn't listening.

This second instance of continuity between narration and dialogue illuminates several points. Holly's sense of place is still configured in mythical terms, but her concerns are more obviously material – “if *we* got to the Far North, *he* still couldn't make a living.” In Kit's dialogue we see, once more, the desire to fulfil the pioneer character, a man who can ride and shoot and who is resilient against the harshness of nature. However, Kit's chirpy optimism is wearying and his tough rebel attitude has worn thin.

As they dance to Nat King Cole's 'A Blossom Fell,' the terrible irony of Kit's predicament is made apparent. The song's lyrics are clearly audible – “The dream has ended, for true love died / The night a blossom fell and touched two lips that lied” – while Kit says, “Boy, if I could sing a song like that ... I mean, if I could sing a song about the way I feel right now,

it'd be a hit." The viewer is also reminded of the uncertain basis of their romance when Holly narrates Kit's fear "of being shot down alone without a girl to scream out his name." Before their tearaway escape starts, Kit says to Holly's father, "You know, before I met her, nobody could ask me how I was doing with my girl. Matter of fact, I didn't really have one." Holly is "the girl" whom Kit can talk about and show off (as he does to those he meets like Cato and the Rich Man), and who will mourn his heroic death; however, Holly never sees herself as that special, remaining the lonely, thoughtful girl who, near the beginning, tells herself (as much as us) that Kit, "could've had any other girl in town if he'd given it half a try." The song fades out as their car approaches the oil well where Holly finally deserts Kit, sparking his final quest for celebrity. In 1975, Malick said of *Badlands*:

I wanted the picture to set up like a fairy tale, outside time, like *Treasure Island*. I hoped this would, among other things, take a little of the sharpness out of the violence but still keep its dreamy quality. Children's books are full of violence. . . Kit and Holly even think of themselves as *living* in a fairy tale. (original emphasis)<sup>49</sup>

Kit and Holly may believe that they are "living in a fairy tale" but it is Holly who structures their account of that experience by recuperating Kit's western outlaw persona within her high-school girl's imagination. Her relative attainment of education, which she is keen to communicate to her audience (in a helpful and descriptive, not arrogant way) creates an exterior world to her narration, a map of her journey which includes her domestic idyll, her outlaw lover, and their "headlong way" across terrain that is real but magically configured. However, there is also an interior quality to Holly's narration, seen in the imaginative reconstruction of her environment, in the ways her secret desires transcend the situations in which she finds herself.

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<sup>49</sup> In Walker, 'Malick on *Badlands*' (1975), 83.

## “Marble Halls”

HOLLY (v.o.)

We planned a huge network of tunnels under the forest floor, and our first order of business every morning was to decide on a new password for the day. Now and then we'd sneak out at night and steal a chicken or a bunch of corn or some melons from a melon patch. Mostly, though, we just lay on our backs and stared at the clouds and sometimes it was like being in a big marble hall, the way we talked in low voices and heard the tiniest sound.

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The sequence in the forest is the most explicitly fantastical of the whole film. It is perverse even to consider the collapsing of time that the construction of such a bucolic kingdom entails given that Holly tells us that they are already being sought by the authorities. One sees the merging of their fantasies as Kit takes responsibility for defence, passwords and escape routes, while Holly takes on domestic chores, such as carrying wood and looking after chickens. In one sense, this is very much an element of the exterior aspect of Holly's narration: the return to nature – which includes Thoreau-like naming of trees – is complemented by cinematography, editing and sound that emphasises montages of nature, rack-focussing on the details of trees, the dynamism of a river in flood, and frequently the background of birdsong.

However, the sequence is characterized by almost continuous voiceover narration from Holly and only two lines of dialogue from Kit until the sighting of the bounty hunters. The scene where Holly reads aloud from *Kon Tiki* confirms her channelling of adventure narratives into her experience as she proudly informs the viewer that, “there wasn't a plant in the forest that didn't come in handy.”

While the forest sequence is probably Kit and Holly's happiest time together, there runs throughout a dark fatalistic vein composed entirely of Holly's private thoughts and a richly fantasized interior world of “marble halls” within the wilderness idyll of her adolescent reading. Though Kit and Holly take various items from Holly's house before destroying it, the most significant are a large painting – a print of Maxfield Parrish's *Daybreak* – and her father's

stereopticon. Having just witnessed the fiery destruction of, not only Holly's house, but specifically her bedroom – including her doll's house – the painting represents an interesting transition from the destruction of her real domestic world to the construction of a new fantastical domestic sphere. This transition is consolidated by a shot of Kit and Holly sleeping which begins on the painting before panning across their figures. Described by Morrison and Schur as a “pastoral scene that evokes antiquity,” replete with blue lakes, marble columns and pre-Raphaelite girls, *Daybreak* also has a “languor[ous] effect. Harmony and innocence are ascendant here.”<sup>50</sup> One could say it is the painting of a dream and, in between the self-defence drills and heavy lifting, Holly's narration takes on an increasingly dreamy quality. After carrying thirty pounds of wood a distance of five miles one day, on another Holly says: “while hiding in the forest, I covered my eyes with makeup, to see how they'd come out.” Her experiment with black mascara suggests playing at being another person, and her wide blinking eyes ringed with black come across as slightly ghoulish.

It is during Kit's clumsy fishing outing that Holly's darker thoughts emerge, firstly when she says “at times I wished he'd fall in the river and drown, so I could watch.” Holly does not just wish he'd die but wants the added thrill of watching it happen. And while the forest continues to exercise its allure over Holly, its stillness and tranquillity mask thoughts of an otherworldly nature:

I grew to love the forest. The cooing of the doves and the hum of dragonflies in the air made it always seem lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone ... When the leaves rustled overhead, it was like the spirits were whispering about all the little things that bothered 'em.

Holly's talk of whispering spirits is soon made manifest on the soundtrack in the scene where the bounty hunters arrive. As with the burning of the house, Malick organizes the soundtrack into movements. First, there is the sound of whispering in English, matching the movement of

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<sup>50</sup> Morrison, and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 72.

Holly's lips as she applies lipstick, followed by a choral verse sung in German, which matches Kit's discovery of the hunters. Then there is a sudden change in the score to match the frantic action as Kit finds his ambush site and Holly finds a fallen tree behind which to hide, before the whispering and German choral verse return as Kit prepares his ambush. The soundtrack is uncanny, not only because of the disembodied whispering, but also because – as I have noted elsewhere – the music is completely incongruous. As the use of Satie undermines Kit's classic Western pose, so the music here complicates the scene's visual parallels with frontier outlawry and even its potential as a metaphor for the ambush tactics of the war in Vietnam.<sup>51</sup>

It is just before their discovery by the man at the river that Holly's most emotionally complex voiceover occurs.

One day, while taking a look at some vistas in Dad's stereopticon, it hit me that I was just this little girl, born in Texas, whose father was a sign painter and who had only just so many years to live. It sent a chill down my spine, and I thought: Where would I be this very moment if Kit had never met me? Or killed anybody? This very moment. If my Mom had never met my Dad? If she'd of never died? And what's the man I'll marry going to look like? What's he doing right this minute? Is he thinking about me now, by some coincidence, even though he doesn't know me? Does it show on his face?

The most obvious point to make is that, while recognizing Kit's presence in her life, almost in the same breath she wonders what her future husband will look like. It might take her a while to decide not to go around with a trigger-happy malcontent, but right here she has made her decision that her future, ultimately, does not lie with Kit. It is also worth noting that the stereopticon of her recently murdered father causes her to dwell on her own mortality, though the questions she poses move from the logical to an extreme romantic cliché. In a dry run for the opening credits of *Days of Heaven*, Malick assembles a montage of antique images that evokes a mood of travel fantasy rather than a sense of continuity. The intimacy of the final image – that of a young soldier whispering into the ear of a girl wearing a hat – is emphasized by the slow zoom

<sup>51</sup> The whispering also foreshadows Linda's curious voiceover in *Days of Heaven*: "I got to like this farm. Do anything I want. Roll in the fields, talk to wheat patches. When I was sleeping they'd talk to me – go in my dreams."

into the face of the girl who appears coy, almost uninterested. The painting and the stereopticon are more than vestiges of her previous life (like the useless toaster and lamp Kit brings along), they are powerful symbols of her imagination and her ability to construct her future life. By comparison, Kit haphazardly collects assorted items with very little symbolic power and puts them out into the world (either buried or attached to a balloon) in the hope that their permanence will ensure his own posterity. In contrast to Holly's sustained overarching narration, Kit talks into rhetorical cul-de-sacs, either running out of things to say or, in this instance, reasoning to the point of meaninglessness. Holly narrates:

Afterwards he took and buried some of our things in a bucket. He said that nobody else would know where we'd put them, and that we'd come back someday, maybe, and they'd still be sitting here, just the same, but we'd be different. And if we never got back, well, somebody might dig them up a thousand years from now and wouldn't they wonder!

If we are to understand more fully the interior world of Holly's narration, a closer look at two other significant interiors is required: Holly's bedroom and the Rich Man's house. Four objects stand out in Holly's bedroom: her large, hooped iron bed, an array of peacock feathers, a catfish in a bowl on the windowsill, and finally a map of Africa. The map of Africa seems an incidental detail, but it further strengthens the argument about Holly's world of fantasy travel: like other maps in the film which never seem to help the pair actually get anywhere, Africa is a possible vista.

The room is seen first in its normal state during the opening voiceover, where Holly plays with her dog on the bed. Later, as the room is incinerated, we see a catalogue of Holly's things burning (her doll's house, doll, bed, and the peacock feathers). One brief scene in between these two moments is particularly interesting as it represents the most explicitly dreamlike extent of Holly's narration. Just before they consummate their relationship sexually, we see an image of Kit: as the camera dollies back to reveal Kit sitting up in a bed at night, Holly says:

And as he lay in bed, in the middle of the night, he always heard a noise like somebody was holding a seashell against his ear. And sometimes he'd see me coming toward him in beautiful white robes, and I'd put my cold hand on his forehead.

Behind Kit we see the array of peacock feathers; his lower body is covered with the blanket seen earlier on Holly's bed, but it is not Holly's bed on which he is resting, rather a narrow cot. In a surrealistic flourish, Holly's catfish is seen gasping on the table beside him, while Kit himself does not seem to be breathing at all. Most eerily, though, Holly describes Kit being in a dreamlike state while in an explicitly dreamlike state herself. Holly's is a controlling fantasy and a morbid one, a transition from the uninterrupted idyll of a girl playing in her room, to her sexual coming of age, and finally to the murder of her father and the destruction of her home.

Holly's fantasy world, evident right from the beginning of her narration, is emphasized by the dislocated relationship she has with her father. The one moment of possible affection between them, where he flicks paint at her feet while washing his brushes, ends in Holly lying to him about her meeting with Kit. Her father's treatment of her veers from cruelty (killing her dog) to attempts to keep her busy with musical accomplishment (learning to play the piano and clarinet). Kit's torching of Holly's house does more than throw the police off their trail; the piano that burns in the fire is representative of the father's attempt to derail Holly's romance with the working-class Kit. Significantly, Holly never completely gives up the connection with those middle-class luxuries, from saving the Parrish painting to her complaints about living rough on the plains.

Holly's narration from the forest scene that, "sometimes it was like being in a big marble hall, the way we talked in low voices and heard the tiniest sound" could apply here as well, so much so that the Rich Man's house to which they flee becomes an approximation of the world Holly dreams of. Here she finds a house full of symbols of high culture: a piano, a harp, sculptures, crystal decanters, and the technological luxury of a dictaphone. Upon entering the house, Kit and Holly behave politely, keeping their voices low and seeking permission (at

gunpoint, granted) to “hang out for a few hours.” In one curious scene they walk around the living room touching random objects: Kit picks up a glass of alcohol but doesn’t drink from it, while Holly transfers a bust from the piano to a marble column and tries sitting in different antique chairs. Their curiously hushed reverence is emphasized by the noise of birds outside and the ticking of a clock. Soon after, while Kit makes his considered voice recording, Holly wanders and reflects on her situation, once again establishing her distance from the world around her: “The world was like a faraway planet to which I could never return. I thought what a fine place it was, full of things for people to look into and enjoy.”

The Rich Man’s house fulfils more than a few of Holly’s fantasies, and her conversation with the owner is tantalizingly interrupted by the appearance of a visitor. Whereas earlier she confided in the girl at Cato’s house that she has to stick by Kit, and that if “he says frog, I jump,” here she baldly exclaims, “Sometimes he acts like there’s something wrong with his bean.” There’s definitely a coquettish quality to her movement and tone as she plonks herself down next to the Rich Man and says: “They claim I’ve got him wrapped around my little finger, but I never told him to shoot anybody.” (In retrospect, within the context of her narration, this statement is disingenuous: she does not tell Kit to kill, but she knows that he will do anything to prevent their capture.)

Kit and Holly’s attachment to things is apparent in many scenes in the film, but there is a distinct difference between the kinds of things they take, leave, observe, and use. Kit’s objects represent mostly mementoes and trophies, memorials to fleeting moments (such as their first sexual experience and his capture). Even the record he makes announcing their ‘suicide’ is seen burning up in the blaze long before the authorities arrive. The trophy he steals from the Rich Man becomes one of “our things” that is buried for future rediscovery, and while he rams cows to save on ammo, he shoots a football which, in Holly’s words, he considers “excess baggage.” The things Holly takes and observes, on the other hand, carry relatively more symbolic weight, like the painting, and even in Cato’s house, she casually flips through a shopping catalogue (for

which Kit ridicules her, saying that they'll never be able to afford any of it). Holly's discernment of material value is clearly more acute than Kit's and, one could argue, the eventual attainment of domestic middle-class bliss (give or take some "nasty looks") makes leaving Kit an easy decision.

It is therefore not so odd that the treehouse in the forest – a natural idyll – should seem so like an epitome of architectural grandeur (the marble halls of her imagination). In fact, so remarkable is the forest abode that it seems as if Holly wills a kingdom into being. Kit and Holly's descriptions, their frequent attempts to imagine a world for themselves, emphasizes that the setting of the film – its landscapes as well as its interior spaces – is always consciously constructed from within the text. In other words, landscape and home, exterior and interior are never passively viewed as spaces and things already there. Kit's desperate frontier fantasies and Holly's interior projections of bourgeois contentment illuminate different, yet linked mythic lines. Kit succumbs to the retreating of the frontier in reality and in mythic / cinematic terms – doomed as a post-war cowboy and as James Dean – while Holly forges middle class security out of her tale of terror of an absent mother, a cruel father, and a violent lover. The configuration of female observers caught in a matrix of romantic and acquisitive desire, violence and death is discernible again in *Days of Heaven*.

## Chapter Three

### “Successions of beauty”

LINDA (v.o.)

He was tired of livin' like the rest of them, nosin' around like a pig in the gutter. He wasn't in the mood no more. He figured there must be something wrong with 'em, the way they always got no luck ... He figured, some people need more than they got, and some people got more than they need. Just a matter of getting us all together.

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There is an inscrutability to *Days of Heaven* that appears even as the opening credits introduce the viewer to the film's significant creative contributors, the writing slipping past almost unnoticed as one's eyes try to comprehend the montage of sepia-tinged photographs from the turn of the twentieth century. Firstly, what is one to make of the music? Camille Saint-Saëns's parlour piece 'The Aquarium' is a whimsical, mysterious piece characterized by eerie broken chords and muted, high-pitched string harmonies that would be perfect for a horror film were it not for an underlying sense of play. Is the choice of music an ironic comment on naturalism's scientific observation of the human condition, or (in its 'classical' orientation) an explicit contrast to the folk music that is also heard in the film, thereby supplementing the class conflict apparent in the film's narrative?<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, what is one to make of the photographs? They include portraits of working-class people seamlessly interspersed with portraits of immigrants,<sup>2</sup> environmental studies of labour, images of urban living suggesting the social reform style of Jacob Riis, but also images of recreation and fantasy. The possible contrasts between the images are finessed by the camera – which moves constantly in and out in concert with the ebb and flow of the music – and the

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<sup>1</sup> The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music* describes *Carnival of the Animals*, of which 'The Aquarium' is a part, as a "grand zoological fantasy," Scholes (1972), 94. For further examination of Malick's use of this particular piece, see Power, 'Listening to the Aquarium,' and Wierzbicki, 'Sound as Music in the Films of Terrence Malick' (both 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Hine's 'Immigrant Girl, Ellis Island 1905' for example.

editing, as the images dissolve dreamily into one another. For example, H.H. Bennet's "instant photograph" of a man leaping over a gap in a rock – where the camera moves up to emphasize the photograph's surprising subject – dissolves into a shot of washing lines strung between tenement buildings, the camera still moving upward in parallel with the musical line. ("The Aquarium' halts four times in two phrases, as if insistently posing a question, before resuming and drawing to an evanescent conclusion.)<sup>3</sup>

Is this a film about class, about capitalism and labour during the booming industrial age of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? The photographs might suggest a critique of Progressivism which, "emerging from the economic depression of the 1890s, constituted itself through the rise of issue orientated party politics as an urban, renovatory movement," superseding "the imagined edenic society of the pre-industrial age symbolised by the autonomous, property-owning yeoman farmer."<sup>4</sup> However, as Janet Wondra has noted,

The seesawing of the film between a class critique in narrative and dialogue and the visual romanticizing of work lends the film a peculiar incoherence or fuzziness, which many critics have pointed to in a fragmented way but have failed to recognize as the function of an unproductive friction between our identification with the narrative track and our fascination with the spectacle of the landscape.<sup>5</sup>

While I agree with Wondra's critique, in this chapter I wish to focus on the narrative track, and contextualize the class relations within the literature of the late nineteenth century, also acknowledging the tension between progressive and populist political ideologies at the time.

*Days of Heaven* is historical in context (period setting) and yet is, like *Badlands*, explicit in its weaving together of American myths. Bill and the Farmer are both American Adams, motivated, ambitious men unafraid of hard work with a belief both in their abilities and in a country that will reward their industry. However, the Farmer, a young man, is the solitary proprietor of a massive

<sup>3</sup> Malick's Director of Photography, Nestor Almendros, notes the musical relationship between 'The Aquarium' and the editing: "With Bill Weber's editing, these title images follow one another in a visual classic symphony, with *andantes*, *maestosos*, *staccatos*, *tremolos*, etc." *Photographing Days of Heaven* (1979), 564.

<sup>4</sup> Munslow, *Discourse and Culture* (1992), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Wondra, 'Marx in a Texas Love Triangle' (2005).

wheat bonanza, while Bill is an itinerant worker, on the run from the law and scrounging for work. Trapped in the film's mythic architecture, all of the characters are also powerless to change the very real social environment in which they are located. The closest they come to engaging with a figure of true authority is waving after Woodrow Wilson's carriage as it trundles ironically by on the president's famous 'Whistlestop Tour.' (Wilson also appears in a photograph in the opening credits, a jarring contrast to the images of workers that dominate the montage.)

Where *Badlands* foregrounds the two protagonists for most of the time – Holly's storybook voiceover structuring the narrative – *Days of Heaven* often diminishes the protagonists in relation to the environment that surrounds them, and provides a voiceover far more disconcerting than Holly's. For large parts of *Badlands*, Kit and Holly dwell in a world of their own imagining – inside the car, in their forest hideaway, even in the house after Kit kills Holly's father – while in *Days of Heaven*, Bill and Abby have fleeting moments in each other's company. Try as they might, they can never escape a system that determines their worth, except in individual flights of fancy: Abby briefly lives the life of a princess while Bill enjoys his sojourn with the flying entertainers. In comparison to Holly, Linda is mostly a peripheral figure, often by choice, shrewdly observing the action taking place around her. Bill and Abby are cut adrift in the narrative, their motivation expressed through an uncomfortable series of terse exchanges and comments by Linda, who is at turns cryptic and matter-of-fact. Even the Farmer, as powerful as he is, balances precariously between commanding assertiveness (starting the harvest) and profound frailty: concerning his health, Linda tells us with alarming candour, "I don't know, the doc must have come round or somethin', gave him somethin'. Probably some kind of medicine. I coulda just took it, put it in a ditch. Like they do to a horse. They shoot him right away."

Finally, where the landscape in *Badlands* is generally bland – the blue mountains of Montana always distant geographically, narratively, and spiritually – the landscape in *Days of Heaven* is deliberately beautiful. Holly's unintentionally ironic point of view of the Great Plains, and her unflattering descriptions of saltgrass and drip-gas, contrast in the latter film, with static

shots emphasizing the grandeur of the farm, wild horses powdered with snow, and herds of bison grazing. Bill, Abby and Linda's second escape, this time on a small river boat, includes striking shots of canyons and the river itself. The descending plague of locusts is also beautiful, dream-like, as still human figures stand in the yellow light inundated with swirling gusts of locusts.<sup>6</sup>

In the foreword to the enlarged edition of his book *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell "assume[s] that anyone who has taken an interest in the film wishes to understand what its extremities of beauty are in service of; and not just its extremities but its successions of beauty."<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Vernon Young, in a debate on the beauty of one of the film's shots – the train going over the bridge – writes that it is beautiful "because being seen, it pleases ... What came *before* and *after* ... can't tell you why the shot is *beautiful*, only how it functions in the story line."<sup>8</sup> It seems that critiques of the film's aesthetics fall broadly into these camps: one that apprehends beauty in the image itself, and one that contextualizes beauty through an examination of its relation to other shots, and that seeks an understanding of the film itself in an understanding of its beauty. Cavell suggests that the beauty is in the service of a "metaphysical vision of the world."

Shall we try expressing the subject as one in which the works and the emotions and the entanglements of human beings are at every moment reduced to insignificance by the casual rounds of earth and sky?<sup>9</sup>

Cavell confirms this metaphysical reading by proposing a Heideggerian interpretation of the film based on the distinction between Being and beings: "beings and Being are in different places. Particular beings and Being are differently located."<sup>10</sup> His argument concludes:

<sup>6</sup> Malick and Almendros shot the plague in wide shots by "running the camera in reverse and dropping peanut shells from helicopters." Almendros, 'Photographing *Days of Heaven*' (1979), 632.

<sup>7</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed* (1979), xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Young and Perez, 'Letters to the Editors' (1979), 326. (author's emphasis)

<sup>9</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed* (1979), xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger's *What is Called Thinking?* in Cavell, *The World Viewed* (1979), xv.

Objects projected on a screen are inherently reflexive, they occur as self-referential, reflecting upon their physical origins. Their presence refers to their absence, their location in another place. Then if in relation to objects capable of such self-manifestation human beings are reduced in significance, or crushed by the fact of beauty left vacant, perhaps this is because in trying to take dominion over the world, or in aestheticizing it (temptations inherent in the making of film, or of any art), they are refusing their participation with it.<sup>11</sup>

Cavell's is a thought-provoking thesis on the relationship between the film's aesthetics and melodramatic narrative, between the greatness of the land and the human lives in miniature playing upon it. His reading also provokes one to consider the ethics of capturing, processing and exhibiting the image (a debate I will return to in chapter five) which Susan Sontag outlines in her essay 'In Plato's Cave': "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power."<sup>12</sup>

For the purposes of my discussion here, however, I tend to agree with Donougho who prefers a "less metaphysical (or meta-filmic) meaning in the image, one rooted in the narrative itself."<sup>13</sup> Though he doesn't use the word, Cavell's language is suggestive of the epic in cinema where narrative matches landscape in sweep and (frequently nationalist) political ambition. There is indeed an epic quality to *Days of Heaven*, promising a *Giant* – dramatic landscapes, secret love, betrayal, the slow passage of time – and yet the narrative is breathless at times as scenes are trimmed bare in an almost perfunctory fulfillment of narrative continuity (consider, for example, the economy of the scenes where the Farmer proposes to Abby, followed by Bill and Abby discussing the proposal). Malick's film seems to escape the fate of Michael Cimino's similarly titled and themed frontier western *Heaven's Gate* by *not* fulfilling its epic promise. Where Cimino built the epic quality of *Heaven's Gate* from the drama of everyday life – observations of a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>12</sup> Sontag, *On Photography* (1977), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Donougho, 'West of Eden' (1985), 19.

community's cultural and social life – Malick observes immigrancy and class through swift montage, and eschews the sentimental excesses of the movie epic by distancing the viewer from the emotional life of the film's major characters. The discourse of labour, land ownership and industrialization in *Days of Heaven* might remind one of American literary naturalism, but the world of the characters owes more to the art modernism of Edward Hopper.

With this in mind, the following sections will examine some of the literary and artistic references in what is Malick's most literary and painterly film, and will show how Malick anchors the major themes in America's volatile cultural and political transformation from the late nineteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth century.

**“The colossal indifference of nature”**

Who shall describe the glory of growing wheat? Deep as the breast of a man, wide as a sea, heavy-headed, supple-stalked, many-voiced, full of multitudinous, secretive, whispered colloquies, – a wilderness of wealth, a meeting-place of winds and of magic. Who shall sing the song of it, its gold and its grace?

Hamlin Garland, *Boy Life on the Prairie* <sup>14</sup>

The earth, hitherto grey with dust, was now upturned and brown. As far as the eye could reach, it was empty of all life, bare, mournful, absolutely still; and, as she looked, there seemed to her morbid imagination – diseased and disturbed with long brooding, sick with the monotony of repeated sensation – to be disengaged from all this immensity, a sense of a vast oppression, formless, disquieting. The terror of sheer bigness grew slowly in her mind; loneliness beyond words gradually enveloped her. She was lost in all these limitless reaches of space. Had she been abandoned in mid-ocean, in an open boat, her terror could hardly have been greater. She felt vividly that certain uncongeniality which, when all is said, forever remains between humanity and the earth which supports it. She recognized the colossal indifference of nature, not hostile, even kindly and friendly, so long as the human ant-swarm was submissive, working with it, hurrying along at its side in the mysterious march of the centuries.

Frank Norris, *The Octopus* <sup>15</sup>

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Discussion of *Days of Heaven*, more than Malick's other films, is frequently contextualized by influences – artistic, literary, and cinematic. In any review or article on the film one is guaranteed to find a reference to at least one of Henry James, Emile Zola, Edward Hopper, Alexander Dovzhenko or F.W. Murnau. Does one find in this continual referential thread (much like the magician's 'endless' multicoloured scarf that is pulled amazingly from his hat) an essential emptiness in which, in Pauline Kael's mind, lies the film's profound failure? <sup>16</sup> Perhaps one person's "pretension" is another's "richness" such that Morrison and Schur claim:

In the great tradition of classic American literature, *Days of Heaven* evokes a sense of place at once mythic and diurnally specific. By virtue of its intricately intertextual relationship to tradition, the film presents its recurrent themes as definitively "American," yet it follows tradition, as well, in coming down finally on the side of the individual. <sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Garland, *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1961), 273.

<sup>15</sup> Norris, *The Octopus*, (1948), Book I: 173-174.

<sup>16</sup> Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies* (1982), 137.

<sup>17</sup> Morrison and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 33-34.

The intertextual relationships in *Days of Heaven* are notable in the way they chart the transition of traditions. Thus, James and Zola are significant if we see them in relation to an interest in literary realism, naturalism and the move into modernism (a process which also includes Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser).<sup>18</sup> In Malick's work, film as a medium is only rarely referred to explicitly, which here carries not only the symbolic freight of Chaplin's populist 'tramp' politics in *The Immigrant*, but also an interest in the aesthetics of silent, black-and-white film as it moves into the era of sound and colour.<sup>19</sup> The art of Hopper, Sheeler, and Wyeth, and the photographs of Hine and Riis (among others) enrich the narrative moment by representing the rapidly changing relationship between people and nature, and the fear in an increasingly industrialized (and Taylorized) society of people being trapped forever within the compartmentalized structure of modern mechanized industry. The optimism of the folksy score that accompanies the remarkable shot of the silhouetted train on the trestle bridge not only signals the movement from city to countryside in blunt oppositional terms, but also the opportunity for Bill to escape the crushing monotony of his factory job. Thus a later shot – the furnace on the farm – is significant not only because it reminds us of the city, but because it returns Bill to the particular environment that characterized his job in the city.

The inescapable presence of industry in nature as a symptom of modernity is a major theme in the film. As the eerie tranquility of the opening theme shimmers into silence, the viewer is quickly taken past the industrial scavengers outside a factory to its thundering, fiery interior. Immediately Malick subverts conventions of narrative construction and sound fidelity by drowning out the dialogue between Bill and the factory foreman with the thudding clamour of the forge. It is an almost Godardian tactic, and one finds oneself straining to hear a word before

<sup>18</sup> The influence of Hamlin Garland's *Boy Life on the Prairie* on *Days of Heaven* is difficult to ascertain. Though a passage from the book appears as an epigraph on early versions of the screenplay from 1976, and Vlada Petric's 1978 review cites exactly the same extract, the film is certainly very different from the early drafts.

<sup>19</sup> Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930) and King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1927) might constitute a thematic lineage. Terry Curtis Fox notes the links with Murnau's 1920s films *Sunrise* (1927) and *City Girl* (1929). Fox, 'The Last Ray of Light' (1978), 27.

realizing that the words do not matter – the fact of Bill’s action does. Bill is defined by action and noise: even as a sacker he is surrounded by tractors, harvesters, and threshers. By comparison, the Farmer appears with an aura of calmness. When the truckloads of labourers arrive at the farm, there is a brief shot of the Farmer walking down the steps from the porch and biting into an apple. Though we are some distance away, the crisp bite is clearly audible before the rumble of trucks is heard and Malick’s editing establishes the spatial dynamics of the farm. Even the momentous act of deciding when to harvest is calm and sensual as he rubs the wheat kernels between his hands and tastes them.

One could argue that the introductions to the two men are symbolically couched within the film’s Biblical metaphors: the Farmer is the new Adam and Bill is a minion in hell. However these two moments also address the theme of energy in the film, its generation and dissipation. The apple emphasizes the serene calm that surrounds the Farmer when we first meet him and which accompanies him for much of the film. However, both men die before the end of the narrative, their energy dissipated while the two women carry on. The conclusions to their stories are defined by movement: in the final shot of Abby she is whisked up on to the moving train moments after arriving at the platform, while Linda is barely enrolled at school before making her daring escape.

The relation between energy – its dissipation and conservation – and the characters in *Days of Heaven* may seem initially like a form of naturalism on screen as the human characters are frequently rendered helpless in the face of implacable nature, and where the economic structures at work separate two quite similar men so that one, Bill, is a full-time labourer in mills, forges and on farms, while the other, the Farmer, is “the richest man in the panhandle.” There is certainly something of naturalism’s focus on heredity and environment in this – how else could two men so similar end up at opposite ends of the economic spectrum? There is also something in Abby of the irresistible rise of Theodore Dreiser’s *Carrie*, complemented by expendable men who fall by the wayside. However, there is nothing of what June Howard terms “the progressive

deterioration” in the characters:<sup>20</sup> the Farmer’s supposed degenerative illness is hardly mentioned, and his final destruction (and that of his farm) is just that, a sudden violent apocalypse which conflates the vagaries of nature with human volatility and leaves the major characters dead or scattered. Also, where a novel such as Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* occupies itself with the deadly struggle between farmers and the alliance of speculator and railroad company (and thus is more a conflict over private ownership and corporatization than between classes), *Days of Heaven*, is more abstract than naturalism would allow. Malick’s aesthetics also operate in opposition to what Michael Davitt Bell has termed “the revolt against style” in naturalism particularly in Norris.<sup>21</sup>

If Bill and the Farmer are representatives of the opposition between labour and capital, then the conflict they represent is already over. Bill cannot have what the Farmer has by overwhelming him in a class war; he can only have it by replacing the Farmer. In this sense, the film is closer to the proposition that “in the West, both capitalists and workers are descendants of the conquering race who ‘explored the West and reared a golden empire.’”<sup>22</sup> Slotkin cites sociologist Emma Langdon, whose 1905 investigation into the Western labour wars of the late 1890s finds the labourers

of the characteristic frontiersman type, come not so much to find work as to seek a fortune. Rough, ready, fearless, used to shifting for themselves; shrewd, full of expedients; reckless, ready to cast everything on a single die.<sup>23</sup>

Bill very much fits this description, even though he comes from an urban background. However, his violence is directed more towards figures of authority, the owners’ minions rather than the owners themselves. *Days of Heaven* might feint towards both naturalism and a Puritan tradition of

<sup>20</sup> Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985), 96. See also Mark Seltzer’s *Bodies and Machines*, particularly his discussion on the second law of thermodynamics, “positing the irreversible degradation of usable energy in any system and hence an inevitable systemic degeneration” (1992), 29.

<sup>21</sup> Bell, *The Problem of American Realism* (1993), 115-130. This “revolt”, however, makes him, in Bell’s opinion, “one of the most incompetent practitioners of his craft across the whole range of the American canon,” 116. In his classic study, *The Ferment of Realism*, Warner Berthoff was hardly less kind when he described *The Octopus* as “the most preposterous” novel of its generation (1965), 224.

<sup>22</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), 162.

<sup>23</sup> In Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), 162.

jeremiadic pessimism, but by failing to take a sustained polemical stance on class, and by (again) refusing to judge its characters for their moral inconsistency, the film refers to both traditions without subscribing to either one. Instead, in the character of the Farmer, Malick produces a mythical merging of late nineteenth-century Populism (emphasizing the individual owner/producer) and corporate entrepreneurship (a cash-crop producer free of the evil, monopolizing grasp of land trusts or the railroad companies). Bill, in a more deliberately political context, is a product of urban radicalism, though he is not really resentful of corporate success; rather, he is shattered by the realization that he will never make “the big score.”<sup>24</sup> Like Kit, Bill is not a class rebel who hates the rich – he likes their lifestyle too much.

*Days of Heaven's* most obvious literary influence – the Bible – allegorizes the specifics of the characters' relationships and illuminates the eschatological vein of American writing such as one finds in Hawthorne, Faulkner, and more recently, McCarthy.<sup>25</sup> The locust plague that destroys the farm is not so much Nature's revenge against the Farmer's success in domesticating it, as it is a soldering of the film's many traditions: the fluctuating relationship between human development and nature; the place of the Frontier in an age of commercial agriculture; the exposing of the Farmer's hubristic control over the land of the farm and the farm's inhabitants, seen in the moment when he ties Abby to the front porch of the house as the wheatfields burn out of control; and the drama of class and desire which draws Abby out of the fields into the house to begin with. Notably it is the Farmer's desperate response to his cuckoldry that starts the fire which will eventually destroy much of the farm.

It would be tempting to see in this conflagration a spilling over of the Farmer's “inner fire” that is contained for the whole film and, to this end, it is briefly worth considering *Days of Heaven* within the framework of Stanley Cavell's discussion of Baudelaire's ‘Dandy.’ For Baudelaire, “Dandyism appears especially at periods of transition when democracy is not yet all-powerful,

<sup>24</sup> Munslow, *Discourse and Culture* (1992), 1-22.

<sup>25</sup> On the Biblical references in *Days of Heaven*, see Cohen, ‘The Genesis of *Days of Heaven*’ (2003).

and when aristocracy is only partially collapsed and vilified"; it is "the last flare of heroism in a period of decadence."<sup>26</sup> Cavell, translating Baudelaire, writes

What then is his ruling passion ...? It is, above all, a burning need to acquire originality, within the apparent bounds of convention ... It is the delight in causing astonishment, and the proud satisfaction of never oneself being astonished,

and proposes that "our most brilliant representatives of the type are the Western hero and Bogart."<sup>27</sup> Writing in the late 1960s, Cavell notes a transformation of this type occurring in film, a "rebirth of unexpressed masculine depth" producing "the new possibility of the cool," and concludes:

The vanity in the young man's careless slouch has perhaps not been sufficiently appreciated; but it should also be recognized that this is not the vanity of personal appearance or fashion, but the vanity of personal freedom: of distinctness, not of distinction. It is the democratic equivalent of the dandy. Its guiding myth is the myth of youth itself, that life has not yet begun irretrievably, that the time is still for preparation, and that when the time comes to declare oneself, one will be recognized.<sup>28</sup>

Without stretching Cavell's theory too tightly over Malick's films, I think it is nonetheless a provocative approach to Malick's early 'heroes.' This perfectly describes Kit and goes some way to understanding the muted aspects of both Bill and the Farmer. The last part of the quotation is strongly evocative of Kit's forthright introduction to Holly that opens *Badlands* – the time has come for him to "declare himself" – as well as his staged capture by the police. In being "quite an individual" in the eyes of the state trooper, Kit acquires "distinctness not distinction" and, importantly, this is all he really wanted. Bill constantly tries to be exceptional, seen in his juggling, the white coat he wears at harvest, even in his sojourn with the flying circus and his return on a red motorbike. The Farmer, on the other hand, is an understated figure and yet he is exceptional:

<sup>26</sup> Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil and Other Works* (1992), 197.

<sup>27</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed* (1979), 55, 56.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 67, 68.

the richest man in the panhandle, his house a bizarre eruption out of the endless sameness of the wheatfields, his garden populated with vestiges of an older European heritage (peacocks, a stone gnome, a swing, and a gazebo). Neither Bill nor the Farmer is the hero of the film in a way that would satisfy the need for an opposition between the forces of good and evil; however, as Rothman and Keane point out in their discussion of Cavell, “in each of the cases Cavell cites, Dandy and Villain have a connection so intimate as to suggest that they are less separate individuals than aspects of a single self.”<sup>29</sup> In Malick’s continually doomed males there is a germ of Baudelaire’s declaration that “Dandyism is a setting sun; like a diminishing star, it is proud, without warmth and full of melancholy.”<sup>30</sup> (In the later films Witt sacrifices himself while Smith chooses a life of shivering contemplation on cold, northern beaches rather than the forest idyll with Pocahontas).

Mark Seltzer observes in his book *Bodies and Machines* that “one of the most striking indices of the naturalistic aesthetic ... is the close link between generation and degradation, or, more simply, between reproduction and death.”<sup>31</sup> The conflicted rebel – part Dandy, part desperate, melancholic hero who fails to master the machine of modern life – is at the core of Bill and the Farmer (and, one might argue, all of Malick’s men).

However, as I noted earlier, while the historical context and narrative structure of *Days of Heaven* invoke a concern with literary naturalism, another powerful presence is also evident in both early films (and particularly in *Days of Heaven*) which I believe is crucial to an understanding of Malick’s treatment of the myth and history. The art of Edward Hopper is expressed not only in the films’ architectural structures but also in the frequent isolation of characters, captured as they look off screen or stand frozen in windows or doorways. Hopper’s unpopulated houses, anxious individuals, and bleak urban scenes with conspicuous signage incorporate the western

<sup>29</sup> Rothman and Keane. *Reading Cavell’s The World Viewed* (2000), 115.

<sup>30</sup> Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil and Other Works* (1992), 197.

<sup>31</sup> Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (1992), 38.

heritage of open spaces and individual perseverance, and the transformation of that heritage into corporate identity and commercial profit. The changing nature of the frontier at the turn of the twentieth century, and the popularization of the mythic west in films are themes that lie at the heart of Malick's early films.

Regarding Hopper's art, I propose two investigations related to specific moments in the *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. Firstly, 'The House on the Prairie' examines the spatial organization of labour and capital in *Days of Heaven*, its architecture and landscape, and how characters move between particular environments. Secondly, 'The Girl in the Tower' considers the prisons of education in which Malick's young female narrators in both films find themselves. These two investigations will develop Orr's argument that Malick "radically alters the conventions of the sublime in the filmic rendering of the West," and that "it is the tense co-existence of natural and industrial sublime which gives [*Days of Heaven*] such generative power."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Orr, *Contemporary Cinema* (1998), 174.

## The House on the Prairie

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The filmic quality of Hopper's art has been observed by critics as both precedent and referent. Hughes notes the former in the Hopper-like qualities of several famous movie 'houses' and the sets of many *films noirs*,<sup>33</sup> while of the latter, Brian O'Doherty maintains "his best works appear like freeze frames from a lifelong movie. Hopper's viewpoints, framing, and lighting frequently appropriate movie and theatre conventions."<sup>34</sup> While Hopper's name frequently occurs in Malick criticism, references to his art are seldom expanded beyond the self-explanatory: for example, Ben McCann notes in passing the "static poignancy of Edward Hopper" in the unemployment office scene from *Badlands*.<sup>35</sup> Morrison and Schur make the aesthetic link succinctly when they note that the shot of Holly in the window of the music school "suggests Edward Hopper in the symmetry of its framing, in the interiority of its subject, in its precise molding of crepuscular light."<sup>36</sup> Later, they propose that Hopper (along with other painters and photographers mentioned above)

share[s] as a concern ... the effects of modernity on the relationship between humans and their environment; in other words, the ways in which industrial culture – locomotives, factories, and cities, along with photography and cinema – may be seen to displace humans from their sense of connection with nature.<sup>37</sup>

In two articles, John Orr proposes a more substantial relationship between Hopper and *Days of Heaven* specifically. After noting that the Farmer's house is "a built facsimile of Edward Hopper's

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<sup>33</sup> Hughes, *American Visions* (1997), 422.

<sup>34</sup> In Renner, *Edward Hopper* (1993), 66.

<sup>35</sup> McCann, "Enjoying the Scenery" (2003), 78.

<sup>36</sup> Morrison and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 62.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

*House by the Railroad* ... and is often shot by Malick from an identical angle, a frontal diagonal,<sup>38</sup> Orr makes two important points about the transplanting of Hopper's house to the wheatfields of *Days of Heaven*: firstly, the "disappearance of the railroad" in the film so that "the house stands sublimely rootless on the prairie," and secondly, the relationship between inside and outside so that "it is a place to be looked at and simultaneously a vantage-point for looking."<sup>39</sup>

Taking Orr's cue, I propose that there is far more to Hopper's work (and Malick's evocation of it) than a fondness for accentuated light and a mood of melancholy in his compositions. After all, *House by the Railroad* (1925, see appendix one) was painted nine years after the setting for *Days of Heaven*, and appreciation for Hopper really began to build only in the 1930s. However, Hopper's representations of the transformation in American landscape, and the place of the individual within that landscape, are central to an understanding of the changing America in the first half of the twentieth century. My contention is that Malick's emphasis on Hopper-like structures, compositions, and light is a visual and philosophical corollary to his representation of major American themes in *Days of Heaven* (the wild prairie transformed into a 'garden' of wheat; the incorporation of immigrant life into American culture, seen in the curious architecture of the Farmer's house). It is useful, then, before examining Orr's observations in close-up, to offer a wide-angle shot of Hopper's work, and its relation to Malick.

*House by the Railroad* is quite clearly the model for the Farmer's house, but this is no more than an observation; the more one looks at Hopper and Malick (particularly in the two early films) the more one senses the overlapping of major themes. Many of Hopper's paintings and etchings echo in the architectural forms either found or constructed by Malick and in the act of looking in which Malick often 'catches' his protagonists. Notice, for example, how Hopper emphasizes railroads and solitary houses, and how frequently individual figures look out from a

<sup>38</sup> Orr, *Contemporary Cinema* (1998), 176. See also Orr, "Terrence Malick and Arthur Penn" (2003), 70. Interestingly, production designer Jack Fiske's first directorial effort *Raggedy Man* (1981) also has strong Hopper-like qualities in the loneliness of its small-town inhabitants and the eeriness of the watcher, often seen observing lit houses from across the street at night.

<sup>39</sup> Orr, *Contemporary Cinema* (1998), 176, 177.

solitary house at Nature, either in the form of dense forest or open plain (*South Carolina Morning* (1955), *Seven A.M.* (1948), *High Noon* (1949), and *Cape Cod Morning* (1950)).<sup>40</sup> Exchanging prairie for coastline, the Victorian house with mansard roof appears again in *The Bootleggers* (1945, see appendix one), while *Railroad Crossing* (1922-23) – in which Hopper begins developing the theme of railroads proximate to houses – is one of many depictions in Malick that, like the Sargis house and the Rich Man's house in *Badlands*, and the Farmer's house, stands alone and is seen as such from multiple positions. The play of light on complex architectural masses, as seen in *Coast Guard Station* (1927) and *The Lighthouse at Two Lights* (1929), is evident in the strange shapes (and plays of light) of the Farmer's house. *Rooms for Tourists* (1945, see appendix one) – with its glowing interior and eerie exterior light source – is evoked in an early scene in *Days of Heaven* when Bill and Abby walk past the Farmer's house at night. All the visible windows are lit, even the highest window in the turret, yet no-one is seen moving within.

It is important to note that Malick's reference to Hopper acknowledges other artistic expressions that precede his particular style of realism. Thomas Anshutz's realist images (both photographic and painted) of working boys and men – most famously *The Ironworker's Noontime* (1880, see appendix three) – echoes forcefully in the opening scenes of *Days of Heaven*, and there is something of the Ash Can School<sup>41</sup> about the squalid opening scenes of Bill shoveling coal into a furnace, and Abby collecting scrap metal in a murky factory run-off. This opening sequence is extraordinarily dense visually yet succinct in its narrative construction: Malick eschews traditional character establishment, providing us with Linda's first jaunty voiceover in place of psychological motivation for Bill's actions. In less than five minutes the characters are running for a goods train and it is the last time Chicago is seen in the film. The grey gloom gives way to the burnished

<sup>40</sup> Hopper's etchings – less well-known in his repertoire – are also instructive. For example, *American Landscape*, an etching from 1920, is clearly an early model for *House by the Railroad*. In the etching the perspective emphasizes the cattle crossing the railroad track in the foreground, an unobtrusive motif of demarcation between domestic and agricultural. While the house is still grand, it erupts into full Victorian eccentricity in the later painting, as it stands in solitude against a curious, murky sky. In both, however, the railroad remains a forceful element in the foreground, cutting the house off from its foundations and distancing the viewer's perspective. *House on a Hill (The Buggy)*, possibly also from 1920, without the hill could be the Farmer and Abby riding up to the house in *Days of Heaven*.

<sup>41</sup> Good examples being Robert Henri, John Sloan and George Bellows.

golden hues of the wheat bonanza and the striking colour contrasts provided by the Farmer's white house and the farm's red labourers' dormitories (the latter recalling Hopper's *Cobb's Barns, South Truro* (1930-1933)). The isolated individual – a recurrent aspect of Hopper's bleak compositions – is also a miniscule and (in)significant feature of Charles Sheeler's precisionist work *American Landscape* (1930, see appendix two).<sup>42</sup> For Morrison and Schur, *Days of Heaven*

is an evocation of the West-Midwest landscape after the decline of America's nineteenth-century fascination with nature – and, at the same time, a critique of twentieth-century objective nature – so it is fitting that painterly realism predominates the film's style.<sup>43</sup>

Miles Orvell asks why it took so long for fine art to represent the mechanical and technological revolution that was taking place in America in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and that found its most orgiastic form in the World's Fair of 1893. His answer is twofold: "Art, within the sanctioned boundaries of the academy and the library and [the] ... family parlour magazines ... was idealizing and inspirational" and not the place for the rude forms of machinery or the toiling men who kept it running.<sup>44</sup> Secondly, artists began to acknowledge industrial aesthetics through exposure to new European movements like Futurism, first unleashed in America at the 1913 Armory Show. America's modernist response culminated in the precisionist zeal of Sheeler and the inscrutable realism of Hopper.

In 1931, Sheeler wrote a statement accompanying a reproduction of *American Landscape* in which he described "the machine working with an infallibility which precludes human competition. Noticeable is the absence of debris. Everything in the path of the activity is in the process of being utilized."<sup>45</sup> One is reminded here of Henry Adams's essay 'The Dynamo and the Virgin' in which he confronts the "occult mechanism" of the dynamo and its perplexing

<sup>42</sup> In Hopper's earlier painting *Manhattan Bridge Loop* (1928) the lone figure is not as antlike as in Sheeler – running for some imagined emergency between the sulphurous yellow smokestack and its reflection in the still but greasy water – so much as melancholic, quietly exiting the left of the picture, almost invisible in the shadow cast by the railway siding.

<sup>43</sup> Morrison and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 70.

<sup>44</sup> Orvell, 'The Artist Looks at the Machine' (1995), 6.

<sup>45</sup> In Orvell, 'The Artist Looks at the Machine' (1995), 19.

relationship to the steam engine: “the break of continuity amounted to abysmal fracture for a historian’s objects. No more relation could he discover between the steam and the electric current than between the Cross and the cathedral.”<sup>46</sup> While the uncanny quietness of Adams’s dynamo pulses in the wind-generator atop the Farmer’s house (thereby lighting the house at night), Malick’s representation of the modern factory seems more in line with the account of a visitor to the factory of Sheeler’s painting. Descending into the furnace room, he described a hellish scene of “great molten kettles of white-hot iron” producing plenty of detritus to be panned by women like Abby in the dirty runoffs.<sup>47</sup> Robert Hughes sees in Precisionism the “concreting over” of the world of Thomas Cole, yet “as the desire for mechanized, impersonal, and abstractly urban images developed in the 1920s, so did its opposite: an interest in what was primal, ‘primitive,’ mythic, and linked to the natural world.”<sup>48</sup>

This recognition of the need to engage anew with the myth of the frontier – no longer as a space of endless possibility and primal innocence, but as a contested and negotiated space of delimitation, ownership and transgression – is where Hopper’s contribution to America’s sense of itself is most profound; and, I would argue, this is the American grain that Malick illuminates in *Days of Heaven*. Hughes’s description of Hopper as one “who saw that the old frontier had moved inward and now lay within the self, so that the man of action, extroverted and self-naming, was replaced by the solitary watcher,” could well articulate the transformative moment in which Bill, a man of action, finds himself a watcher, waiting for the Farmer to expire.<sup>49</sup>

A primary response to Hopper’s paintings is a feeling of alienation, but ambiguously so. Linda Nochlin succinctly notes the difference between the “narrative chattiness” of Hopper’s commercial art and the “pictorial abstraction” of his renowned paintings, alerting one to the

<sup>46</sup> Adams, *The Dynamo and the Virgin* (1999), 318.

<sup>47</sup> Orvell, *The Artist Looks at the Machine* (1995), 18.

<sup>48</sup> Hughes, *American Visions* (1997), 386.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

arrested or stillborn attempts at communication in his scenes.<sup>50</sup> When two or more people populate a Hopper scene, they seem uncertain of how to proceed. Wieland Schmied observes: “Hopper never portrayed a child. His is a world of adults condemned to extinction, and conscious of the fact.”<sup>51</sup> In *Room in Brooklyn* (1942), for example, the viewer almost misses the presence of a person in the scene because the focus is, instead, on the white vase full of flowers, prominently displayed and strongly lit from the side. By comparison, the dark-haired woman – facing away from us and looking out of the window – is masked by the rocking chair in which she sits, only her pale neck standing out just below the horizon of the buildings across the street. It is hard not to think of her awaiting death. However, in *New York Movie* (1939), the alienation of character within the scene arouses curiosity and intimacy: it provokes us to ask why she is standing in the movie theatre by herself and why she appears downcast. Similarly *Office at Night* (1940) quivers with eroticism: while the woman in the too-tight dress might bend to pick up the fallen page, will the man, so engrossed in reading a document, even notice?

The ambiguous character of Hopper’s alienation is evident in not just *Days of Heaven* but also *Badlands*. It infuses them in two significant ways: firstly, in the relationship between individuals and their surroundings; and secondly, in the zone of engagement between nature retreating from (or intruding into) the developed world of modern society, represented by Hopper’s massed architectural forms, railroads, and roads. During the forest sequence in *Badlands*, Kit and Holly appear to be living in complete primal seclusion, building their dwelling from forest materials; however, in a shot by the river where Kit fishes, we can see a road in the background – the communication network of the modern world is not that far away.

While the jarring proximity of nature and modern industry (represented in Hopper by the iconography of commercial art) is apparent here, Malick also isolates his characters and structures on barren plains, rendering them abstract, almost surreal. The scene where Kit goes out to talk

<sup>50</sup> Nochlin, ‘Edward Hopper and the Imagery of Alienation’ (1981), 138.

<sup>51</sup> Schmied, *Edward Hopper* (1999), 54.

with Holly's father as the latter paints a sign is a good example. Morrison and Schur observe that "its appearance in the middle of the field is a shock. It departs so radically from the uniformity of the landscape in which it is embedded, it can only be seen as a powerful form of address, but it courts no attentions – far from roads or byways – and there is no one there to see it."<sup>52</sup> The sign is commercially useless and it prompts one to wonder at the extraordinary effort Holly's father puts into it. Morrison and Schur, citing the previous scene's allusion to Hopper, argue that the sign "thrusts us to the opposite end of the movie's spectrum of influence, evoking the kaleidoscopic colour, cluttered composition, and garbled perspective of pop art," which is true of the sign itself, but ignores Hopper's close observation of obtrusive signage in many of his most famous pieces.<sup>53</sup> Notable in its sense of alienation and isolation, in the incongruous presence of commercial art in a barren landscape, in the profound weariness of wasted effort in its protagonists (Kit soon sees that Holly's father will not relent), the scene is a brilliantly observed moment of failed communication.

*Days of Heaven* articulates this sense of dislocation by emphasizing the contrast between structure and the landscape (seen in Hopper's earlier paintings of isolated houses) and between interiors and exteriors. This is clearly demonstrated when the workers first arrive at the farm. Bill, Abby and Linda's journey on the train is visually characterized by community as a diversity of working class labourers huddles atop the steam train, all seeking work in the wheatfields. Their arrival at the farm, however, draws the first clear class distinctions in the film. Very simply, the sequence runs as follows.

#### SHOT ONE

Complex shot. Transports carrying the labourers arrive at the entrance to the farm, the camera tracking and then moving upwards as they head towards the house in the distance.

<sup>52</sup> Morrison and Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (2003), 62.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

## SHOT TWO

Long shot of the house from a slight low angle. The Farmer walks down the front steps of his porch.

## SHOT THREE

Complex shot. The first part of the third shot contains a rough-looking house (in stark contrast to the Farmer's ornate house) out of the door of which walk two men. At this point, the conventions of editing lead one to assume that the two houses face each other, the two shots being contiguous, so that the Farmer and two men are walking forward, in effect, towards one another.

However, in the second half of the third shot, the camera tracks to the right revealing the Farmer's house quite some distance beyond the back of the labourers' house and, strikingly, despite the considerable distance, the Farmer is still visible owing to the unnatural luminosity of his white shirt. In widescreen, a flagpole that stands to the left of the Farmer's house in shot two is just visible on the extreme right of the beginning of shot three.

Here, the editing offers an insight into Malick's subtle deployment of filmic language in a way that expands the narrative beyond the characters' actions and the spoken word. In this instance, the only words spoken in the scene are an exchange between a girl (who will become Linda's friend) and the foreman: she enquires, "Whose place is that?" to which the foreman responds, for the benefit of anyone within earshot "The owner's – don't any of you go up around there either." This confirms the spatial organization of the farm (in terms of class) to which the edit draws our attention: rather than facing one another in relatively close proximity, the two structures are, in fact, some distance apart, the Farmer's house overlooking (and dominating in terms of size) the sackers' quarters.

With carefully composed shots and elegant editing, Malick quickly establishes the context of his film, both in terms of its romance and its broader cultural dimensions. This clear demarcation of space is established only to be transgressed as the film succinctly brings the protagonists closer together using terms that have been established in this brief initial scene. Orr relates the film's spatial arrangement to its love story narrative, remarking: "Hierarchy is thus symbolized not only by size and style but also by spatial solitude, with [the Farmer] as the lonely

patron whose marriage to [Abby] trades social status for companionship and love."<sup>54</sup>

Just after the workers' arrival, Malick produces a typically ambiguous sequence of shots. In the first, a lone figure in extreme long shot walks from right to left across a field of wheat. In the second, Bill, in close-up, moves from left to right across the shot, chewing a grass stem. Again, contiguity tells us that the lone figure is Bill, but the movement of the two figures in opposite directions suggests otherwise. At the end of this second shot, Bill turns to the camera before Malick cuts to a medium shot of grazing bison; however, the bison are not visible in the first wide shot of the lone figure, or in the final shot in the sequence – a slow pan of the horizon following a bird. Malick does not simply repeat this motif of static cutaways, though; a short while later, as the workers take a break during the harvest, we see Linda and her friend playing in the grass, and a herd of bison is visible a short distance away.

The entire sequence, starting with the arrival of the workers at the farm, is thus a subtle examination of the zone of contestation between not only rich and poor, employer and employee, but also, broadly, nature and culture. At what point does nature intrude on culture, and where does culture intrude into nature? The flight of birds and mammals ahead of the harvesters is clearly framed as the sacrifice of nature on the altar of human industry, yet even here the image is doubly constituted: though we sympathize with the plight of the animals, they are also, from a farming point of view, intruders into the realm of culture, much like the locusts that eventually precipitate the farm's destruction. Their undesirability is emphasized by the relative security of the ducks and peacocks which are seen strutting about outside the house.

True to the film's Biblical allusions, the Farmer spies Abby working in the fields and enquires after her. Though she passes very close by him, his enthronement in an ornate chair produces a profound distance between them. The chair in the field is incongruous, a sign of conspicuous wealth and power, and yet it is also an early sign of Malick's overturning of conventional film iconography. It is commonplace, especially in Westerns, for the villain

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<sup>54</sup> Orr, *Contemporary Cinema* (1998), 176.

(frequently a wealthy landowner or land developer) to surround himself with hired guns to protect his person and his interests. Here, we see only the Farmer, the foreman, and later an accountant. By not surrounding the Farmer with the Western accoutrements of villainy, Malick works to undermine the structured oppositions around wealth and class which distinguish hero from villain.

Malick finally collapses the space between his major characters in two scenes where Bill, Abby, and Linda's proximity to the house is suddenly realized. In the first scene, we see Bill in close-up rummaging along some shelves, looking for ointment. Only when the camera follows his movement is his location revealed – inside a doctor's wagon at the front door of the Farmer's house. From here, he eavesdrops on the doctor giving the farmer "maybe a year" to live (we assume). Interestingly, the possible tension Malick might build should Bill be found hiding behind the wagon is defused by a cut to the Farmer in close-up bridged by a voiceover from Linda: "He knew he was going to die."

In the scene following Bill in the doctor's wagon, Abby and Linda are seen herding peacocks, and in a wide shot of Linda the camera finally rests, as it does so often in the film, on the solitary majesty of the house. The Farmer, hidden from view as he lies in the grass, rises up and greets Abby. Once again, the proximity of the house is a surprise, even if we know from the Farmer's interest that Abby is unlikely to suffer any punishment. It is significant in this respect that there is no fence around the house (though there is a dirt driveway up to the front door). The barriers of class and wealth are intangibly articulated, voiced by the foreman but without the visible referents to make his warning spatially unambiguous.

Malick's arrangement of privileged spaces, and the slow erasure of the boundaries delineating those spaces, reaches a climax when Bill is given caretakership of the house. Significantly, Bill crosses the threshold of the farmer's house while Abby and the Farmer share their honeymoon: he crosses into the realm of his desires and ambition at the moment he begins to lose Abby. Wondra makes an astute observation, on this point, concerning Bill. In rebuffing

Pauline Kael's criticism of Richard Gere's acting – not being able to convey “sexual avidity for his former companion, now another man's wife” – Wondra argues that “Kael has misplaced her criticism by misreading Bill's desires. In fact, the shot-reverse shot structure, which *Days of Heaven* uses sparingly to underline critical moments of desire, reveals that the apple of Bill's eye is the farmer's mansion.”<sup>55</sup>

Bill's entrance into the house is accompanied by music more appropriate to a horror film. Like Kit in the Rich Man's House (another nameless member of the ruling establishment), Bill seems in awe of what he sees, curious and, at the same, reluctant to move anything or even make a noise. He seems uncertain how to behave, as if propriety has momentarily got the better of him. The buildup to this moment is found in tension at the edges of Malick's scenes. The wedding sequence has Abby and the Farmer at its centre, but the words they exchange are those that will resonate later in the film; while the Farmer says little, Abby speaks her portion of the vows, deepening the betrayal of the Farmer (and in the end, Bill as well). Meanwhile, Bill and the foreman stand alongside each other uneasily, parting in opposite directions the moment the ceremony is concluded. Bill hovers awkwardly at the edge of the celebrating party, and Linda looks back wistfully as the fiddler serenades the married couple along the path.

The imposing yet awkward structure of the Farmer's house creates the perfect space for the meeting of many of Malick's themes. “Sublimely rootless” and architecturally alien, the house is also entirely American in its declaration of infinite possibility, one man's citadel in an endless expanse of tamed land with its wilderness driven out or shot for sport. While a hubristic display of mastery over nature (its construction is entirely illogical in such terrain), it is also a repository of European classical learning, an oasis of advancement where Abby will attempt drawing, and Linda will briefly encounter formal education.

On their first night, the Farmer asks Abby if “all this feels strange” to her, to which she mutely nods her head. Two brief static shots follow before they depart on their honeymoon and

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<sup>55</sup> Wondra, ‘Marx in a Texas Love Triangle’ (2005).

the Farmer suggests that Bill move his things into the house. First there is a low-angle shot of a lit window which one assumes is the bedroom window: for the first time, we know there are inhabitants, and we can only assume that it is Bill who is looking up at that time of night. There follows a closeup of a locust on a leaf, a foreshadowing of the events to follow and a clear indication that the tragedy has more to do with the flawed marriage just consummated than nature wreaking its revenge on industrial man.

In his composition of shots, visualization of architectural forms, and idiosyncratic editing (favouring ellipsis over continuity), Malick has produced a film classic in its story but experimental in the arrangement of that story. His close observation of the discourse of painting (particularly Hopper) indicates a project that goes beyond enriching the narrative through visual references. In both *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, Malick represents America's historical context (time, place, and the process of change) and also its mythic context (representations in art and literature) as outlined in chapter one. The following section will focus specifically on the two young female narrators and their relationship to the spaces in which they find themselves.

## The Girl in the Tower

LINDA (v.o.)

I got to like the farm. Do anything I want. Roll in the fields, talk to wheat patches. When I was sleeping they'd talk to me – go in my dreams.

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Consider these three images.

In *Badlands*, after Holly's father has shot her dog as punishment for continuing to see Kit and dumped the duffel-bag containing its body into the river, Malick cuts to a still shot of Holly looking out of the upper-story window of a building. She narrates in voiceover: "He made me take extra music lessons every day after school and wait there till he came to pick me up. He said that if the piano couldn't keep me off the streets, maybe the clarinet would."

The composition of the shot is significant. Dominated by a large sash window capped by a mantel of stone, with two smaller, thinner windows on either side, Holly appears in the window with the words 'McKenzie School of Music' painted onto the glass above the position of her head. The two edges of the 'tower' in which she is waiting for her father form two additional vertical lines while the top and bottom edges of the frame cut off any view of the building's lower or upper reaches. Holly is imprisoned in the building and by the frame of the shot. It is her father's last resort – though the second part of the voiceover is not without irony, no matter how flat her expression – before Kit, after one final stumbling attempt at communication with her father, decides to take her away.

Extra-curricular education is seen as the best guardian of a lonely girl and one can't help but feel that the neon 'Frigidaire' sign below the window of the music school is not accidental but instead captures perfectly the cold relationship between the sign-painting father and his young daughter. Holly's brief sojourn with Kit may form the large part of the narrative but it is a short episode in her life, an interruption of the progression from educated, or 'accomplished'

young woman to middle-class wife. There is also a noticeably gothic overtone as the imprisoned girl awaits the man who will liberate her from the clutches of a possessive father: though her father picks her up, the determined Kit is waiting at home for their return.

In *Days of Heaven*, there are similar attempts to 'educate' both Abby and Linda. In the winter before Bill's return (and the plague of locusts) we see a montage sequence of Abby becoming a 'lady'. She is given fine jewellery by the Farmer, and practices life drawing; significantly, we see the two of them at their most intimate. Then there is an extreme low-angle shot of Linda in the window of the 'tower' of the Farmer's house. Again the young girl is imprisoned by the severe vertical lines, this time emphasized by the sheer height of the structure. Linda narrates, "He taught me keys on the piano and notes. He taught me about parts of the globe." The shot is characterized by stillness; she appears almost frozen in the window, in contradistinction to her usual restlessness and activity, dancing, playing ball, playing catch, and so on. Linda's education is short-lived: it is soon spring and, as planting begins, she resumes her more outward-bound activities. (We should not forget her earlier curious declaration to be a "mud doctor, checking out the earth underneath.")

After the apocalyptic fire on the farm and the death of both Bill and the Farmer, we find Abby and Linda in town. In a narrative ellipsis, Malick moves from the police gathering around Bill's dead body to a retreating dolly shot of a Pianola. The cut is incongruous: Bill's death is emotionally dramatic, while the sound and the apparatus of the Pianola seems almost humorous, evoking association with slapstick comedies of the silent era. The purpose of the cut becomes apparent as the scene proceeds: it is a ballet class, which finally reveals a teacher showing Abby and Linda around. We are presented with Linda's point of view of girls practicing, and though there is no judgment, we know that this is not Linda's world; indeed, as she says goodbye to Abby she tries to rub the lipstick off her mouth and wears a pained expression. Abby, for her part, confirms the lack of conviction in her words – "you'll be alright" – by adding brusquely, "turn around and go inside." Abby's swift, business-like resolution of the problem of an

adolescent companion fills in the narrative ellipsis after Bill's death: with both her husband and her lover dead, she tidies up her affairs and prepares to move on, Abby's enrolment at a boarding school being the final item on her list.

Once again, Linda is imprisoned in a tower of education. This, too, does not last long and immediately we see her rappelling down the outside of the school at dawn with the use of knotted bedsheets. Her classmates look on, perhaps in admiration, as she scurries off to meet up with the adventurous, continually heart-broken girl from the farm. Together they don't know where they are going but Linda is moving once more. Abby and Linda's parting is permanent, as Wondra observes:

Abby's direction is coded as Eastern – she is wearing fine traveling clothes, her fortune is made, and she travels in company with soldiers who will be shipped across the Atlantic – while Linda's departure is coded as Western when she walks into nature, into the region of becoming, but uses the railroad tracks which have been built to open the West to the East.<sup>56</sup>

These three shots are fascinating on a number of levels. As I have indicated, they all represent unsuccessful attempts to educate young girls and, at the same time, the inability of adults to communicate effectively with young girls. On a narrative level, they precede great adventures: Holly and Kit are soon on the run after the first shot and, coming towards the end of *Days of Heaven*, we have to assume that Linda's adventures will continue. Visually, however, they indicate the influences of both Hopper and Jan Vermeer.

It is not uncommon for cinematographers and critics alike to refer to Jan Vermeer in relation to film. Famous for his careful deployment of exterior light across delicate interior surfaces, he is especially relevant when directors choose to shoot with available or natural light, eschewing artificial fill lighting. In an interview with Brooks Riley, Nestor Almendros describes a strategy he used for shooting interiors while keeping to Malick's radical style of using predominantly natural light.

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<sup>56</sup> Wondra, 'A Gaze Unbecoming' (1994), 15.

When we were shooting inside at day time, we had people beside windows. We used the Vermeer technique, which I had already used in *The Marquise of O* ... It just means having the window at the side of the person, like *The Lacemaker* of Vermeer, and letting the actual light come from the window and light the person without any help.<sup>57</sup>

The fine detail of Vermeer – for example, the creases in the map in *The Artist's Studio* (c.1665), or the upturned glance of the seated woman in *The Letter* (1666) – seems antithetical to the direct, often harsh swathes of light in Edward Hopper, yet both find an important place in *Days of Heaven*.<sup>58</sup>

While *House by the Railroad* is the obvious model for the exterior of the Farmer's house, the interior is more complex. *Days of Heaven* is visually largely defined by the tension between interior and exterior spaces, and one could make a similar argument for *The New World*. However, where the latter film is punctuated by high-contrast silhouette shots framed by doorways and windows – the outside seen from the inside – the former is organized around nocturnal, electric light, and diurnal, natural light. So while Hopper's *Rooms for Tourists* registers strongly in the shots of the house at night (as noted earlier), the daytime interiors of Vermeer provide a fresh angle on the negotiation of interior and exterior space in the film. Space is not only subject to a dialectic of capital and labour; it is also organized along gender lines.

*Badlands* details Holly's negotiation of interior and exterior spaces. Her romance with Kit is explicitly exterior as her father forbids it (thereby marking the house out of bounds) but Kit's invasion of that interior space, leading to the murder of her father, forces them both into unequivocally exterior positions. From the moment she is 'outside', however, Holly displays a tendency to 'inside' culminating in her leaving Kit, being acquitted of the crimes, and finding a permanent domestic place 'inside'. The two female protagonists of *Days of Heaven* display opposite tendencies. Orr notes that the "unspoken jealousies" between Bill and the Farmer

<sup>57</sup> Riley, 'Nestor Almendros interviewed' (1978), 29. See also Almendros, 'Photographing *Days of Heaven*' (1979), 562.

<sup>58</sup> In fact Schmied argues that while "in the Netherlands, apart from Rembrandt, [Hopper] discovered Jan Vermeer as a painter of spiritual illumination and an incomparable master of the intimate interior." *Edward Hopper* (1999), 19.

also relocate the females at the centre of the household to which they only just gained entry. Here they are framed like figures out of Vermeer. They share an unspoken knowledge whose tensions create the absent presence implied in his letter paintings and in the prototypical gaze towards the painter, the slightly anxious turn of the woman who knows more than she conveys.

Crucially, for Orr, “the advent of the woman into the domestic interior prefigures the downfall of the males in the external world.”<sup>59</sup> While I agree that Abby and Linda’s move from the wheatfields to the house precipitates the downfall of both men, the process is more complex than this straightforward transition might suggest. Firstly, Abby’s movement ‘inside’ means that her illicit romance with Bill is conducted outside (associated with the wolf in one crucial scene); like Kit and Holly, inside is out of bounds. However, the result of Abby’s move inside is unintended love and the Farmer’s recovery, which forces Bill outside, so much so, in fact, that he leaves the farm entirely for a while. It is only Bill and Abby’s failure to respect the distinction between inside and outside that results in the events leading to Bill and the Farmer’s deaths.

Secondly, while Abby continuously tends to the inside, Linda tends to the outside. The most Vermeer-like shot in the film sees Linda chopping vegetables, daylight streaming in through the window outlining her unusual profile. The pots along the wall, her clothes, even her hair are detailed echoes of Vermeer’s domestic scenes, but it is one of the few times we see Linda indoors. Linda preparing food recalls an earlier scene where she is plucking a bird, which somehow seems more congruent with her “mud doctor” ruminations and dreams of talking wheat. At the end she escapes from inside, and though she has no means and no direction – a more precarious future than when we met her – being outside is clearly her preferred state.

Interiors in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* are spaces of authority and education – the only time Kit is able to speak to Holly’s father (before explicitly shattering the interior/exterior relationship) is when the latter is painting a sign outdoors. For both Holly and Abby, forging ahead with an interior life carries in part the recognition of their indiscretions: Holly gets

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<sup>59</sup> Orr, *Contemporary Cinema* (1998), 177.

“probation and a lot of nasty looks” while Abby, according to Linda, “promised herself she’d lead a good life from now on ... She didn’t care if she was happy or not, she just wanted to make up for what she did wrong.” Education, conducted inside, also hardens class distinctions. It is supposed to keep Holly away from Kit and in this respect, one could argue, her father finally succeeds: Holly misses the interior life of civility and accomplishment too much to stay with Kit.

True to the Western form, Malick’s rebel men are defined by exteriors – however, ambiguously so. Like Private Witt and John Smith, Bill and Kit are destined to keep fleeing, whether out of choice or necessity. However, one feels that both Kit and Bill would probably prefer an idle interior life of steaks from the butcher, to having to catch their own food. Kit is an inept fisherman and Bill catches a fish with the enthusiasm of a man who does not do it often. These two are no Ethan Edwards – trapped on the verge of civilization and wilderness – both are desperate to get inside.

The solitary house and the elaborate frame of the farm entrance stand as interruptions in an endless expanse of wheat which is really ersatz, a man-made garment thrown over the shape of nature. Malick’s cut to the bison is another moment of mute apprehension where each character is trapped in the cell of the shot unable to convince even the viewer that they are related in time and space. Hopper’s solitary figures, similarly, look out of windows and doors but the viewer has no idea what they are looking at; there is no return of their gaze, and so whatever we might think their look signifies – optimism, grief, pleasure or anxiety – is moot, because there is nothing to confirm it. Renner articulates Hopper’s representation of nature in the following terms, which emphasize the entirely modern aspect of the paintings while reminding one of his recognition of particularly American cultural myths and their transformation:

Hopper’s view of landscape, for instance, calls to mind the archetypal experience of the Frontier, that meeting of Man and Nature that was so crucial to the American identity and which left its mark not only on the pre-eminent nineteenth-century writers (Hawthorne, Melville, Poe) but also on the pictures of Thomas Cole and the Hudson School. And just as the myth of endless natural opportunity became an ossified loss of bearings in Poe and Melville, so too the image of Nature in Hopper’s

art often undergoes curious metamorphosis. Either it is scored by civilization's many blemishes, by streets and railroad crossings and lighthouses, or those very tokens of civilization appear lost and even endangered in an unspoiled natural setting – an impression conveyed by most of the pictures of houses Hopper painted.<sup>60</sup>

Within Hopper's solitary, 'threatened' architecture dwell (both explicitly and implicitly) solitary, anxious figures uncertain of how to communicate in the world in which they find themselves. It is as if they open their windows one morning to find themselves in the last house left on earth: how does one communicate the shock and to whom?

In sequence after sequence, Malick presents us with faltering exchanges (Kit and the employment office, for example), uncertain etiquette (how to address, respectfully, the person you are about to kill), soliloquies for unknown audiences, and fragmented voiceovers, deliberately incomplete in their descriptions of what is seen on the screen. Eschewing the explicit narrative continuity through ellipsis and cutaways, Malick also confronts the viewer with not so much the interruption of the gaze – the Farmer, after all, spies Abby through his binoculars in a shot where the viewer shares his point of view – but often the non-return of the gaze and the vacancy of looking. As in Hopper's paintings, where the viewer seeks an answer to the figures' enigmatic outlooks by interpreting the spaces they inhabit, so in Malick, one needs to appreciate the spaces of the film, both interior and exterior, and the way they relate to the characters.

While the narrative in *Days of Heaven* is a deployment of Biblical allegory within the history of industrial and agricultural transformation in America at the turn of the century, the film's aesthetics tend very much toward the mythic. The Farmer represents the forces transforming the wilderness at the edge of the frontier into a garden that will nourish the whole country. He is the antithesis of Duncan Stewart in Garland's *Boy Life on the Prairie*, "leading his little fleet of 'prairie schooners'" into Northern Iowa, "pushing resolutely on into the west,"<sup>61</sup> and yet, for the most part, lives in poetic detachment beyond the ugly squabbles of Frank

<sup>60</sup> Renner, *Edward Hopper* (1993), 7.

<sup>61</sup> Garland, *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1961), 1.

Norris's San Joaquin farmers in *The Octopus*. He is the very picture of Turnerian ingenuity and civilization while Bill is the product of the surfeit of success inherent to Turner's economic model. Malick's evocation of the movie Western's panoramic sweep (derived from the nineteenth-century visions espoused by Church and Bierstadt) juxtaposed with the angular obstruction of the landscape in Hopper proposes the true historical destiny of the frontier myth.

It is my contention in this thesis that Malick's two recent films, *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* indicate a shift in his thematic concerns while continuing his experimentation with aesthetic and narrative forms. To use an art metaphor, he now seems to be painting a bigger canvas. His examination of American history and myth is now enlarged beyond nineteenth-century frontier myths and the country's transition from a fragmented and developing geopolitical place to a fully industrialized twentieth-century superpower. While *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* are still concerned with American histories, they are also more obviously transcendental, in the relationship between the characters and the natural world, and in the battles within the characters between restlessness and spiritual calm. Kit and Holly, Bill and Abby sought borderlines; Malick's new characters seek other shores entirely, new beginnings in worlds outside those in which they live.

## Chapter Four

### “Convincing rather than accurate”

A painting or drawing is judged a fake when it turns out not to be by the artist to whom it has been attributed. A photograph – or a filmed document available on television or the internet – is judged fake when it turns out to be deceiving the viewer about the scene it purports to depict.

Susan Sontag<sup>1</sup>

One day one of their number would write a book about all this, but none of them would believe it, because none of them would remember it that way.

James Jones<sup>2</sup>

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While there are obvious continuities linking Malick’s two 1970s films with his 1998 ‘return,’ it is now more convincing – in light of *The New World* – to see *The Thin Red Line* as initiating a more complex approach in his filmmaking. The visual ‘poetry’ is still there (perhaps even amplified), as are the voiceovers, the interest in earlier historical epochs, and the hero as isolated dreamer: however, the voiceovers are now more questioning, less descriptive, and history and myth are more explicitly engaged than in the earlier films. The history referred to is more specific, but also more fundamental: the frontiers sought by Bill and Kit are premised on the literally new shores discovered (and colonized) by John Smith, and the figurative ‘other world’ ungrasped by the majority of Charlie Company.

At first glance, *The Thin Red Line* seems to have little to do with the myth of the nineteenth-century frontier and its transformation in the early decades of the twentieth century. As a combat film, its focus is on a particular conflict with a very specific historical context, and

<sup>1</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), 41–42.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 529.

yet it is in the experimentation with the characteristics of the genre that Malick's themes of the frontier and its newness, and the human experience of that newness are evident. The soldiers of Charlie Company might be engaged in the fight of their lives with the Japanese on Guadalcanal, but amongst them are those who seek an understanding of their relationship to one another and their place in the strange and terrifying world in which they find themselves.

In this chapter I wish to explore Malick's challenge to a particular type of history on film, from his practices of adaptation in relation to James Jones's original novel and his construction of an interrupted narrative, to his subverting of the war film genre through montage and fragmentation of both sound and image. The emphasis on the film's historical (in)fidelity has, I believe, overlooked its attempt to represent war on film in an ethical manner, an unusual aspect of the combat genre. Throughout, Malick's abiding interest in enduring myths of American experience in relation to both the historical context of the conflict, and the narrative context of the novel, will be examined.

As a combat movie, *The Thin Red Line*, of all Malick's films conforms most obviously to a recognized genre, epic in scope, like many of its contemporaries. Originally, combat films were no longer than films from other genres, but the fusion of historical epics with the war model (initiated by ambitious, multi-director projects like *The Longest Day* in 1962, and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* in 1970), has produced the modern combat epic, extended to the logical extreme in the TV mini-series, *Band of Brothers*.<sup>3</sup> As a World War II combat film, it enters a canon of films that is at once distinctly historical in its concern for representing the 'realities' of combat and galvanizing (or affirming) a sense of national identity in the face of enemy attack, as well as mythic in its promotion of an ideal America, both at home and abroad. As Dana Polan writes:

For the soldiers, the mission can become the occasion for emotional growth and self-discovery but, in the ideology of the World War II film, one discovers what was really there all along - the meaningfulness of nation and national mission, the

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<sup>3</sup> Even classic combat films like *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *The Big Red One* (1980) have been re-released in vastly extended forms to great acclaim (as *Redux* (2000) and *The Reconstruction* (2004) respectively).

rightness of one's place, the justification of cause.<sup>4</sup>

However, *The Thin Red Line* openly challenges the ideology of that canon and the conventions of the combat movie genre in general. As a result the film has been hailed as one of the great war films by some, while being reviled by others as an historical aberrance. Such divided opinion is the possible fate of any film, but the context for this heated debate is significant as it brings to light again the relationship between myth and history in film. Part of the debate around the historical film is ethical. How can or should one represent historical events or persons on film? Is it not the filmmaker's prerogative to select or introduce material, to shape the narrative in a way that illustrates an individual vision? Before looking at the issue of narrative and historical 'fidelity' in the narrative, historical film, it is worth considering briefly the philosophical and ethical context of the photographic image itself, its formation, reproduction, and transmission.

Sontag's words at the head of this chapter suggest the 'deceit' attached to the reconstructed image. Simply, she puts into play the ethics of photographing and disseminating an image (two practices that are ideologically differently inclined) in terms of its possible reception as an authentic record of the moment. Sontag also recognizes both the immense power of the painted (or etched) image despite its obvious constructedness, and the assumption of fidelity in the photograph, despite the possibility that it might be manipulated. More fundamentally, Walter Benjamin argues that the fact of reproducibility "detaches the produced object from the domain of tradition" creating an inhuman distance from the "unique existence" – the "aura" of the object. He views this process with ambivalence: "Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage."<sup>5</sup> Ironically, this distance occurs for the "contemporary masses" while "every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very

<sup>4</sup> Polan, 'Auteurism and War-teurism' (1999), 59.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (2004), 794.

close range by way of its image, or, rather, its copy.”<sup>6</sup> Benjamin’s concerns with film – understandable given the filmed spectacle of Nazi rallies which contextualized the writing of his essay – revolve around two footnotes in his essay. In the first, he writes, “Mechanical reproduction is inherent in the very technique of film production. This technique not only permits in the most direct way but virtually causes mass distribution.” Later he adds:

Mass reproduction is aided especially by the reproduction of the masses. In big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin’s primary concern here is that Fascism uses film as a distraction, offering the masses an illusion of their rights – through the “chance to express themselves” – rather than their actual rights.<sup>8</sup>

A contemporary of Benjamin’s, Ernst Jünger, made similar observations but came to profoundly opposite conclusions. Jünger, a decorated World War I veteran and right-wing intellectual, saw modern life as characterized by the imminent threat of mortal danger. The potential for horrible death in the newly motorized and electrified urban world was an extension of the “often apocalyptic sense of peril he experienced on the war front.”<sup>9</sup> Two aspects of Jünger’s philosophy are germane to this discussion: firstly, the relationship between the technologies of the media and war; and secondly, the idea of “second consciousness.”

Jünger’s wartime experiences produced in him the revelation that “[i]t is the same intelligence, whose weapons of annihilation can locate the enemy to the exact second and meter, that labours to preserve the great historical event in fine detail.”<sup>10</sup> For him, shooting the image really was like shooting the person, not only technologically, but also because, more than merely

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 795.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 796 (fn 7), 810 (fn 21).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 810.

<sup>9</sup> Kaes, ‘The Cold Gaze’ (1993), 107.

<sup>10</sup> Jünger, ‘War and Photography’ (1993), 24. The applicability of this comment to contemporary news coverage of war is so chilling in its prescience must be acknowledged, though it requires a different space for examination.

a means of recording a moment, he decided that photography (and the war itself) had produced a new way of seeing. Photography's ability to capture ever more shocking images from an invulnerable, 'objective' distance – such that “it captures both the flight of the bullet and the individual at the moment before he is blown to shreds by an explosion”<sup>11</sup> – produced in the photographer, a second consciousness. In ‘Photography and the ‘Second Consciousness,’ Jünger wrote:

If one were to characterize ... the human type that is evolving in our time, one might say that among his most obvious characteristics is his possession of a ‘second’ consciousness. This second, colder consciousness shows itself in the ever more sharply developed ability to see oneself as an object.<sup>12</sup>

This provided a space where “the amount of pain that can be endured grows” to the point where “pain can be regarded as an illusion.”<sup>13</sup>

Jünger, like Benjamin, saw in the filming and transmission of large events by the media, “signs that point to a great distance.”<sup>14</sup> However, where Benjamin saw in this distance the loss of the self as a tragedy, Jünger saw a liberation of the self in the mass, a “new form of humanity”<sup>15</sup> that was discarding the fears and suppressed anxieties of liberal, postwar Germany. His analyses of war on film are provocative now just as they were in the 1930s: his seductively rational argument goes some way to explaining contemporary responses to cinema's battlefield ‘realism’, and the blurring of narrative film's constructed reality with news footage of war and atrocity. Jünger's conclusion to his essay ‘War and Photography’ explicitly links the task of historical interpretation with the medium of the photograph in a way that is instructive when considering *The Thin Red Line* and the contemporary combat film:

<sup>11</sup> In Weneburg and Phillips, ‘Ernst Junger and the Transformed World’ (1992), 53.

<sup>12</sup> In Kaes, ‘The Cold Gaze’ (1993), 109.

<sup>13</sup> In Cadava, *Words of Light* (1997), 53.

<sup>14</sup> In Cadava, *Words of Light* (1997), xxii.

<sup>15</sup> Weneburg and Phillips, ‘Ernst Junger and the Transformed World’ (1992), 49.

To sense the spirit of great deeds and great suffering behind the images of a lost world, behind its ruins, that is the task which every document demands of the attentive viewer; so it is with the photographs of zones of battles past.<sup>16</sup>

In this respect, two briefly sketched moments from the history of American art are worth considering.

Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) is a famous painting commemorating the defeat of the French by the British at Quebec in 1759. Remarkable as much for its depiction of a recent historical event as its curious identity as an American painting made for a British audience on the eve of the War of Independence, it is also a wholesale fabrication in terms of setting and those present at 'the event'.

West did not attempt to paint the subject with the "same truth that guides the pen of the historian," [in his words] but deliberately took extraordinary liberties with the known historical facts ... in order to give the subject an appropriately epic treatment ... He used contemporary costume and other detail to create a convincing rather than accurate representation of the event.<sup>17</sup>

Convincing rather than accurate. We are not at all surprised by this because of the conventions of historical painting; in fact, we might even share the surprise of King George III, West's patron, who reportedly, "thought [it] very ridiculous to exhibit heroes in coats, breeches, and cock'd hats."<sup>18</sup>

The power of the image to "convince" takes an ethical turn during the American Civil War. Photographs of the dead taken on the battlefields of Antietam Creek and later Gettysburg by photographers in the employ of Matthew Brady offered metropolitan viewers a horrifying look at not only the cost of war, but also the disfiguring effect of modern mechanical warfare. "Mr Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war," went the *New York Times* review of Brady's exhibition entitled, 'The Dead of Antietam'. "If he

<sup>16</sup> Jünger, 'War and Photography' (1993), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (1986), 57.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and long the streets, he has done something very like it."<sup>19</sup> However, far from being photographs of a discovered scene, some images were the product of ghoulish manipulation.

Americans then believed that the camera could not lie. In this they were wrong; Brady's assistants, such as Timothy O'Sullivan and Alexander Gardner, were apt to drag corpses around to concentrate their pathos and improve their visual composition. But the factual superiority of the camera over traditional ways of image-making could not be denied, and it helps account for the scarcity of worthwhile paintings or drawings of the Civil War.<sup>20</sup>

If West's painting is a manipulation of the historical record, then O'Sullivan and Gardner's photographs can be seen as a manipulation of the act of witness. In light of Sontag's claim that, "a photograph ... is judged fake when it turns out to be deceiving the viewer about the scene it purports to depict" one is prompted to ask, is the viewer being deceived? Does the moving of the bodies change the import, the meaning of the photographs? Hughes recognizes the "factual superiority" of the photographs even as he attacks the myth that the camera cannot lie. A more significant aspect of this debate, I believe, is the act of looking itself, the relationship between the exhibited image and the individual viewer. After recognizing the social effect of the photographs – jolting urban Northern audiences out of their complacency regarding the war – the *New York Times* writer then turns his attention to the effect of the photographs on the viewer.

Of all objects of horror one would think the battlefield should stand pre-eminent, that it should bear away the palm of repulsiveness. But, on the contrary, there is a terrible fascination about it that draws one near these pictures, and makes him loth to leave them. You will see hushed, revered groups standing around these weird copies of carnage, bending down to look in the pale faces of the dead, chained to the strange spell that dwells in dead men's eyes.<sup>21</sup>

This account is extraordinary in the way that it complicates the apparently simple dissemination of images. The viewing of the viewers is part of the experience, as if the act of viewing carnage

<sup>19</sup> *New York Times*, October 20, 1862, in Bjelajac, *American Art* (2000), 223.

<sup>20</sup> Hughes, *American Visions* (1997), 272.

<sup>21</sup> *New York Times*, October 20, 1862, in Bjelajac, *American Art*, 223-24.

such as this is an entirely new thing. The only language he can resort to is that of horror and fantasy, “the strange spell that dwells in dead men’s eyes.” However, one is finally able to attain some degree of distance, again, while looking more closely: “By the aid of the magnifying glass, the very features of the slain may be distinguished.”<sup>22</sup> This last detail is alarming because it tacitly acknowledges the ‘mechanical’ assistance of the magnifying glass, hence the certainty that people *will* want to look closer. Years before Jünger’s theories of second consciousness, this writer illuminates brilliantly the fascination and revulsion of the viewer on encountering images of destruction, even if the images occur after the battle is over.

Stephen Crane offers an interesting link in the connection between the static, nineteenth-century images of the Civil War dead, and Jünger’s frozen, fatal moments of the twentieth century. Though he was born after the Civil War had ended, Crane had been proximate to the experience of combat as a journalist writing about wars in Europe and Cuba, and it helped him produce one of the key expressions of the war in any literature, *The Red Badge of Courage*. At one point, he tries to overcome his cowardice after having fled his first major encounter: “The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him. Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses.” Later, his courage assured, Henry wades into battle: “His mind took a mechanical but firm impression, so that afterward everything was pictured and explained to him, save why he himself was there.”<sup>23</sup> No longer the spectator after the fact, now the protagonist himself develops that strange photographic objectivity.

These examples not only contextualize the representation of war on film – particularly the verisimilitude of the combat genre to which contemporary viewers have become accustomed – but also the ethical nature of that representation. One ethical concern is the form of the narrative film: the filmmaker produces a narrative that, to some extent at least, is based on the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>23</sup> Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1964), 74, 128.

conventions and inescapable restrictions of film (compression of time, character development, and the invention of dialogue, for example). Like O'Sullivan and Gardner, the filmmaker is expected to present to the audience images that realistically depict the documentary quality of a life or an event. However, like West, the filmmaker is expected to tell a story that excites or, at the very least, interests the viewer, that identifies some, while excluding other, notable moments of that life or event. As Simon Schama notes in the controversy around *The Death of General Wolfe*, West's "deviation from the conventions of academic history painting ... had exposed a serious contradiction in its requirements – both to be strictly faithful to the details of the narrative and to render them poetically noble by the exercise of the imagination."<sup>24</sup> Though the context is different, the contest between historical fidelity and the imagination is no less present in the contemporary narrative historical film.

It is my contention that *The Thin Red Line* is ethical not only in terms of the representation of its narrative content (individual experiences of an historical event) but also ethical in terms of its engagement with the medium of film as a powerful tool for the representing of history. The following section will investigate critiques of the film's historical context as well as its position within the contemporary combat movie genre.

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<sup>24</sup> Schama, *Dead Certainties*, (1991), 28.

## “A moving box”

But he instantly saw it would be impossible for him to escape from the regiment. It enclosed him. And there were iron laws of tradition and law on four sides. He was in a moving box.

Stephen Crane<sup>25</sup>

What was it, really, this EVOLUTION OF A SOLDIER? What is it still? ... I think that when all the nationalistic or ideological propaganda and patriotic slogans are put aside, all the straining to convince a soldier that he is dying *for* something, it is the individual soldier's final full acceptance of the fact that his name is already written down in the rolls of the already dead.

James Jones<sup>26</sup>

You're in a moving box. They want you dead. Or in their lie.

Sergeant Welsh<sup>27</sup>

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A lot of the criticism that has surrounded *The Thin Red Line* is what one might call mistakenly historiographic, founded on the belief that because it is a war film, and a war film based on a first-hand account of a particular conflict, it must conform to certain self-explanatory standards of historical veracity. Thus, while Kenneth Jackson complains that Malick's film “does not tell the viewer enough about history,”<sup>28</sup> Eliot A. Cohen angrily denounces the film as

disgraceful – an act of dishonor towards a tormented author who was not merely exceptionally skilled at the literary craft, but who had lived the story he wrote, and who knew that in later years the real story would be lost in mock heroics and stylized histories – or, in this case, in sentimentality and sheer lack of comprehension.<sup>29</sup>

Cohen, thereafter, concludes his review by trotting out Jones's now famous conclusion to the novel (cited at the head of this chapter) as if it makes sense in itself. Cohen seems happy for

<sup>25</sup> Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1964), 47.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, ‘WWII’ (1991), 261-262.

<sup>27</sup> Spoken by Welsh in the film.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson, ‘Review of *The Thin Red Line*’ (1999). See also Stuart Klawans's strangely equivocating conclusion to his review, ‘Saving Private Malick,’ in which he writes of *Saving Private Ryan*: “Say what you will against that movie, it's about a specific war, fought for specific reasons in a specific time and place.” (1999).

<sup>29</sup> Cohen, ‘Review of *The Thin Red Line*’ (1999). In another review from a military context, Sharon Ritenour Stevens finds the film “tedious”, but adds that “Jones would probably be pleased with the metaphysical rendering of his novel,” ‘Review of *The Thin Red Line*’ (1999), 709.

Jones to write the story from one soldier's perspective but denounces the film as "psychologically wrong, failing utterly to get inside the heads of American young men in battle," as if Jones's 'disclaimer' somehow does not extend to the psychology of his characters. Cohen is right in observing that Malick's Welsh<sup>30</sup> responds very differently to Captain Bosche's "family speech" at the end of the narrative compared with Jones's surly sergeant; but in the same paragraph, Bell "suffered a sudden impulse to laugh out loud insanely and call out at the top of his voice: 'Yes, but what does it all MEAN?'"<sup>31</sup> All the way through the novel, soldiers respond differently – often unpredictably – to situations; this multiplicity of frequently interior thoughts is fundamental to Jones's project. Ultimately, Welsh's narration in the film is a deft incorporation of Crane's metaphor for regimental discipline, and is entirely in keeping with Jones's cynical Welsh who turns down military honours from his superiors and resolutely remains a sergeant.

While Cohen's review attacks Malick's infidelity to the source material, Jackson, in acknowledging a central debate about historical films – that "an artist is under no obligation to produce a work that bears any relation at all to actual events" – states that, because "Americans increasingly get their history from movies or television", the filmmaker "should at least aspire to accuracy." By which he means, for example, using the correct model of ship used in one early scene.<sup>32</sup> True, he goes on to make his primary complaint that the viewer "learns too little about Guadalcanal, either as personal experience or as grand strategy," but by this point, the damage is done. Jackson's concern about American viewers excludes "other" viewers; it is possible that others might want something more out of the film than another American point-of-view of a historically and morally uncontested event. Jackson's form of criticism assumes a privileged position, through emphasizing such specific detail, that he implicitly suggests that someone's inability to tell one kind of troop transport from another somehow invalidates that person's possible reading of the film.

<sup>30</sup> For a list of relevant cast members, please see Appendix.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 508.

<sup>32</sup> Jackson, 'Review of *The Thin Red Line*' (1999).

Moreover, his insistence on historicity – both in terms of *matériel* and narrative – really offers the filmmaker little opportunity beyond producing an account of the event supported by texts much like Samuel Eliot Morison's US Navy commissioned book *The Struggle for Guadalcanal*, for example, a lively, fascinating, occasionally somewhat racist text.<sup>33</sup> Of course the critics I mention allow for the possibility, even the necessity, of a personal account that might tell a different story, but woe betide the filmmaker who dares a 'distortion' of the event. It is also important to note that while Cohen's "tormented author" may have "lived the story he wrote," Jones's Guadalcanal experience is a strange one. Historian Gerald Linderman describes his wartime participation thus:

He was a company runner at Schofield Barracks on the morning that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. On January 1, 1943, he landed on Guadalcanal with F Company, 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. For 10 days he prepares lists, helps with reports, runs messages. On the 11<sup>th</sup> day he moves to the line and on the 12<sup>th</sup> joins the assault. It begins at 06h30; at 10h30 he is wounded – a mortar fragment to the head.

Ten days later, he returns – to clerking at company headquarters. To be sure, not all during this period remains routine: at one point, he must help to disinter the bodies of American dead; at another, more important, he goes into the jungle to relieve himself and glances up to see a Japanese soldier charging at him, bayonet extended. James Jones must kill him with a knife. Several weeks later, the first sergeant catches sight of Jones' chronically injured ankle and orders him out.

So what do we have? Pearl Harbor and Guadalcanal – less than two days of combat of any intensity.

This is not intended to undermine the veracity of Jones's account, for Linderman, in praising the book as an "achievement of very high order," then asks "how does James Jones expand such limited experience of the line into the perceptions of a veteran combat soldier?"<sup>34</sup> His answer lies in a combination of factors, but what is important is that this knowledge of Jones's wartime experience does not lessen the impact of Jones's descriptions of combat and the life of a soldier. Linderman argues that Jones "may be unique among World War II writers in anticipating the

<sup>33</sup> Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume V* (1955). For a more recent history, see Frank, *Guadalcanal* (1992).

<sup>34</sup> Linderman, 'James Jones and Two Wars' (2000). Allan R. Millett makes the further point that Jones's injured ankle was originally sustained in "company athletics" in Hawaii before the war. 'Review of *The Thin Red Line*' (1999), 1430. Jones on his participation at Guadalcanal, 'WWII' (1991), 260-261.

problem of selective memory, the propensity of the soldier to heal his own distress by suppressing his most painful memories.” For Linderman, that final ironic disclaimer about individual experience that concludes *The Thin Red Line* also represents Jones’s fear that the more horrible and perverse aspects of the war will be slowly erased from the record, either in history or the novel. Indeed, “it seems . . . that he would greet today’s Steven Spielberg-Tom Hanks-Tom Brokaw Greatest Generation flummery first with embarrassment and then with one of his famous rages. He did not intend to soften what he called battle’s ‘awful animal indecencies.’”<sup>35</sup>

A few critics have implied that Jones’s novel is not only poorly written but is also unsuited to Malick’s intellectual aims. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, in consigning the novel to a closing footnote, describe it as “rather ordinary”, and patronizingly reduce it to being the ‘inspiration’ (their punctuation) for the film.<sup>36</sup> While I would be the first to state that Malick’s adaptation is creatively complex and far from a straight re-telling of Jones’s story, his inclusion of material from Jones’s first novel, *From Here to Eternity*, in the dialogue of the film indicates to me that he is, in fact, interested in Jones as a writer, at least as a writer of books about men in war. Few critics have made this observation, or linked it to the fact that Jones intended his three war novels (including *Whistle*) to be a loose trilogy where characters ‘recurred.’<sup>37</sup> In choosing to adapt a book such as Jones’s, Malick has identified not only the inherently mythic qualities of the text, but also a central concern in the representing of history: the attritional conflict between memory and objectivity. As the distance in time from an event increases, so the memory hardens particular aspects and lets slip others, providing the impetus for the generation of myths, as stories of the event begin to attain a coherence.

The coherence of theme, character, and plot also characterizes the combat movie genre as it seeks to tell the same story in different locations and at different times, allowing viewers to

<sup>35</sup> Linderman, *James Jones and Two Wars* (2000). Jones quotation from ‘WWII’ (1991), 255.

<sup>36</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being* (2004), 178. In the same passage they misname Sergeant Welsh, “Top”. For another critique of Jones as a writer, see Stuart Klawans, ‘Saving Private Malick’ (1999).

<sup>37</sup> A notable exception being Jimmie E. Cain Jr’s article, “Writing in his musical key” (2000), 2-24. See also Jones, ‘A Note by the Author’ in *Whistle* (1978), 15.

apply the films' message easily to different contexts. Jeanine Basinger proposes that

When we speak of such a genre definition, we are actually speaking of two kinds – the basic assumed definition, which more or less remains constant, and the evolving definition, which uses the basic one to construct new meanings for the changing times.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, Malick's early draft of *The Thin Red Line* supports a more conventional combat film: for example, in an early scene a legend appears spelling out the location and date: "Guadalcanal, 9 November 1942." The screenplay opens with a long quote from William Manchester's *Goodbye Darkness*, a particularly searching personal account of the Pacific campaign, part travel narrative, part exorcism, and part history. The quote from Manchester ends: "Any man in combat who lacks comrades who will die for him, or for whom he is willing to die, is not a man at all. He is truly damned."<sup>39</sup> Also, the script is dedicated to Jones "and those who served with him." However, the finished film translates this emphasis on comradeship in the heat of battle to a more explicitly philosophical context that seeks to understand our place in the world – the way we see the world and others in the world. No soldier is more alone and in need of 'comradeship' than Bell on reading the letter in which his wife leaves him. Tall, Staros, Welsh and Witt all perceive the world differently beyond the immediate context of the battle for the hill and, as a result, the film focuses more on the fragmentary subjectivities of the soldiers than the coordinated efforts of groups of soldiers towards a tactically and ideologically established end.

Jones knew about the problem of memory and objectivity from the outset: his first novel, *From Here to Eternity*, opens with the following epigraph from Emerson: "The Sphinx must solve her own riddle. If the whole of history is in one man, it is all to be explained from individual experience." Less enigmatically, Manchester, who repeatedly struggles with the problem of memory, writes of Guadalcanal:

<sup>38</sup> Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film* (1986), 16. See also Robert Ray's chapter on combat films; *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* (1985), 121-125. Basinger and Ray not only discuss the durability of the genre template but locate its coherence in the politics and ideology of the war period.

<sup>39</sup> Revised first draft of *The Thin Red Line*. Malick does cheat a little – the passage is not from the chapter on Guadalcanal, but rather from Manchester's traumatic experiences on Okinawa. *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 391.

One difficulty is that, in looking back through the lens of time, we are constantly revising the definitions of proper nouns, both history's and our own, giving more weight to this battle, less weight to that. We balkanize the past, too; my recollections of the Canal are as fragmented and jumbled as the jungle I toiled through. And if you were hit in the skull, like me, you are never going to get the shattered pieces of remembrance just right.<sup>40</sup>

Later, while visiting Saipan, he admits "because my eardrums had been ruptured and I was partly blind, my memories of my first brief visit to Saipan are fragmentary." Finally, at Okinawa, he writes that "[c]ontinuity disappears; the timepiece in the attic of memory ticks erratically ... Certain incidents and impressions can be recalled, but only as a kaleidoscopic montage."<sup>41</sup> His language might not be intentionally filmic, but his resort to the collapse of "continuity" into "montage" is interesting when considering the narrativization of personal trauma. Manchester's struggle to square his perceptions of his experiences in World War II with the demands of narrative coherence and historical veracity illuminates an anxiety in history films, and war films in particular. In identifying and possibly empathizing with the individual protagonist, the broader political and cultural discourses are marginalized; however, it can be hard to understand these discourses without figures with which to empathize and identify.

Thus, history films, broadly speaking, have to be narratively and psychologically coherent, whilst being held up to exacting historical standards. Because of their perceived influence over public opinion and their ambiguous, almost folkloric position as educational (often indoctrinating) narratives, virtually every history film becomes a contest involving academic historians, hobbyists and, in certain cases, individuals who were alive at the time of the events depicted. War films, in particular, elicit strong responses, perhaps because they involve the traumatic experiences of some still alive today, or because they examine nationalist tendencies behind the origins of the wars they depict, and the inevitable atrocities that follow.

In a more typical combat film, the 'mission' on which the narrative is based is also a

<sup>40</sup> Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 271, 365.

framework around which social, political, and psychological meaning is constructed. So, in *Saving Private Ryan*, the mission to save Ryan is actually about Ryan proving his patriotism, and fulfilling the dying Captain Miller's final wish; about the importance of the American family; and about remembering the tremendous sacrifice of those who served in World War II. Ultimately, despite the 'anti-war' horror of its combat scenes, it is a film about the necessity of war: the fight is worth all the sacrifice if a way of life exemplified by young Ryan's evolution into old Ryan is the result. Hardly an image, word, or sound in its extensive running time promotes an idea that falls outside of these aims.

In *The Thin Red Line*, on the other hand, the meanings attached to the mission (to take a hill) are far less certain. The story's World War II context is largely unannounced; victory is quickly forgotten in a futile skirmish; personal tragedies and emotional disintegration scuttle the men's morale; and the moral claims of the victors (usually secure in the American World War II setting) are muted at best, or else openly undermined.

The harshest critics of war films – and often the most pedantic – are historians with particular military interests, and ex-soldiers, both of whom adopt privileged positions which initiate mostly conservative critical parameters for the reception of the film. Cohen, for example, lambastes a critic for his opinion that Malick's film is "a thinking person's *Saving Private Ryan*" adding that it "reveal[s] ... the degree of ignorance about World War II common to most professional movie critics."<sup>42</sup> However, in the outmoded pedantry about 'fidelity' to the source that characterizes his review, he shows little appreciation for film criticism.

Lawrence Suid, in his history of the US Armed Forces on film, provides an extensive (thirteen page) discussion of *Saving Private Ryan*. By comparison, he apports one page out of 673 to *The Thin Red Line*, claiming that it "[says] almost nothing about war."<sup>43</sup> Not just Guadalcanal, but war in general. Suid's is a strange text; a history of the relationship between the

<sup>42</sup> Cohen, 'Review of *The Thin Red Line*' (1999).

<sup>43</sup> Suid, *Guts and Glory* (2002), 637.

dream factory and the military machine, it hints at penetrative analysis when one reads this in the preface:

Instead, [the book] describes how Hollywood and the armed services have conspired, with some few interruptions, to provide the nation with its perception of the military establishment in war and peace for almost one hundred years.<sup>44</sup>

However, the true character of the author – which militates against a project like Malick's – emerges right at the end, where Suid concludes his analysis of *Pearl Harbor* (2001):

*Pearl Harbor* may have offered one other benefit. It reminded younger viewers that on a quiet Sunday morning long ago and far away, those friendly people who sell Play Stations, video recorders, cameras, and cars to the United States once launched a sneak attack on American territory and its people, who then believed they were at peace with the world.<sup>45</sup>

How, then, is one to evaluate critics such as Suid, given that they approach the film from a military history position which clearly is not one with which Malick empathizes? I think their comments represent a much larger corpus of critical opinion in this era of increased militarization and access to proliferating 'information.' American films about the armed forces are caught in a bind: if the script does not satisfy the military readers in favourably representing the armed forces, then the film will receive little or no assistance in terms of advice or *matériel* and will be open to the kind of criticism Jackson makes about using the wrong ship. Logically, it becomes impossible for a filmmaker to satisfy the audience's demand for verisimilitude and create a film that might question the actions of the military. It is interesting to note the view of the US Army liaison on *The Thin Red Line*, who writes that the screenplay "does not portray soldiers in an authentic manner," that "the language is exceptionally vulgar," and that it portrays officers as "men who overlook war crimes including murder," among other things.<sup>46</sup> In addition

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 668.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 638. This, it must be acknowledged, is the tremendous value of Suid's text; the access he offers to such communications and what they reveal about the conditions under which war films are made. Request for military assistance on *The Thin Red Line*, for example, was denied.

to Jones's own fairly coarse language, Peter Bowman and William Manchester – both of whom also wrote accounts of the Pacific campaign from personal experience – speak of “the blasphemous and obscene and the terrifyingly / simple words that men use when they can't quite put / their fingers on what they mean.”<sup>47</sup> Manchester's CO – and another celebrated author of the campaign – Samuel B. Griffith, describes the ‘Old Breed’ of US Marines who were brought in to bolster the Marines ahead of Guadalcanal as “a motley bunch”, a mixture of young recruits, older sergeants, and “perennial privates with disciplinary records a yard long.”

They were inveterate gamblers and accomplished scroungers, who drank hair tonic in preference to post exchange beer (‘horse piss’), cursed with wonderful fluency, and never went to chapel (‘the God box’).<sup>48</sup>

More chillingly, Manchester describes the body of a murdered Okinawan girl on his march to the line, and later, the massacre of Japanese nurses. Reflecting on the atrocities from a contemporary perspective, he writes: “The Americans of today may not deserve the slurs of the demonstrators, but the fact remains that more than seventy-seven thousand civilians died here during the battle, and no one comes out of a fight like that with clean hands.”<sup>49</sup> The contemporary military's insistence on retrospective purification is as much a desire to take ownership of the historical record as a visual artefact, as it is the need to produce positive images of the military to aid current recruitment.

Suid, like Jackson, is not wrong to suggest that the viewer will not get an accurate history of Guadalcanal in *The Thin Red Line* but his claim that the film “says nothing about war” appears a product of narrow militarist thinking. In one of the more balanced reviews of the film, Allan R. Millett writes: “I don't think being a military historian has much to do with assessing this movie,

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<sup>47</sup> Bowman, *Beach Red* (1945), 105. This quote follows the book's “typographical arrangement” which, the publisher insists, should be read as prose.

<sup>48</sup> Griffith, *The Battle for Guadalcanal* (1963), 23-24.

<sup>49</sup> Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 356, 381, 388.

which was not the case with *Saving Private Ryan*.<sup>50</sup> Author (and another Pacific Marine veteran) Samuel Hynes, favours *The Thin Red Line* because, he contends “Malick was thinking about war when Spielberg was only thinking about movies.”<sup>51</sup>

Films about the Pacific campaign have never quite succeeded in the same way as films about the European theatre. In a revealing aside, Manchester mentions “John Wayne being booed in a Hawaiian hospital by an audience of wounded Marines from Iwo Jima and Okinawa, men who had had macho acts, in a phrase of the day, up their asses to their armpits.”<sup>52</sup> Though Wayne’s successful memorialization of Iwo Jima would come with *Sands of Iwo Jima* in 1949 – a benchmark for the combat film – it is clear that, after the war, narratives about the Pacific war were a hard sell. In some cases, this encouraged experimentation: the hugely expensive *Tora! Tora! Tora!* adopted a binational approach with the Japanese ‘point of view’ filmed by Japanese directors. *Beach Red* (1967), however, was more intriguing with its combination of gruesome battle realism, introspective interior monologues, and still shot cutaways to scenes from the home front for both Japanese and American soldiers. Cornel Wilde’s film (which he produced, directed and in which he starred) is actually the closest in spirit and execution to *The Thin Red Line* of all the films I have seen, yet it remains virtually unknown today. Based on Bowman’s strange novel of 1945 – a short, fierce account of a day in the life of a soldier going ashore on a Pacific island – it transforms the author’s bitter, battle-centred antagonism towards the Japanese into a treatise on equality in war, more attuned to Japan’s increasing economic ties to America and the forceful protest against the war in Vietnam in the late 1960s. Roughly coterminous with *The Green Berets* (1968), *Beach Red* is an early reflection on the passage of myth through history as the moral certitude of World War II (the ‘Good War’ myth) runs into a divisive trauma of Vietnam. Martha Bayles’s pithy description of Wayne’s film captures this conflict well: “Promised ... to the troops in 1966, set in the confident days of 1963, fashioned in the style of

<sup>50</sup> Millett, ‘Review of *The Thin Red Line*’ (1999), 1429.

<sup>51</sup> Hynes, ‘Fighting for Truth.’ (1999).

<sup>52</sup> Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 12.

1949, and lobbed like a grenade into 1968.”<sup>53</sup>

*The Thin Red Line* grapples anew with this tension. While incontrovertibly a combat film, it uses its generic certainties to challenge various myths of war, war films, and national identity. To explore these engagements fully, I shall engage in a detailed critique that looks more closely at the film’s relationship to its source material and that considers not only the historical context of Guadalcanal, but also the changing representations of war on film. It is to this latter point that I will turn, examining *The Thin Red Line* as a World War II film made after the war in Vietnam.

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<sup>53</sup> Bayles, ‘Hollywood’s visions of Vietnam’ (1988), 30.

## Displacement and Transcendence: a (de)tour to 'Nam

While focussing specifically on photographs, Sontag's essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, addresses images of atrocity in general and it is in this light that her comments relate most interestingly to the war film. She argues that "during the Vietnam era, war photography became, normatively, a criticism of war."<sup>54</sup> It is also perhaps true, with the notable exception of John Wayne's *Green Berets* that, for a while, films made about war were criticisms of war. Whether it was the blue-collar realism and wilderness symbolism of Cimino's *Deer Hunter* (1978), the all-pervading madness of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), or the post-traumatic stress of *Coming Home* (1978), fictional narratives about the Vietnam War in the 1970s were explicitly critical of the war and became established as definitive representations of the conflict and its aftermath.

However, already here one can see how the situation would change during the first half of the 1980s as criticism of the war turned, through a process of "cultural debriding" as Susan Jeffords theorizes, to sympathy for individual combatants and the passing of accountability on to broader civic and governmental institutions.<sup>55</sup> Though critics would characterize *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (1985) as "cartoonish" and "Leatherstocking on steroids"<sup>56</sup> compared to the shocking realism of *Platoon* (1986), both films dwelt on the experiences of individuals, the war itself being a historical given.<sup>57</sup> For example, in describing the relationship between "moralism and militarism" in the archetypal warrior, Rasmussen and Downey observe that "the animosity

<sup>54</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), 58.

<sup>55</sup> Jeffords, 'Debriding Vietnam' (1988), 525-543. Jeffords describes the medical context of "debriding" as "the successive cleansing by whirlpools of dead and infected skin from a burn patient's body," 525.

<sup>56</sup> Bayles, 'Hollywood's visions of Vietnam' (1988), 30; Schechter and Semeiks, 'Leatherstocking in 'Nam' (1991), 23.

<sup>57</sup> John Rambo is a curiously ambiguous figure in this regard. His extraordinary solo slaughter of jungle villains calls to mind colonial exterminations of indigenous peoples when the Puritan mind framed the slaughter as a means to the heathens' salvation. However, his combat technique is twentieth-century Deerslayer, incorporating forest knowledge, knives, and a bow and arrow in addition to firearms. He is another avatar of the white man 'gone native' the perfect American blend of indigenous knowledge and white frontier valour.

between Barnes and Elias culminates as Elias stops Barnes from orchestrating a massacre; moralism enjoys a partial but transitory victory over psychotic militarism.”<sup>58</sup> However, this scene, though dramatic and crucial to the film, is also troubling because it seems to suggest that if only a Sgt Elias had been at My Lai, then the atrocity of that event (and others like it) would not have happened, thereby undermining the criticism that the entire war, whether fought by Barneses or Eliases, was wrong.

Studlar and Desser argue that a crucial part of “rewriting” the undesirable past lies in the “substitution of one question for another”:

In the case of recent rightwing Vietnam war films, the fundamental textual mechanism of displacement that has not been recognized is that the question “Were we right to fight in Vietnam?” has been replaced (displaced) by the question “What is our obligation to the veterans of the war?” ... Yet answering the second question “mythically” rewrites the answer to the first.<sup>59</sup>

The implications here are profound, not just for films made about the Vietnam War, but also war films in general made since the end of that conflict. If the 1980s saw the eventual recuperation of the ‘baby killers’ of the early 1970s, then the 1990s was a restoration of the warrior ethos with its mythic commingling of compassion, duty, and lethal professionalism. For Jeffords, this recuperation performs the double task of not only displacing the difficult challenges posed by the war, but also undermining the advances made by people marginalized by the hegemony of white masculinity.

By focusing on the individual at odds with “the system,” [Rambo, Braddock] these films are able to suggest that patriarchy is not itself a system, not itself institutionalised, and therefore not responsible for any of the failures of those institutions (of which the loss of the war is only one), *at the same time* that they reestablish and reinforce the values, definitions, and relations upon which patriarchy depends. (original emphasis)<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Rasmussen and Downey, ‘Dialectical Disorientation in Vietnam War Films’ (1991), 187.

<sup>59</sup> Studlar and Desser, ‘Never Having to Say You’re Sorry,’ (1988), 10, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Jeffords, ‘Debriding Vietnam’ (1988), 539.

With hindsight, one can see how this process has been made manifest in a variety of films, from World War II narratives like *Saving Private Ryan*, *U-571*, and *Pearl Harbor*, to “liberation”/revenge narratives like *The Patriot*, *Gladiator*, and *Braveheart* (*The Thin Red Line*, as I will demonstrate, is eccentric to this process). However, at the end of the 1980s, with World War II’s reawakening still some way off, it is interesting to see how the Vietnam War recharges the debate around America’s central myths.

Perhaps the most fundamental myth which Vietnam war films internalize is that which Slotkin has termed the “regeneration through violence” in which the hero ventures out into a savage wilderness, is transformed and purified by the process, and subsequently helps to make the world anew.<sup>61</sup> Schechter and Semeiks propose that the fundamental quality of this myth explains the popular success of films as divergent as *Rambo* and *Platoon*.<sup>62</sup> However, Rasmussen and Downey argue that in four films explicitly critical of the war (*The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987) it is, in fact, the destabilizing of this myth that has led to a “dialectical disorientation” around America’s sense of self after Vietnam: the war is “envision[ed] as *purposeless* rather than sacred and *destructive* rather than regenerative.” (original emphasis)<sup>63</sup> While the figure of the warrior – archetypally composed of humane “moralism” and professional “militarism” – suffers the degeneration into “psychosis”, the aesthetics of the films “create the image of an arbitrary, futile, patternless, and mad existence by symbolizing the chaos and purposelessness of war. As a result they create disorientation for the viewers by forcing them to process complicated collages of rapid, disjointed, blurred images.”<sup>64</sup> John Hellmann, rooting *The Deer Hunter* in the Western genre (particularly through the character of Michael), argues that the experience of Vietnam is an overturning of colonial mastery of the environment and subjugation

<sup>61</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973). Slotkin takes his term from William Carlos Williams’s essay on Daniel Boone, whom Williams describes as “a great voluptuary born to the American settlements against the niggardliness of the damming puritanical tradition ... Far from dead, however, but full of a rich regenerative violence he remains, when his history will be carefully reported, for us who have come after to call upon him” *In the American Grain* (1956), 130.

<sup>62</sup> Schechter and Semeiks, ‘Leatherstocking in ‘Nam’ (1991), 17-25.

<sup>63</sup> Rasmussen and Downey, ‘Dialectical Disorientation in Vietnam War Films’ (1991), 178.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

of indigenous peoples: “There is no revenge/quest in *The Deer Hunter* because it would be beside the point; the point is to determine how a culture proceeds once it has experienced the inversion of its central assumptions about itself.”<sup>65</sup> The appalling brutality directed at civilian populations – from the murders in *Platoon*, the rape and murder in *Casualties of War* (1989), to the insanely dark humour of Kilgore’s Wagnerian helicopter raid in *Apocalypse Now* – also aligns Vietnam combat films with the colonizing brutality of the US Army in many revisionist films of nineteenth-century ‘Indian Wars’. This exposes a troubled seam in American combat history that runs through the ‘Indian Wars’, the Philippines, Korea to Vietnam: Michael Herr, for example, remarks sardonically on attempts to “date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along.”<sup>66</sup>

Central to Jeffords’s “regeneration of a victimized American masculinity,” and what seems to be lurking behind the particularly acute criticism of *The Thin Red Line* is the belief that Malick has, through the sensitivity of his main characters, ‘feminized’ them. Doubt, anxiety, madness and post-traumatic stress belong in Vietnam, it seems, not amongst the brave fighting men of World War II. However, Jones was disgusted by the macho representations of combat and, as Steven R. Carter has written “*The Thin Red Line* devastatingly comments on the ‘toughness’ of men in combat who fail to acknowledge the wholeness of the masculine and the feminine within the circle of yin and yang yet remain subject to it anyway.”<sup>67</sup> At one point in the novel, Bell converses with his absent wife in interior monologue: “Anyway, you’re a woman. You want to make life. You dont understand men.”<sup>68</sup>

Taking a different approach, Paul Budra – in his analysis of the POW-combat films like *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* (1984) – links the politics of individualism in the films to literary pastoralism, particularly in its nineteenth-century form:

<sup>65</sup> Hellmann, ‘Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film’ (1982), 426.

<sup>66</sup> Herr, *Dispatches* (1978), 46.

<sup>67</sup> Carter, *James Jones* (1998), 96.

<sup>68</sup> Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 74. Jones’s particular syntax has been retained in quotations from his writing.

Their pastoralism is not so much manifest in settings (though the jungle of Vietnam can be presented as Edenic) as in the image of the self-reliant man, the American pastoral ideal of Jefferson, Emerson, and Thoreau, the man who rejects not only government and its bureaucracy, rejects not only military organization, but who rejects technology to return to a more primal and virile state of being.<sup>69</sup>

For Budra, this is not the left-leaning pastoral of 1960s environmentalism, but the “proletarian pastoral” of the Western. While it might seem strange to consider Thoreau’s adventure in nature in the same breath as John Rambo’s sortie into Vietnam, they are both expressions of the American anxiety around innocence lost in the act of starting over that was discussed in the first chapter. America’s major wars have often been framed as beginning anew – figured as divine providence in the seventeenth century, an independent republic in the eighteenth century, and a united nation in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century has seen a successful test of this unity followed by a catastrophic failure of both the myth of regeneration and the consequence of restored or reborn unity.

Leslie Fiedler’s combustible article, ‘Mythicizing the Unspeakable,’ is characteristic of how the fallout from Vietnam has percolated in cultural studies discourses. As with all national traumas, some form of recuperation and reconciliation must occur – from the lifting (and shifting) of shame that burdens the participants (as cited above), to the restoration of myths of the frontier pioneer, the yeoman farmer, the young adventurer: in short, a man with the chattering metropolis behind him and an empty wilderness ahead. Considering the overwhelming success of *Gone with the Wind* which, despite its dubious politics, transcended the national fractures of the Civil War and the Reconstruction and has since passed into movie mythology, Fiedler proposes:

As this century draws to a close, no novel or film I know of has similarly mythicized for all audiences, popular and elite, Hawk and Dove, victor and vanquished, the defeat in Vietnam of not just our forces but our illusions. The three movies to which I alluded earlier [*Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Rambo*] have, however, come close to

<sup>69</sup> Budra, ‘*Rambo in the Garden*’ (1990), 189.

performing that formidable task; in part because they are all three of them sufficiently ambiguous to reflect the doubts which these days undercut the one-time certainties of the most hawkish and dovish. It is, indeed, this quality that has led some critics to speak of them as ideologically muddled, politically confused, when in fact they are, like all truly mythic texts, metaideological, metapolitical; and, by the same token – despite certain gestures at realism – contemptuous of what historians, journalists, and social scientists consider “facts.”<sup>70</sup>

Fiedler’s point is that *The Deer Hunter*’s steel-mill realism<sup>71</sup> is really a reworking of Cooperian myth with Michael the supreme hunter who has learned his skills from the wilderness and is thus in the best position to be deployed to the jungle horrors of Vietnam. However, this mastery of the environment is exploded in the film’s chaotic battle scenes and degenerates to the point where Michael’s “single-shot” skill in the hunt transforms hideously into Nick’s single-shot “skill” in Russian roulette. Importantly for Fiedler, *The Deer Hunter* is antiwar and antiviolence, but not anti-American: “What defeat has delivered them from is the illusions by which adolescents think they can live forever, a false utopia of irresponsibility, male bonding, booze, casual sex, and justified murder.”<sup>72</sup> *Apocalypse Now*’s muddled execution and ill-fitting source materials (including “rightwing” scriptwriter John Milius and “pro-Vietcong Dove” Michael Herr) render it incapable of properly transcending class division in relation to the war (which Fiedler constantly stresses). This leaves John Rambo to “bring back home again what we hope can be recuperated in imagination if not in fact: a not ignoble part of us all squandered in an ignoble war.”<sup>73</sup>

In affirming the “unironic, unsentimental” immigrant celebration of the American flag in *The Deer Hunter* (and the church, home, marriage and family it shelters), while playing up the irony of Maoist guerillas watching *Rambo* in the Philippines (a triumph for American popular culture in spite of the failed military campaign), Fiedler overstates the ability of these films to

<sup>70</sup> Fiedler, ‘Mythicizing the Unspeakable’ (1990), 393. There is a whiff of reactionary zeal in Fiedler’s damning of the anti-war movement in which he conflates upper-class criticism of the war with a brand of ignorant socialism.

<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, both *Days of Heaven* and *The Deer Hunter* open with protagonists working in a steel-mill, suggesting a particularly bleak and urban view of working class labour.

<sup>72</sup> Fiedler, ‘Mythicizing the Unspeakable’ (1990), 395.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 395, 396, 399.

transcend issues of class and political orientation in the viewer.<sup>74</sup> Rasmussen and Downey argue that, “*The Deer Hunter* ... offers no rationale for American involvement in Vietnam,” leading to “the impossibility of integrating militarism and moralism” and, ultimately, “the impotence of values.”<sup>75</sup> It is this impotence – born of the failure to address the underlying question of why American soldiers were in Vietnam in the first place – that fractures the fundamental values of film’s mythologizing of war. However, Fiedler’s argument that the powerful American myths in war films might be at odds with the war film’s desire for verisimilitude is interesting, especially in the light of the World War II revival of the late 1990s.

To what extent, then, is *The Thin Red Line* a ‘post-Vietnam’ film? Perhaps it is also transcendent in the way Fiedler proposes – “metaideological and metapolitical” – because it succeeds the “inversion” caused by Vietnam (and concretised in literary and filmic representations of the conflict), and also because it taps into similar powerful myths (the character of Witt certainly fits the mould of the isolated frontier hero). Now that the inversion is acknowledged, *The Thin Red Line* questions the security of myths of national unity and character that have grown out of World War II and, to adapt Fiedler’s argument, subverts the mythic qualities of those narratives that have come to “represent” World War II, just as *The Deer Hunter* and *Platoon* have come to represent the war in Vietnam.

However, I do not think Malick is “contemptuous of history or fact” in *The Thin Red Line*. Rather, he emphasizes myth in terms of its historical roots, investigating the endurance of, and challenges to, myth in the light of ideological change in society. *The Thin Red Line* thus appears in an America vastly different to that of the World War II era but a nation which seeks in that earlier era a clearer sense of unified purpose, undisputed national character, and ideological certainty. This quest is not only promoted by the government, but also by “the public communications media, which seize upon forthcoming commemorative dates to stimulate

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 395, 398.

<sup>75</sup> Rasmussen and Downey, ‘Dialectical Disorientation in Vietnam War Films’ (1991), 188.

cultural production of all kinds," of which the feature film (abetted by the television documentary) is a crucial form of expression.<sup>76</sup>

Reconciliations through commemoration and recuperation, however, often shade key issues that are not properly resolved in the post-war period, or which may have led to the conflict in the first place. For example, Edward Linenthal describes the "tacit forgetfulness" in the annual re-commemorations of Gettysburg following the Civil War that sought to restore relations between North and South. The celebration of "a joint and precious heritage" (as one politician has put it) was at the expense of the recognition of slavery – a key factor in the South's secession and consequently Lincoln's determination to continue the war. Later commemorations have increasingly taken the form of reenactments "enthral[ling] spectators ... with the pageantry of war," while debates over the commercial "desecration" of the site raises the issue of the mythic value of the landscape: for some, "the entire physical environment ought to be pure, unsullied by modernity in *any* form. Only then [can] visitors gain intimate entry into the past."<sup>77</sup>

The debate between the state and civic representatives (historians if not by training then by designation) in the construction of meaning creates powerful myths primarily because the 'cultural products' tend to reinforce one another. The nexus of popular historians, major filmmakers, and journalists carry the message to far wider audiences than the site- or date-specific commemorations of battles.

*The Thin Red Line* questions the untroubled return to the values of the Greatest Generation by reminding the viewer of the intervening trauma of Vietnam but, more importantly, by reminding the viewer of the trauma of conflict for all involved. By comparison, *Saving Private Ryan* hectors viewers with the atrocity of war, but never offers them a remotely sympathetic enemy figure with whose point of view they might identify. In this sense, *The Thin Red Line* does aspire to the "metaideological and metapolitical" character of "truly mythic texts"

<sup>76</sup> Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, 'The Politics of War memory and Commemoration' (2000), 4.

<sup>77</sup> Linenthal, *Sacred Ground* (1993), 90-91, 103, 115.

but not in the nostalgic and ahistorical forms of popular consumer culture Fiedler identifies. Malick's complex treatment of myth – at once literary and intensely filmic – suggests that the 'bad' myths of Vietnam and 'good' myths of World War II are inseparable, elements of the same seam that runs back to the origins of America's conception of its modern self. Moreover, the questions posed by the film visually and in voiceover demote the spiritual cleansing of the national character that is contained in most of the World War II revival films.

*The Thin Red Line* is thus not a 'Vietnamification' of World War II, a simple toppling of previously unimpeachable heroic virtue. Though we might dislike Colonel Tall, he never acts amorally or in a way that seriously undermines the humane moralism and professional militarism of the 'warrior code.' He may be overzealous and too concerned with his own advancement, but he is cast against other soldiers (like Captain Staros) who overcompensate by being too moral and not military enough. *The Thin Red Line* seeks to transcend the narrowly defined ideologies that have created such a wide divergence between attitudes towards World War II and attitudes towards the war in Vietnam. The officer class in Vietnam war films often bears the brunt of implied criticism for being disconnected from the men and invested too much in the politics of war back home. Where a film like *Hamburger Hill* (1987) critiques military authority (and sympathizes with the grunts) by having the leaders permanently disembodied as voices over field telephones, Malick not only has Tall dominantly present, but also visiting the frontline to 'see for himself' what's going on. Even the brief scene (added by Malick from the book and perhaps inherited from the 1964 adaptation) where General Quintard outlines the military objective to his junior officers provides a context for Quintard and Tall to discuss personal ambition and duty, and for Tall to describe, in his bitterly weary voiceover, the overwhelming and unavoidable loss that accompanies his thwarted ambition.

Another consequence of Vietnam on film is the myth of the heat of battle, of showing "what it was really like." World War II combat films strove for similar ends, but the moral codes by which films were made excluded explicit depictions of horror even though films were being

made to rouse public support for the troops, and to emphasize the appalling nature of the evil they battled. With the transformation of the ratings system in the late 1960s, and the extraordinary advances made in special effects technology and cinematography, increasingly realistic approximations of the heat of battle became possible, but the desire to represent this horror had as much to do with the conflicted morality of the war as the particulars of the film medium. Oliver Stone's 'grunt's view' of Vietnam in *Platoon* set new standards of approximate realism and audience revulsion, not just because some scenes contained appalling violence and cruelty, but because often the cruelty was perpetrated by American soldiers. In earlier films, these soldiers certainly killed people, often out of anger, but always with justification. In contrast, Sergeant Barnes and Bunny's murders in the Vietnamese ville are indefensible and establish clear moral parameters for the initiate (and hero) Chris.

While *The Thin Red Line* fits comfortably with contemporary combat films in its attempts to represent the terror and chaos of battle as realistically as possible, the film never moves fully into 'Vietnam mode' either through the surrealistic malaise of *Apocalypse Now*, the foul-mouthed bitterness of *Platoon*, or the satirical cruelty of *Full Metal Jacket*. If one reviews Rasmussen and Downey's 1991 article in the light of the World War II war film revival, it appears that the aesthetics of confusion and patternless violence that undermine the fundamental American warrior myth in the Vietnam war film, are now deployed in films that are either ambiguous in their criticism of war (*Saving Private Ryan*), or fully invested in reconstructing the 'warrior' after machismo of Rambo's '80s (*Black Hawk Down*).

The most direct attempt to contextualize *The Thin Red Line* within its World War II 'revivalist' moment is articulated by John Streamas who sharpens his bayonet on Malick's film before attacking the myth of the Good War and the related myth of the Greatest Generation, particularly for their white, male American chauvinism. Streamas finds that

Malick may prefer myth, but in *The Thin Red Line* history prevails. Scenes of desecration and other particularities are its most persuasive claim against the

dehistoricizing myths of good wars and greatest generations.<sup>78</sup>

In a narrow sense, I don't disagree, but Streamas still leaves the film shackled by specific myths of the combat film genre, urging it to fight a battle against the massed representatives of 'official memory' which is definitely not its sole aim. In accounting for the film's mixed popular reception, Streamas sees the problem in Malick's adherence to an outdated 'myth', "when mainstream American culture fused anti-Vietnam politics with new racial or environmental narratives and produced narratives such as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*."<sup>79</sup> However, as I will show, the film's historical character is more complex than whether it accurately represents the battle for Guadalcanal, and Malick's deployment of a World War II narrative in a post-Vietnam context disturbs attempts to "present the past as an alternative to the present, instead of as a prelude to it," to affirm the relevance of that era's values to a forgetful, 'postliterate' contemporary generation.<sup>80</sup> Against offering evidence for the necessity of winning the war, no matter the cost, *The Thin Red Line* manoeuvres the details of the war to the margins, details that form the narrative crux of these other films. It also refuses to affirm the importance of the war film as an educational or commemorative text, a way of teaching those who weren't there what it was really like: while Malick stages several ground-shaking battle sequences, and spares the viewer little in depicting the physical annihilation of war, he refuses to make these a central locus for meaning.

Equally disruptive of both the convention of the combat film genre and the ideology of certainty and purpose espoused by recent films, is Malick's movement back and forth between images of nature and the horror of battle, an aesthetic normally assigned isolated symbolic value (like the butterfly in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1930). While this approach might seem to

<sup>78</sup> Streamas, 'The Greatest Generation Steps Over *The Thin Red Line*' (2003), 144. For a fuller examination of contemporary combat films and the "Good War" myth, see McCrisken and Pepper, 'Saving the Good War' (2005) who find that "for all its ruminations on the meaning and effects of war, *The Thin Red Line* actually does little to directly challenge or undermine the myth of the Good War or the benign met-narrative of American foreign relations," 123.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>80</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (2000), 13.

represent a dialectic between Nature and Culture, between Innocence and Corruption, these are exchanges and engagements rather than oppositions. Whereas most war films register the domination (and destruction) of nature – the effect of man *on* nature – Malick identifies the spaces between these grand events as moments of contemplation, doubt, and wonder, where man is *within* nature.

Streamas's argumentative binary between "persuasive history" and an "inadequate myth" that "rejects historical analysis," boldly divides the film into discrete discourses. However, the brevity of the article does not allow for an analysis of the complex "historical particularities" Malick uses so "shrewdly."<sup>81</sup> To develop this argument, I will look more closely at Jones's novel and its geo-historical co-relative – the island of Guadalcanal – and the ways in which Malick's adaptation expands upon ideas beneath the surface of the terrain which Jones's narrative ferociously traverses.

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<sup>81</sup> Streamas, "The Greatest Generation Steps Over *The Thin Red Line*" (2003), 138.

## Mapping the Territory: or, Resemblance Unintended

Vietnam veteran William Broyles Jr. articulates what all combat survivors know: "If you come back whole, you bring with you the knowledge that you have explored regions of your soul that in most men will always remain uncharted."<sup>82</sup>

And naturally, any resemblance to *anything* anywhere is certainly not intended.<sup>83</sup>

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Malick's challenge to the dominant Hollywood ideology of World War II as the 'Good War' also reveals a sense of alienation among viewers for whom World War II is represented by the war in Europe, and, more tellingly, the idea that a certain kind of landscape, both physical (jungles and lush green grass) and cultural (Oriental enemies and unpatriotic sentiments) belongs in Vietnam (a time and space), not World War II. Perhaps Malick's most unappreciated achievement in *The Thin Red Line* is conveying just how strange and alien Guadalcanal must have seemed to the American soldiers and how out of place they felt on it. In a rare recognition of this, Thomas Doherty writes:

In one sense at least, his outlook reflects the original wartime perspective. To American eyes, the combat landscape of the Pacific appeared as alien territory, primeval and Darwinian, the humid jungles and volcanic ash of obscure atolls possessing none of the reassuring familiarity of the postcard monuments of the tourist capitals of Europe.<sup>84</sup>

Manchester doesn't mince his words when he reflects on American ignorance of the Orient and the Pacific in the war's early stages:

American eyes were riveted on Europe. Asia and Oceania, on the other hand, mystified them. They mistook Singapore for Shanghai and thought it was a Chinese city. Most of them were unaware that Hawaii is closer to Japan than to the

<sup>82</sup> Fussell, *Doing Battle* (1996), 177.

<sup>83</sup> Jones, 'Special Note' *The Thin Red Line* (1998).

<sup>84</sup> Doherty, *Projections of War* (1999), 311.

Philippines.<sup>85</sup>

He is especially bitter over the failure of the government to recognize the significance of the island chains north of Australia as men, ordnance, food, and naval support were sacrificed to the war in Southern Europe and North Africa “because our own government, appeal[ed] to its national constituency, which was almost entirely comprised of former Europeans and their descendants.”<sup>86</sup>

Martin Clemens, one of the famous coastwatchers on Guadalcanal, found similar ignorance in England after the war was over.

People knew far more about the war in Europe, and tended to leave the Pacific as being an American affair ... I felt genuinely ashamed of the abysmal ignorance generally displayed. Some didn't know of what our war had consisted; some didn't know that parts of British territory had been won back.<sup>87</sup>

Guadalcanal must have seemed just one unknown island in an entirely unknown place, a “topographical error”<sup>88</sup> whose approaches and terrain were unknown to intelligence officers often working from old maps and verbal accounts. General Quintard asks Colonel Tall in the film: “You wonder why? Why did the Japs put an airfield there, of all places? I guess we don't know the bigger picture, if there is such a thing.” It is a strange line because Quintard has just declared confidently to his staff that “this is their road to Australia, and this is their way of controlling the sea lanes to America. Now, if we're going to stop the Japs' advance into the South Pacific, we gotta do it right there.” But then, if the story is true, the Japanese brass was not necessarily that much more organized.

Informed that the Marines were ashore on the Canal, a senior colonel on Hirohito's general staff wondered aloud what the Americans could possibly want with “an insignificant island inhabited only by natives.” The colonel's superiors and his

<sup>85</sup> Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 77.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-176.

<sup>87</sup> Clemens, *Alone on Guadalcanal* (1998), xiii.

<sup>88</sup> Bowman, *Beach Red* (1945), 31.

opposite numbers in the Japanese navy could have told him. Their men had been on the Canal for six weeks ...<sup>89</sup>

The cultural prejudice cited by Manchester and Clemens which almost led to the loss of Guadalcanal still exists, and it is likely that viewers today are as ignorant of the positions on a map of Guadalcanal, Saipan, or Iwo Jima as people were on the homefront during the war, who wondered where on earth, literally, their loved ones were dying.<sup>90</sup>

If the island is an enigma as a space on a map, it is even more strange to the soldiers once ashore. While Manchester's initial view is "a spectacle of utter splendor," the romance soon wears off: "I thought of Baudelaire: *fleurs du mal*. It was a vision of beauty, but of evil beauty."<sup>91</sup> "That fucking island," "that godforsaken backwash of the world," or more poetically, "a weird green blotch shaking with violent epilepsy in the tremulous haze of dawn"<sup>92</sup> – Guadalcanal elicits consistently dispiriting descriptions. And yet every writer expends pages listing its flora and fauna, its impenetrable jungle, hidden swamps and quicksands, steep hills, (deadly) insects, and assorted natural oddities. Suffering and embittered soldiers they may be, but Jones, Manchester and Bowman are also amateur naturalists, learning the names of 'foreign' trees and animals (and often learning their indigenous names too). Manchester registers both the cartographic and natural strangeness of Guadalcanal in this description of one of the most significant land engagements of the campaign. The Marines were dug in on one side of what they thought was the Tenaru river, awaiting the Japanese attack: "From their deep foxholes the Marines checked their weapons. Some prayed. Some watched the crocodiles sliding in and out of the stream. Most, however, simply felt defiant."<sup>93</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 166.

<sup>90</sup> A curious echo of the Pacific campaign was *Survivor Palau*, the first in the series to move away from stereotypically ethnographic mise-en-scène. The producers opted, instead, for military detritus and included tasks with a military slant (like firing an artillery piece).

<sup>91</sup> Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 159, 160.

<sup>92</sup> "That fucking island" – Herman Wouk in Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 93; "godforsaken backwash" – James Michener in Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 117; "weird green blotch" – Bowman, *Beach Red* (1945), 7.

<sup>93</sup> Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 185. "It is characteristic of our grasp of the island's geography that we called the creek the Tenaru; later we found that it was the Ilu," 184.

The image of the crocodile draws comparison to the opening shot of *The Thin Red Line*, and the temptation is to burden the image of the crocodile with symbolic freight: it represents lurking evil, Nature as a silent danger, something “with which no pretence of communication is possible.”<sup>94</sup> Certainly, one can imagine the trepidation of a soldier anticipating a night assault across a river, who knows what is in the water, but just as valuable here is Manchester’s observational mode of writing, the desire to represent various different emotions amongst the soldiers. Malick’s crocodile is matched later by an image of a captured crocodile being idly taunted by the soldiers. It is a ‘mute’ image: the men look on without saying a word, and Queen fails in his attempts to elicit a reaction from the animal. For the soldiers, frustration, bemusement, terror, and curiosity seem to be in constant competition.

Superficially, Jones and Malick’s representations of Guadalcanal appear quite distinct. Jones’s attitude towards the island’s overwhelming vegetation is essentially combatant – it represents a constant barrier, a threat, an impenetrable wall which makes the soldiers uneasy when they arrive on the island.

The coconut trees ended just beyond the edge of the bivouac. Beyond them there was nothing except flat open ground all the way to the jungle. Across the open space the distant green wall looked even more menacing than it had from within the groves. At the edge of the trees the men stopped to look at it. Then, still without raincoats but so soaked now they no longer thought about that, they approached the high wall of jungle curiously and gingerly in the rain ... They had read about it for months now in the papers, this jungle. Now they were seeing it at first hand.<sup>95</sup>

However, despite finding the corpse of an American soldier shortly thereafter, the attitude of the soldiers towards the jungle is more than one of simple fear and apprehension. As Charlie Company draws closer to battle, Fife contemplates his imminent death alone in the jungle, and later has sex with Bead in the jungle.<sup>96</sup> Jones may not aestheticize nature the way Malick does in the film, but then Malick’s representation of nature is not all clear seas, coconuts, and ferns. He

<sup>94</sup> Chion, *The Thin Red Line* (2004), 41.

<sup>95</sup> Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 62.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 123, 129.

subtly refers to whole scenes in Jones's book with just a single image.

For example, the immense "green wall" of the jungle in Jones is interestingly reflected in a scene during the company's march to the line where they pass through a bamboo forest. Malick brings the camera down from the canopy along the bamboo trunks, finally finding the men picking their way cautiously along, and one is alarmed at their minute size. Fear and awe mingle in the calmness of the image, accompanied by a soft clacking as the trunks touch one another in the breeze. The discovery of the American soldier's corpse in the jungle occurs (in the film) in the menacing kunai grass that is taller than the men walking through it. Here, the camera moves with the men, and we share their fear of being completely enclosed by the thick, sharp-edged, rustling grass which dominates the soundscape, making the discovery of the body not necessarily a shock but a confirmation of our fears. And where Jones provides a piercing blow to the huge imposing character of Queen through his fear of snakes,<sup>97</sup> Malick has one of his soldiers encounter a snake as he moves up the hill under fire from the Japanese placements. Ultimately, Jones and Malick can be seen approaching proximate ideas from different angles. In both cases, the soldiers are alienated in their environment. For Jones's soldiers, their dislike of the jungle and grass is bred from unfamiliarity, a knowledge that they don't 'know' this terrain, and that they could die in this alien place and be consumed by it forever.

The clearest indicator of Jones's recognition of the subjectivity of experience and the *strangeness* of that experience is presented before the narrative has even started in the form of this 'Special Note.'

Anyone who had studied or served in the Guadalcanal campaign will immediately recognize that no such terrain as that described here exists on the island. 'The Dancing Elephant', 'The Giant Boiled Shrimp', the hills around 'Boola Boola Village', as well as the village itself, are fragments of fictional imagination, and so are the battles herein described as taking place on this terrain. The characters who take part in the actions of the book are also imaginary. It might have been possible to create a whole, entirely fictional island for the setting of this book. But what Guadalcanal stood for to Americans in 1942-3 was a very special thing. To have

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 65.

used a completely made-up island would have been to lose all of these special qualities which the name Guadalcanal evoked for my generation. Therefore I have taken the liberty of distorting the campaign and laying down smack in the middle of it a whole slab of nonexistent territory.

And naturally, any resemblance to *anything* anywhere is certainly not intended.<sup>98</sup>

It is a provocative declaration to make in a war account and appears to be in contrast to the detailed company roster that Jones draws up, a *dramatis personae* of name and rank. A place real but re-imagined, a list of men named but non-existent, Jones collapses the ghostly possibility of fact – for we know that most of it must refer to ‘real’ events and people – with an insistence on the imaginary. Here is the self-aware reflexivity of Jones which, for a military historian like Suid, renders the book “impressionistic ... not a story about the actual battle for Guadalcanal.”<sup>99</sup>

And yet even a historian like Morison in his story about the “actual battle” is prompted to write metaphorically: “Observe on the map the American perimeter, shaped like a chicken drumstick with the narrow, bony shank extending west to Point Cruz, the meaty thigh containing the airfield territory.”<sup>100</sup> All writers of Guadalcanal’s war history describe the sea-lane to the north of the island as Ironbottom Sound, after the tremendous number of ships sunk there; but then its ‘original’ name is no more indigenous – Sealark Channel. The fluidity of this practice of naming and the reasons for name-changing are latent in Manchester’s observation during his return to Guadalcanal in 1978:

The end is the town of Honiara. No Guadalcanal veteran will recognize the name. Honiara rose after the war, and takes its name from the native *nabo ni ara*, meaning “facing the east and southeast wind.” It occupies the site of Point Cruz, a complex of concrete docks we built to replace a coconut plantation.<sup>101</sup>

The history of sixteenth-century European ‘discovery’, colonial economic exploitation (the island’s economy is dominated by Lever Brothers), strategic war locality, and postcolonial

<sup>98</sup> Jones, however, does not invent everything. References to actual locations on Guadalcanal do exist in the book, for example, to Lunga Point and the Matanikau River, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 390.

<sup>99</sup> Suid, *Guts and Glory* (2002), 637.

<sup>100</sup> Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume V* (1955), 335.

<sup>101</sup> Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (1981), 205.

transformation is evident. In his introduction to the collection of essays entitled *Mappings*, Denis Cosgrove writes:

The measure of mapping is not restricted to the mathematical; it may equally be spiritual, political, or moral. By the same token, the mapping's record is not confined to the archival; it includes the remembered, the imagined, the contemplated. The world figured through mapping may thus be material or immaterial, actual or desired, whole or part, in various ways experienced, remembered or projected ... Acts of mapping are creative, sometimes anxious, moments in coming to knowledge of the world, and the map is both the spatial embodiment of knowledge and a stimulus to further cognitive engagements.<sup>102</sup>

Cosgrove adds that "maps are thus intensely familiar, naturalized, but not natural," which is borne out by the US Army altering the map of Guadalcanal by renaming the island's formidable features and indigenous villages, challenging its overwhelming strangeness with familiarity. Naming (and renaming) might not have made the mountains and valleys more accessible, or the jungle more welcoming, but it did instil a sense of ownership of the terrain. Graham Huggan identifies the central conflict in "cartographic discourse" as "the discrepancy between its authoritative status and its approximative function, a discrepancy which marks out the 'recognizable totality' of the map as a manifestation of the desire for control rather than as an authenticating seal of coherence."<sup>103</sup>

This colonial drive to control through the making of maps is also present in much historical writing about the Pacific campaign, whose writers and historians (representing imperial powers) overlook the processes which made those islands and atolls strategically significant to begin with. Most obviously, the sole military object on Guadalcanal was an airstrip named Henderson Field, after an American hero at the Battle of Midway. The Japanese had, of course, followed the same principle so that their newly given names also appeared on American maps: on the slopes of Mt Austen was a strongly fortified ridge named the Gifu after a "homeland

<sup>102</sup> Cosgrove, 'Introduction: Mapping Meaning' (1999), 2.

<sup>103</sup> Huggan, 'Decolonizing the Map' (1989), 117.

prefecture."<sup>104</sup> Once the titanic dramas of bloodshed and personal struggle begin, the prior identity of these places is simply erased.

Simon Schama writes in *Landscape and Memory*.

Although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind.<sup>105</sup>

One might add, as much "a work of the mind" for a writer like Jones or a historian like Morison, as for the military tacticians who saw in the aerial photographs of the hills inland from Point Cruz, a Sea Horse and a Galloping Horse, handy nicknames for their strategic objectives.<sup>106</sup> Whether shrimp, chicken, horse or elephant, it is important to consider landscape in the light of surveying and naming.

Jones's text thus starts with a place that, while imagined, has already been plotted in a continuation of the colonial project of mapping out a territory for possession and strategic use. Landscape is not neutral in his book, is never neutral, a fact that is forgotten in the reading of many war narratives once armies have signified it as a battlefield. It is perhaps the greatest single misreading of Jones that the landscape of Guadalcanal is viewed by his characters as wholly negative or, indeed, not viewed at all. So, Tom Whalen proclaims "rarely does Jones mention nature," and yet immediately adds

Rather than taking the time to admire the fall of water off elephant ear plants, Jones's soldiers "could not even remember how many hills they had captured and passed. Everything ran together in one long stumbling rush of green leaves and ropy lianas interspersed with blazing sunshine on bare knobs and dusty-smelling masses of kunai grass. Somewhere in the midst of this a night passed."<sup>107</sup>

Even in this passage from Jones (one of the less descriptive in the book) one has a vivid picture

<sup>104</sup> Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume V* (1955), 336.

<sup>105</sup> Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (1995), 6-7.

<sup>106</sup> Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume V* (1955), 340.

<sup>107</sup> Whalen, "Maybe all men got one big soul" (1999), 163.

of the landscape. Consider, for example, Jones's extraordinarily sexual passage of the men's first encounter with the jungle.

From a distance they made a funny sight: groups of wet men in the rain, moving skittishly up and down along the jungle edge, bending and looking and peering in here and there. It really was a wall of leaves; meaty green leaves jostling and elbowing each other, with hardly a minute opening anywhere between them. Peering at them Big Queen felt you might almost expect one of them to bite back at you if you shoved it. Spreading these – finally – and stepping through, taking the plunge as it were, they found themselves immediately enveloped in a deep gloom.<sup>108</sup>

It is the beginning of an extended scene which insists on the overwhelming jungle, even as Jones dwells on the soldiers' individual thoughts (Big Queen's macho reputation and his fear of snakes) and the narrative that brings the men to the discovery of a Japanese mass grave. One is reminded of the scared and disoriented Henry of Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, coming across a "chapel" of branches: he pushes "the green doors aside" to discover a decomposing corpse within. Whether religious dread or vagina dentata, both authors make the physical engagement with nature an inexorable part of the war experience.<sup>109</sup>

When Private Bead, against regulations, takes a crap in the jungle and ends up killing a Japanese soldier (which Jones himself experienced), his walk into the jungle becomes a reverie that reminds him of being a Boy Scout in the Iowa woods. This accentuates the interruption of the Japanese soldier and the subsequent fight which ends up with Bead screaming, covered in blood and his own excrement.<sup>110</sup> The landscape, for Jones, does not signify one thing: the description of the jungles and hills is as much an aspect of the soldiers' minds as the island's topography is a work of the imagination.

Malick has been criticized for poeticizing what was considered nothing more than a steamy malarial hell by many of the soldiers who fought there. This is often shackled to an argument that, along with the cutaways to animals, sees the whole film as the expression of a

<sup>108</sup> Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 62.

<sup>109</sup> Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1964), 71.

<sup>110</sup> Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 172-178.

simple (and simplistic) dialectic.

And so, while the battle rages, we see a wounded bird struggling pathetically on the ground, or a snake trailing with malice aforethought toward a soldier (who thinks his only problem is the gunfire in front), or a swarm of bats in the trees, chittering with overtones of mockery and carnivorousness. You see why I keep lapsing into capitalization. In this movie, War is an expression of Nature, and Nature, for all its teeming show, turns out to be stunningly simpleminded.<sup>111</sup>

It is remarkable, then, that even a 'straight' history (and a naval one at that) notes, the "white cockatoos, minah birds and variety of other bright and raucous wild fowl [that] flit and scream" and "the bird calls and the shrilling of insects" on the island.<sup>112</sup> In Bowman's *Beach Red*, the narrator observes, amidst the snipers, ambushes, and bloody combat:

This is the home of the wallaby, phalanger and echidna  
and other fauna you have never even heard of before.  
There is a bird that sounds like a demented man  
banging two blocks of wood together in a moronic cacophony,  
and there is another that cries like a dog barking.  
Here's where the fruit-bats and reptiles of all shapes and sizes  
establish a free government for themselves and for their posterity ...  
And did you know that a cassowary resembles an emu?<sup>113</sup>

Whether one reads Jones, Morison, Manchester, or Bowman, or seeks earlier literary precedents such as Crane, it is pointlessly reductive to separate wars and their combatants from the natural environment. Malick, it seems to me, has not reduced war to a simplistic dialectic with Nature. On the contrary, nature and landscape – in relation to the soldiers – are variously configured throughout the film: as cartographic location (the map scene aboard the ship); as strategic anomaly (trying to explain the Japanese presence); as "property" (a place to be invaded and owned); as paradise/hell (palm trees/battlefields); as tourist location (an issue raised by Jones but

<sup>111</sup> Klawans, 'Saving Private Malick' (1999). Whalen also lapses into sarcastic capitals when he writes: "Look at Me, look at Me. I am a Symbol of the Power and the Glory and the Mystery ... I am All That Ever Was and All That Ever Will Be," and so on. "Maybe all men got one big soul" (1999), 163.

<sup>112</sup> Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume V* (1955), 5, 129.

<sup>113</sup> Bowman, *Beach Red* (1945), 27.

latent in Malick);<sup>114</sup> as topographic identity (the names of the hills); as logistical obstacle (the difficulty in maintaining supply lines); as dispassionate observer (occasional scenes of nature literally 'watching' the soldiers' travails); as domain of ancient cultures (the statue in the swamp and observations of the indigenous Melanesians); and as natural wonder (the astonishing bamboo forest).

By opening his film on an unnamed Pacific island and focusing on AWOL soldiers, Malick encourages an association with Eden, a paradise removed from the madness and destruction of war metonymically residual in the dogtags that Witt chooses not to remove. Critics on both sides of the divide frequently describe the island scenes as obvious metaphors for paradise found and lost, as a prelapsarian space corrupted by the onset of war. This apparently peaceful island world that narratively precedes the conflict, invokes the myth of utopia in its etymologically ambiguous sense. For as Lewis Mumford observes, the "trick" of Thomas More's *Utopia* lay in Utopia possibly referring either to 'eutopia', meaning 'the good place', or 'outopia' meaning 'no place'.<sup>115</sup> Jones's "slab of nonexistent territory", also the "property" that Welsh believes is the reason for the war in the first place, is a no-place in which "any resemblance to anything anywhere is certainly not intended." And so Malick re-imagines the territory again, moving outside the bounds of Jones's account – which starts when the men arrive and ends as they leave – establishing visual signifiers that prefigure the battle for Guadalcanal and that exist beyond its historically prescribed parameters.

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<sup>114</sup> Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 66. "It was an interesting thing which Bell had noted before about the American Army that wherever they went, and no matter what dangers they expected to encounter, they went prepared to look and, if possible, to record. At least a third of every outfit carried cameras, lens filters and light meters tucked away somewhere. The fighting tourists, Bell called them."

<sup>115</sup> Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (1962), 1.

## “Property” or, the Pacific Frontier

All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. War and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system. This is the political formula for the situation. The technological formula may be stated as follows: Only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technical resources while maintaining the property system.

Walter Benjamin<sup>116</sup>

Property! The whole fucking thing's about property.

Sergeant Welsh

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If Jones's novel articulates the inevitability of personal experience becoming recorded fact, then Malick's film seems almost to offer no 'facts' at all, certainly none of the spatio-temporal indicators that feature so prominently in historical films, and particularly war films. In another sense, Malick seems to recognize that the 'fact' that the US Army expelled the Japanese from Guadalcanal before embarking on a bloody campaign that would culminate in victory amidst the desolation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is so well known as to be not worth repeating. Instead, other histories are suggested that are entirely absent from the majority of war films about World War II. One is hard-pressed to find another that even acknowledges the presence of Melanesian islanders in the Pacific theatre: *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943) includes a brief early scene featuring two native guides who are indirectly commended for their bravery, but the scene is immediately made 'humorous' by a soldier remarking: "Look at the hair on them guys. What a spot for a mattress factory." The film's comic foil, "Taxi" Potts, is also the butt of an early exchange with Father Donnelly. When he hears there are natives on the island, his face wears a shocked expression, "Uh ... cannibals?" to which Donnelly replies, "No, I believe they're strict vegetarians. [pause] But then, of course, they've never tasted Marine meat."

<sup>116</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1999), 810.

In fact, between eight and ten thousand islanders lived on Guadalcanal, and forty thousand on neighbouring Malaita.<sup>117</sup> In their book, *Island Encounters*, Lindstrom and White compile images of engagement between troops (mostly American) and inhabitants of the numerous islands that were ravaged by the Pacific campaigns. World War II is the most photographed war ever but, as the authors point out, “empty spaces in our visual understanding of ourselves at war” do occur, mostly through censorship and selectivity:

Other empty spaces in war pictorial history result not from conscious restriction, but from the fact that certain encounters and events are not even recognized as photographable. Pacific islanders occupied one of these spaces.<sup>118</sup>

Even more than the photographic record (which Lindstrom and White’s book seeks to enrich), the visual iconography of the Pacific war film virtually erases the existence of indigenous peoples. One image that does occur sporadically is that of the ‘loyal islander’ acting anonymously as an extra in the greater performance of the war.

Brave scouts and hardworking laborers both fit this image and received significant attention from the wartime myth-machines. Villagers who suffered bombing, dislocation, and starvation did not.<sup>119</sup>

The remarkable legend of Jacob Vouza is interesting in this regard. Captured, tortured, and left for dead by the Japanese, he somehow made his way back to American lines, insisting on relating the (crucial) intelligence he had gathered, before receiving attention.<sup>120</sup> He is singled out, naturally, for his heroism in many texts on the campaign; however, representations of the daily struggle of indigenous people (especially women) living in a place torn apart by foreign military powers are largely absent in the record. There were people here before the war arrived, before a

<sup>117</sup> Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume V* (1955), 10. See also Lindstrom and White *Island Encounters* (1990), 1; and Hogbin, *A Guadalcanal Society* (1964), 1.

<sup>118</sup> Lindstrom and White, *Island Encounters* (1990), 3, 4.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>120</sup> Vouza was subsequently made an honorary sergeant major in the US Marine Corps, was awarded the American Silver Star and British King George medal, and was eventually knighted. On Jacob Vouza, see Clemens, *Alone on Guadalcanal* (1998), 209-10, 26; Lindstrom and White, *Island Encounters* (1990), 52.

quarter of a million tonnes of shipping, and thousands of lives were lost over a single airfield.<sup>121</sup> Even in written accounts of the Pacific campaign, island inhabitants are either wholly ignored or, when they are integral to the battle, they are constantly displaced in the record.

If one looks at the cover of Martin Clemens's book, *Alone on Guadalcanal*, there are two images. The first (on the right of the front cover) shows a supply train, while the second (wrapped around the spine) shows Clemens with three native guides. This image – split by the spine of the book – appears on the front cover as a white man standing over a seated native man who looks deferentially downwards. The layout makes the image curiously dated (given that the book was published in 1998). Two of the forewords – written in 1953 for an abandoned attempt to publish the book – also reveal the problematic colonial discourse that recognizes the islanders' bravery and loyalty (a common theme) while maintaining a typically paternalistic register. General Alexander Vandergrift, USMC, writes of the loyalty of the "natives" "earned" by Britain's "colonial servants" (meaning the coastwatchers) over the years. Perhaps less surprisingly, Sir Philip Mitchell (a district commissioner on Guadalcanal) describes the "loyalty and devotion to Britain of those simple, ignorant, often savage folk," "weak and primitive people," even as he trumpets Vouza's bravery. This distinction between "colonial servant" and "native" adumbrates a distinction between planning and knowledge, on the one hand, and almost mindless heroism on the other. Clemens, himself, makes a rather awkward distinction. "When I say *we*, I mean that considerable number of whites – government officers, planters, missionaries – who were present on Guadalcanal, having chosen to remain behind for various purposes" (author's italics).<sup>122</sup>

In citing these examples, I mean no belittling of the extraordinary courage of coastwatchers or US Marines, but they underline the colonial discourse that operates unacknowledged in many military histories, and which are entirely invisible in the majority of

<sup>121</sup> Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume V* (1955), 372. He adds (alarmingly), "Many thousand more soldiers went down in blasted transports or barges, and the number of Japanese sailors lost in the vicious sea battles will never be known, because such matters do not interest the Japanese."

<sup>122</sup> In Clemens, *Alone on Guadalcanal* (1998), ix, xi, xiii.

World War II combat films. Basinger addresses the underlying colonial aspect of the combat film directly when she writes:

The white troops have their assistants from the lands they exploit: the fey, imaginative, and in-tune-with-nature creatures that guide them through the jungles and hostile terrains they have set out to exploit in true white-man tradition.<sup>123</sup>

Malick's inclusion of the islanders is one of the major additions he makes to the film from Jones's book, and is also one of the most complex aspects of the film in terms of representation. On the one hand, *The Thin Red Line* admits to the privileged space of the combat genre a world that exists prior, during, and after the narrative: Michel Chion notes that in *The Thin Red Line* "[t]he world does not cease to live because men are making war."<sup>124</sup> However, Malick's representation of the world in which the fighting takes place is not without its problems, its ambiguities. Polan contends that "in Malick [there is] a romanticism that seeks to posit a coherent authenticity of nature beyond all subterfuge, beyond all the incoherencies of human conflict," and that his "use of the natives to portray lost innocence is certainly politically problematic and not at all innocent."<sup>125</sup>

The second village scene in *The Thin Red Line* is enigmatic in this regard. On the face of it, the scene shows the destructive effect of the war on indigenous village life; the malnutrition, hunger, and disease amongst civilians that is frequent in war situations. Seen through the eyes of Witt, the viewer draws comparisons to the idyllic opening scene and shares Witt's shock and disappointment when children do not greet him. Whereas earlier, only his dogtags represented his military identity, here he is fully outfitted, rifle in hand. Interpreted in this light, the war of two colonial powers has entered this paradise and brought ruination, and the departure of the armies will be followed by recuperation of the people and the land. However, a puzzling element in the scene is the two shots of weathered skulls and other bones on a shelf – evidence of

<sup>123</sup> Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film* (1986), 72.

<sup>124</sup> Chion, *The Thin Red Line* (2004), 41.

<sup>125</sup> Polan, 'Auteurism and War-tourism' (1999), 61.

trophies – suggesting the presence of conflict and cruelty in all cultures.<sup>126</sup> This could be a mark of Witt's disillusionment, that in seeking goodness in these island communities he overlooks the signs of violence that are plain for all to see.

While the introduction and coda suggest a world beyond the war, three encounters between the soldiers and the islanders position that world within the war. As Charlie Company scurries ashore, a scout confers with Captain Staros about their move inland: "A couple of mortars hit the beach, but most of the guys came in standing up. The funniest thing I ever did see, sir – they got fish that live in trees." This final phrase is matched with a shot of a tall, bearded islander with a helmet, the shot dominated by a large machete. It is a fascinating edit, especially in light of other similarly incidental moments in the following scene, the long march to the front. Firstly, there is a shot from a soldier's point of view as he moves quietly in line through the long grass. The sounds of birds, animals, and the grass itself are audible, and clearly the men are nervous after encountering no opposition on the beach. A figure comes into view moving in the opposite direction, an old man who passes the soldiers without even a glance. Private Doll, open-mouthed, watches him go by, and a soft (non-diegetic) bamboo flute 'breath' is heard, fading as he walks away out of shot. As Charlie Company wades through a mangrove swamp, an indigenous stone statue is seen, hidden amongst the roots. Shortly thereafter, the soldiers reach the top of a hill and are seen gathered around a bare-chested and bare-footed guide. The camera moves down and focuses on his bare feet before moving up his body to his face.

In all three shots involving the island men, the combination of image and sound deliberately evokes strangeness and confusion. While a critique might take the form of obvious 'Orientalism' on Malick's part – especially in relation to the opening scenes of the film – these shots also clearly recall facets of the frontier myth; of white soldiers moving into forbidding alien

<sup>126</sup> Hogbin writes in *A Guadalcanal Society*, "Both shrines look from the outside like dwellings, except that thigh and other bones hang from the gable, and along the front a shelf supports a collection of skulls, many of them showing the mark of a blow from a club or hatchet. These are the trophies of former battles in which the *nanama* of the spirit whose house it is brought victory to the worshippers" (1964), 75.

terrains, reliant on native guides who, though viewed as culturally primitive, are respected for their knowledge of the environment.

The nineteenth-century frontier is also echoed in the attitude toward the enemy in combat discourses from the Pacific theatre. Morison celebrates the introduction of Admiral Halsey to the Pacific campaign thus:

Well, thank God for Halsey, exuding strength and confidence; for his slogan, which "Scrappy" Kessing painted up over the fleet landing at Tulagi in letters two feet tall: Kill Japs, Kill Japs, Kill More Japs!

This may shock you, reader; but it is exactly how we felt. We were fighting no civilized knightly war. We cheered when the Japs were dying. We were back to primitive days of Indian fighting on the American frontier; no holds barred and no quarter.<sup>127</sup>

Morison's explicit link to "Indian fighting" (compared to the "civilized knightly" codes of Europe) is interesting, not only because of what it says about military opinion about Native Americans (some of whom served with distinction in the Pacific campaign), but also because it fits the Japanese into a mould of mythic savagery familiar in America. In his book, *War Without Mercy*, John W. Dower discusses the extraordinary barbarity of both American and Japanese soldiers in the Pacific and questions why "the Japanese were more hated than the Germans before as well as after Pearl Harbour."<sup>128</sup> Despite balancing atrocities and providing logical explanations for the attitude of American soldiers towards their Japanese foes, he essentially argues that the underlying drive is profound racism: "During the first year of the war, for example, Admiral Ernest King worried about the repercussions of Japanese victories 'among the non-white world.'<sup>129</sup>

Despite exhortations to fairness and discretion from the Office of War Information

<sup>127</sup> Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume V* (1955), 187.

<sup>128</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy* (1986), 8.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

(OWI)<sup>130</sup> in the depiction of the Japanese, films made during the war crackled with racist epithets and crude depictions of Japanese savagery and deceit. Basinger, in describing the construction of the combat movie genre during World War II, puts her finger on the problem: “We viewed the war with the Japanese as a race war and the war with the Germans as an ideological war. When we disliked the Germans it was the Nazis we meant. When we disliked the Japanese it was all of them.”<sup>131</sup>

*The Thin Red Line*, particularly in its sympathetic view of the Japanese enemy, and its acknowledgement of indigenous inhabitants on Guadalcanal, raises the spectre of America’s increasingly turbulent Cold War interventions in South East Asia at a time when a battalion of films set in Europe seeks to redeem a military record sullied by exactly such interventions. Spielberg overawes us with the sheer terror of warfare, but he never once doubts the rightness of his soldiers or the greater context within which the search for Ryan is played out. American soldiers might shoot a few Germans in *Saving Private Ryan*, for example, but there is something far more disconcerting in *The Thin Red Line*, where Charlie Dale casually examines the teeth of the living and the dead, broken cigarettes up his nose and pliers in his hand. Malick could introduce material that would help us understand Dale’s actions, and he hints at such brutality when Charlie Company finds two mutilated soldiers on their march to camp. In the end, he deviates decisively from Jones’s novel by having Dale toss his bag of teeth away while sobbing uncontrollably in the rain, where Jones has the newly promoted Dale looking for a bigger jar.

While the “historical particularity” of Dale’s actions might “anchor some of [Malick’s] story in history,”<sup>132</sup> the scene does not only function as a revision of earlier filmic representations of the war. Malick’s treatment of Dale (admittedly more sentimental than Jones) also shows the appalling emotional struggle of men in combat committing atrocity without censure. Where

<sup>130</sup> See, for example, Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes To War* (1987), 250; Doherty, *Projections of War* (1999), chapter 6 ‘Propaganda Directed Hatred,’ 122-148.

<sup>131</sup> Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film* (1986), 28.

<sup>132</sup> Streamas, ‘The Greatest Generation Steps Over *The Thin Red Line*’ (2003), 138.

having to 'fight dirty' justified racism in the early combat films (just as learning the Indian way helped the frontier warrior fight his "savage" foe in the Western) Malick suggests there is a price to be paid for fighting dirty.

As a result Malick establishes a different visual paradigm for the war while largely avoiding the problematic victors' morality so common to combat films. In addition, where the majority of World War II combat films emphasize America's ethnic diversity and the inclusion of – to hijack Delia Konzett's term – "model minorities" (those who "assimilate quietly" to the American way of life),<sup>133</sup> Malick produces a largely undifferentiated mass of soldiers, all white, their voices dominated by broad mid-Western accents.<sup>134</sup> So, where most American combat films attack racial prejudice in the enemy using a model of racial integration, *The Thin Red Line* passes by that ideological hitchhiker, further distancing it from the racial context of the World War II combat film.

Malick's sympathy for the Japanese in *The Thin Red Line* is really sympathy for all men in war, and a way of dealing with the combat film's fundamental ethical quandary: how to treat both sides of a conflict equally when audience identification will always promote the interests of one side over the other. The most obvious demonstration of this is a remarkable shot of a Japanese face, half buried in the dirt, so that it resembles a mask. A voice is heard: "Are you righteous, kind? Does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was too. Do you imagine your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness? Truth?" It is unclear to whom the voice belongs, but in emotional tone it sounds like Captain Staros who, earlier, refused to lead his men in a frontal assault. It leads into the American soldiers finally attacking the Japanese camp, a long, wordless scene which begins by positioning both sides in an eerie enveloping mist. The cuts between the waiting Japanese and the cautiously advancing Americans

<sup>133</sup> Konzett, 'War and Orientalism in Hollywood Combat Film' (2004), 328. Konzett contrasts Asians in America after the war with Black Americans who "vociferously demanded civil rights." On the ethnic diversity of the combat unit in World War II films, see Ray, *A Certain tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* (1985), 115-116; Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film* (1986), 51.

<sup>134</sup> Those who criticize Malick in this regard should note that Jones creates a similar effect in his roster of Charlie Company: almost all the names consist of only one syllable.

disorientates the viewer so that we feel a sense of dread for both groups of combatants.

Malick's approach to representing the enemy, thus, does not vilify American soldiers as many Vietnam films have done; nor is it a balancing of points of view as one finds in *Beach Red* where officers on both sides have flashbacks to their families at home. While *The Thin Red Line* follows Charlie Company almost all the time, through various characters we see the tremendous emotional turmoil and unpredictable behaviour of individual men in these uniquely horrible conditions. Doll says in voiceover after his first kill, "I killed a man ... Worst thing you can do. Worse than rape ... I killed a man and nobody can touch me for it." Like "Chicken" in *Guadalcanal Diary*, Doll's transformation through *The Thin Red Line* is a significant thread holding the narrative together; however, where "Tojo" forces a young man to become cynical and mean in the former film, in the latter, battle itself is "dirty" all the time. There's plenty of valour in the actions of Malick's Charlie Company – Witt's courage and sacrifice, Welsh's mad rush to aid the dying Tella, Doll's charge for the Japanese stronghold, Bell's recce up the hill – but little nobility in the end. As Doll's voiceover declares over images of two American men fighting, and Dale crying in the rain: "War don't ennoble men, it turns them into dogs. Poisons the soul."<sup>135</sup>

Just as Jones lays down "a whole slab of nonexistent territory" in the very real campaign of Guadalcanal, so Malick introduces an inhabited 'property' and deploys his warring armies across it. Though the airfield is the objective, it is soon forgotten in the reduction of the hill which dominates the centre of the film, and disappears entirely in the skirmish which ultimately claims Witt's life. The village scenes might be problematic because of their outdated ethnographic aesthetics, but their greater significance – in enclosing the war narrative with observations of quotidian existence – is that they form part of a visual paradigm to complement Welsh's muttered curse about "property." His frequent discourse on property in the novel is

<sup>135</sup> A brief note on Andrew Marton's *The Thin Red Line* 1964. Here Doll becomes an amalgamation of Jones's Bell, Fife, Bead and Doll (though Fife is a major character in the film as well). Like *Sands of Iwo Jima*, the film is dominated by a battle between the tough sergeant and a rebellious recruit. Jack Warden's Welsh is a good mix of Jones's Welsh and his earlier 'incarnation' of Warden in *From Here to Eternity*. Doll, as the rebellious recruit, goes almost mad at the end, but in true combat fashion, assumes leadership upon the death of the sergeant.

distilled into one furious outburst in the film. Jones's surly sergeant never really expounds on his definition of property, or at least never contextualizes it with any political explanation: it exists as a monstrous abstraction that consumes the lives of young men who fight over it. It becomes his mantra and a way of confounding those who try to understand him.<sup>136</sup> In the film, Welsh's curse is one of several attempts to reconcile the carnage of war with a greater purpose. Sergeant McCron, for example, goes mad, clutching in the soil and babbling "dirt, we're just dirt" after he loses his whole squad.

Guadalcanal's inconsequence to the two armies beyond its tactical position has been alluded to already in the conversation between General Quintard and his officers ("Nobody wants this island"), but this conversation also provides the context for Malick's interpretation of property. In imperial eyes, the island is a wasteland, a place "nobody" wants (excluding, presumably, the people who live there). In *Sands of Iwo Jima*, Private Bass asks, "what does anyone want to take an island like this for?" again, rendering the island an uninhabitable hell. The answer from Private Thomas is "War ... trading real estate for men." While most films recognize one half of this equation – that war is about "property" – few ever describe that property, beyond the topography of tactical significance. *The Thin Red Line* moves beyond such deprecation and, importantly, also transcends Welsh's cynical theory of property through Malick's reinvention of Private Witt, Jones's racist Kentucky boxer who becomes, instead, the film's visionary. Malick invests Witt with the obstinate, restless spirit of Jones's Prewitt in *From Here to Eternity*, and a questioning nature that looks forward to the reinvention of Captain John Smith in *The New World*.

In the conversation between private Witt and Sergeant Welsh in the brig, Witt says to his superior, "I've seen another world; sometimes I think it was just my imagination." Simplistically, this world could be the island paradise Witt has just left, but throughout the film is the suggestion of something greater than the personal loss and gain of battle, or the historical

<sup>136</sup> Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 24-25, 51, 125, 261, 401-402.

relevance of this specific battle, something Colonel Tall intellectualizes (“nature is cruel, Staros”), Welsh is unwilling to seek (“make an island for yourself”), and Witt embraces, but struggles to come to terms with. If one sees misguided and outdated ethnographic curiosity in Malick’s representation of the island society, and his emphasis on their strangeness to the American soldiers, then I think one misses Malick’s recognition that *all* points of view are strange. When Witt asks why the island woman is afraid of him, she responds, “because you are army.” Witt, in return, says “it doesn’t matter” but, of course, it does and he knows it. He may be stripped to the waist, with no sign of his uniform or any other army equipment, but his dogtags carry his identity; as Witt himself says later in the brig, “I love Charlie Company; they’re my people.”

The image of the receding island and the voiceover intoning a closing thought would be a suitable end to a combat film. As Crane writes in *The Red Badge of Courage*:

The sultry nightmare was in the past. He had been an animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war. He turned now with a lover’s thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks – an existence of soft and eternal peace.

Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rainclouds.<sup>137</sup>

Nature is restored here in the mind of the narrator; it will no longer terrify and master him, but will soothe and satisfy his “lover’s thirst.” On the surface, *The Thin Red Line* ends in a similar fashion. As Guadalcanal fades into the sun, a voiceover intones, “Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made. All things shining.” However, instead of ending on the soldiers’ withdrawal from their hellish conflict, Malick produces three final images: children paddling in canoes, two brilliantly coloured parakeets, and a blooming coconut in the shallow waters washing onto a beach. These “separate images united by a single emotion [showing] three levels of life: human, animal, and vegetable”<sup>138</sup> represent the world that remains after the conflict of empire that we have witnessed – the island becomes world again, and not just ‘property.’

<sup>137</sup> Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1964), 157.

<sup>138</sup> Chion, *The Thin Red Line* (2004), 72.

The ending of the war narrative and the ending of the film are subtle but forceful challenges to the ethos of the combat film, where the narrative structure and emblematic utilization of nature combine in a worldview that focuses on any number of human philosophies: the wastefulness of war; the capricious termination of young lives; the essential sameness of protagonist and antagonist; and the class battle between those who give and those who take orders. Even a film like *All Quiet on the Western Front* – with which *The Thin Red Line* is often associated as an ‘anti-war’ film – ends on an image of nature that represents these human qualities: as Paul reaches out to touch the butterfly, he is shot dead by a German sniper. In *The Thin Red Line*’s final shots the “regeneration through violence” of American nationhood in the toughening of young fighting men, and the conquest of strange shores is utterly transcended by the ‘meaningless’ images of life lived outside these discourses, the world outside the world of war.

## Chapter Five

### “A Prisoner of Metonymy”

While Malick's World War II film has to bear primarily the weight of the Greatest Generation, and secondarily America's increasingly fraught military excursions abroad in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The New World* sails into hurricanes more ferocious and enduring than those that wreaked havoc with the waves of colonial expedition along America's south-eastern coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

William Carlos Williams's bitter contention that “history begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery” bears serious reflection as the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Jamestown settlement looms.<sup>1</sup> Malick's chosen title appears foolhardy in this respect, though at least it initiates deliberation, as opposed to Disney's film, *Pocahontas* (1995), where the title suggests a story entire.<sup>2</sup> As one of the oldest myths of America – the modern nation not the ancient continent – the story of Pocahontas, Captain Smith and John Rolfe has developed into a complex knot of history, myth and propaganda that is as contested now as it has ever been.<sup>3</sup> Jill Lapore, in a review of *Pocahontas* and *The Scarlet Letter* (1995), writes: “Locating the origins of contemporary American gender and race relations is nothing new; it was already old when Alexis de

<sup>1</sup> Williams, *In the American Grain* (1956), 39. For the sake of consistency, I will use the term ‘Jamestown’ in this chapter, though initially the settlement was known as James Fort.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Chickahominy Chief Stephen R Adkins's reservations about the film's title in the documentary, *The Making of the New World* (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Consider Faery's account of the ‘premiere’ screening of Disney's *Pocahontas* in the town of Pocahontas, Iowa in *Cartographies of Desire* (1999), 145-152; Strong, ‘Animated Indians’ (1996); Edgerton & Jackson, ‘Redesigning Pocahontas’ (1996).

Tocqueville did it in the 1830s. But [these] films are sobering reminders that the story is still up for grabs.”<sup>4</sup> These contemporary adaptations are not just about gender and race and they operate in quite different ways, teaching cultural tolerance and curiosity on the one hand, and rummaging around in America’s literary subconscious for repressed carnality on the other. *The New World*, too, cannot be considered as simply a retelling of a fabled story; it adds to a myth that has undergone frequent revision in various media from poems to films.

In the myth, Rolfe’s marriage to Pocahontas is complicated: a chaste man’s salvation of a psychologically distraught girl; the conversion of a “heathen” to Christianity; an attempt to initiate economic stability through political betrothal, and a deft piece of marketing to ensure continued royal sanction for the Virginia Company’s colonial enterprise. Smith’s relationship with Pocahontas is perhaps nothing more than expediency, an easy way to ensure support for the English during the lean early years of the settlement, or at most the partial reciprocation of a young girl’s initial curiosity, ultimately betrayed not so much by Smith’s departure (‘the end of the affair’) as by her kidnapping and prolonged residence at Jamestown leading to marriage with John Rolfe. The character of Smith as witness, recorder and participant in these events has long been the subject of debate amongst historians, cultural critics, and even anthropologists, yet his words still offer the most substance for what is historically a skeletal narrative. Regarding his “rescue” by Pocahontas, the claims to truth of the event itself now appear successfully defended; however, the interpretation of that event is still debated.<sup>5</sup>

Pocahontas becomes the floating signifier, silent but for Smith’s recounting of their last conversation, of obscure motivation in her actions, acquiescent to colonial ways and,

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<sup>4</sup> Lapore, ‘Review of *Pocahontas* and *The Scarlet Letter*’ (1996), 1168.

<sup>5</sup> For competing interpretations of the event, see Price’s book *Love and Hate in Jamestown* (2005, particularly the Marginalia, 241-245); the succinct synopsis in Richter’s *Facing East from Indian Country* (2001), 69-78; and Williamson, ‘Pocahontas and Captain John Smith’ (1992).

most importantly, mother of a son from whom Americans down through the years have claimed descent. It is in the last, most sexualized role, that Pocahontas has become such a powerful figure in American myth, though powerless too as she is made appealing to numerous suitors. Those who have used her, and those who have defended her, can't resist the signifying game: Pocahontas is most often a woodland sprite who captures an adventurer's heart (and whose heart in return goes out to him), whose desire leads her to betray her father for the sake of the itinerant hero, and so becomes an American Ariadne / Medea to John Smith's Theseus / Jason.<sup>6</sup> She is also Rebecca of the scriptures in whose belly struggled two nations, one destined to be stronger than the other, the elder destined to serve the younger. Esau, of course, was born "red", sold his birthright for pottage to his brother Jacob, a "plain man" but loved by his mother.<sup>7</sup> As the pliant representative of a wild America ready to accept colonial conquest and control, she has become a literary cousin of America "awoken out of repose" by Vespucci in Jan de Straet's drawing of 1575, "our native clay" in Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, a proto-Galatea under earnest colonial tutelage, and "Our Mother" in Vachel Lindsay's poem of 1917.<sup>8</sup> In *The New World*, John Smith calls Pocahontas "my America" a restrained distillation of the exposition in Malick's early screenplay where Smith explicitly brings the desiring male gaze into the ambit of the appropriating colonial gaze:

He gazes at her. She is a lady, a flower, a jewel. The woods murmur about them. He looks out on a new creation; a landscape as lovely as a lost Eden. O his America, his new found land, how blessed he is in discovering her, and in full nakedness; unbound (scene 64).

<sup>6</sup> In Joel Barlow's exhausting patriotic poem *The Columbiad* (1807, book IV, stanza 27), Pocahontas is equated with Medea, while in an early draft of Terrence Malick's *New World* screenplay, Pocahontas is an Ariadne (scene 127). See *Faery Cartographies of Desire* (1999), 80-144, for a rich discussion on representations of Pocahontas, the "metaphor of marriage" in the legend, and the "decolonizing" of her image; and Philip Young's essay "The Mother of Us All" (1962).

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, Genesis 25:22-31.

<sup>8</sup> Crane, 'Cape Hatteras' in *The Bridge* (1970, originally 1930); as Galatea – Faery evokes this comparison in *Cartographies of Desire* (1999), 141; Lindsay, 'Our Mother Pocahontas'.

Later, Pocahontas bears not only a more explicit form of this geopolitical metaphor, but also a classical Western mythic paradigm:

She is the dove of peace, the living proof that the heart's great wilderness can be tamed, the infidel brought to Christ. She is the very flesh and promise of the American soil, and Earth Mother as surely as ancient Demeter (scene 161).

A prisoner, literally, at Jamestown, she is now a prisoner of metonymy, a mythic drum cursed to sound eternally.<sup>9</sup>

It is perhaps unfair to pick out extracts from a screenplay written approximately twenty-five years before the film was made; however, as I will show, Malick's film is not only a continuing development of themes from his earlier films but also a complex construction of historical revisionism and mythic interpretation, an understanding of which is enriched by acknowledging the original screenplay as part of that creative process. In this chapter, I will first examine the historical context of the Smith / Pocahontas / Rolfe story within the culture of English colonialism at the time before discussing *The New World* in more depth. It is my contention that *The New World* owes its character to an engagement between the poetic Pocahontas of early twentieth century modernism (genealogically and geopolitically maternal), and a Transcendentalist reflection on nature, and knowledge gained through intuition and experience.

In the former sense, Pocahontas is employed as national symbol, a genuine American origin to be claimed so that "Saxon blood" and "Teuton pride" may be renounced, and a Whitmanesque catalogue of American character can be celebrated.<sup>10</sup> In the latter sense, *The New World* is an obvious continuation of themes explored in *The Thin Red Line*, particularly our relationship with the natural world, and reveals a filmmaker continuing his experiments with narrative form and film language. However, where *The*

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<sup>9</sup> The phrase, "a prisoner of metonymy" comes from a discussion with Professor Clive Chandler.

<sup>10</sup> Lindsay, 'Our Mother Pocahontas'

*Thin Red Line* is arguably able to transcend the historical parameters of World War II, *The New World* encounters a more inflexible context and fails to transcend the problematic representations that the Pocahontas myth has developed over the centuries. In the closing scenes, Malick attempts to outflank the myth by, once again, drawing the film to a close with enigmatic images (and sounds) of nature. *The Thin Red Line* denies the heroic and nationalistic pride of the war film with the island returning 'to normal', the soundtrack comprising hymns sung by Melanesian choirs. In *The New World*, swelling music seemingly draws the spirit of Pocahontas home, across the ocean and into the rivers of Virginia, but triumphant orchestral closure is interrupted by the sounds of the forest: creaking trees and birdsong. Simply, we are being drawn back, to a time before that first encounter.

## An Astonishing Encounter

Every man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to; it is indeed the case that we have no other criterion of truth or right-reason than the example and form of the opinions and customs of our own country.

Michel de Montaigne, 'On the Cannibals'<sup>11</sup>

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Any historical commentary on Jamestown and Plymouth should recognize an unavoidable tension in the historical record. On the one hand, there are copious contemporary accounts produced by both colonists and writers in England detailing not only voyages of discovery but the quotidian details of colonial life which are pored over by historians in the hope of more accurately reconstructing the period. On the other, there is the experience of numerous different Native American tribes who, despite some ethnographic distinction, are understood as either 'friendly' or 'hostile' (often the former followed by the latter),<sup>12</sup> and in terms of their threat or use to the colonists. Thus, in Samuel Morison's brief account of the founding of the Jamestown and Plymouth colonies in *The Oxford History of the American People*, "friendly" Indians bring food one moment, before "skulking" Indians kill off livestock during times of hardship the next. Ultimately, "the only thing that kept Virginia alive in these difficult years was the patriotism and deep religious faith of some of the leaders."<sup>13</sup> Consigned to a lurking presence on the fringes of colonial ambition and industry, the history of the indigenous people appears as in relief, extrapolated from the margins, understood by inference, characterized by the aside.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Montaigne, 'On the Cannibals' (2003, originally 1580), 231.

<sup>12</sup> Hulme, *Colonial Encounters* (1986), 137-173, and Kupperman, 'English Perceptions of Treachery, 1583-1640' (1977).

<sup>13</sup> Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (1955), 49-51.

<sup>14</sup> 'Indigenous' is understood here as the Native American groups who inhabited the American continents before the arrival of the European colonists.

This does not mean that little is known about the indigenous cultures European adventurers encountered when they came ashore in their 'New World', but most of what is known must be subject to an adjustment in the present that makes allowance for the colonial ideologies of the time. So, Tzvetan Todorov takes the rather simple declaration by Hernando Cortez upon viewing an Aztec city – "I shall not attempt to describe it at all, save to say that in Spain there is nothing to compare with it" – and proposes: "These comparisons testify of course to the desire to grasp the unknown by means of the known."<sup>15</sup> Todorov, and also Bernard Sheehan, argue that this encounter – "the most astonishing in our history"<sup>16</sup> – was undermined from the outset by the preconceptions of this 'new' continent. Sheehan frames this encounter in terms of "savagism" and civility:

The myth, of course, preceded the experience. Europeans knew what they would find in the New World long before experience had an opportunity to intrude on their convictions. They encountered savages in America because their minds and their senses had been molded by a powerful mythic formula that equated societies less elaborately organized than their own with the primal condition.<sup>17</sup>

What preceded even this myth was the belief for a considerable time that Columbus's discovery represented a new earthly paradise, "a few small, delectable islands, any one of which was understandable in terms of a *hortus inclusus*, the walls of which sheltered the Earthly Paradise, or a bower of bliss, or the garden of eternal youth and spring, from the dark wilderness of the world."<sup>18</sup> And once the first reports emerged of the gilded cities of this 'New World,' the paradisaic garden developed a second, more complicated character – an unbelievable yet attainable manifestation of the Golden Age as evoked in painting and verse by Renaissance artists. The garden paradise became the perfect context in

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<sup>15</sup> Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (1992), 128.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility* (1980), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, *O Strange New World* (1964), 61.

which to review humanity, from the naked savages who reminded a corrupted Europe of a distant innocence, to an emergent Europe aspiring to new ideals of beauty, morality, and knowledge.

The pastoral image of the Indians and their world gained a measure of reality from the observations of travellers and colonists. True enough, the garden motif drew on a long tradition and came to the New World in the baggage of the Europeans.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the 'New World' arrived in Europe in a form that was already understood, no matter how strange the landscape, inhabitants, flora and fauna might be.

If mythic preconceptions 'prepared' European navigators and adventurers for the strangeness of their experiences across the Atlantic, then the relating of that strangeness back to their European audiences was equally complicated: as Wayne Franklin writes, "'Discovery' was a double concept, since it referred both to the act of finding and to the later act of revealing what had been found."<sup>20</sup> Of Columbus's descriptions of his discoveries, Jones suggests that "the genius of the discoverer was not reportorial," but then asks, "even it had been, to what literary tradition could he turn?"<sup>21</sup> Part of the answer to this question lies in the dissemination – slow at first, then almost cancerous – of information regarding the trans-Atlantic voyages and, more importantly, what treasures lay on the other side. Jones notes one process that helped transform the strangeness of the 'New World' into terms as surprised and surprising, yet comprehensible in relation to acknowledged forms of geographical and exploratory description.

[Peter Martyr] translated the reports of Columbus, Vespucci, and others into Renaissance terms, which means that, never having been in the West Indies,

<sup>19</sup> Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility* (1980), 25. Malick dwells on the incomprehension of the colonial traveller in several scenes in *The Thin Red Line*, as discussed in chapter four.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin, *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers* (1979), 182.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, *O Strange New World* (1964), 14.

he saw the New World, though often with shrewdness, through a haze of Latinity.<sup>22</sup>

Whether friendly or hostile, noble or ignoble, the indigenous people Europeans encountered were never free of the powerful rationalizing agency of the philosophies that saw them either as innocents delighting in a paradisaic garden, or barbarians run amuck in an untamed wilderness which Europeans, by God's instruction, needed to civilize. Where a sophisticated society, such as the Aztecs of Montezuma, was encountered, or appreciation for indigenous culture flowed from the pen of a European writer, the prejudice existed in a different form, as Todorov proposes:

If it is incontestable that the prejudice of superiority is an obstacle in the road to knowledge, we must also admit that the prejudice of equality is a still greater one, for it consists in identifying the other purely and simply with one's own "ego ideal" (or with oneself).<sup>23</sup>

What Sheehan and Todorov both illuminate is the inexorable binarism that characterizes colonial discourses. Whether the Christian cant of Robert Gray – who pronounced that, “although the Lord hath given the earth to children of men ... the greater part of it [is] possessed and wrongfully usurped by wild beasts, and unreasonable creatures, or by brutish savages, which by reason of their godles ignorance, and blasphemous Idolatrie, are worse than those beasts which are of most wilde and savage nature,”<sup>24</sup> or the apologist disillusionment of Marc Lescarbot who wrote that the greatest threat came “not from the people we call savages, but from them that term themselves Christians and yet love but the name of it – cursed and abominable people, worse than wolves, enemies to God and human nature,”<sup>25</sup> the colonial encounter was always described through

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>23</sup> Todorov, *Conquest of America* (1992), 165.

<sup>24</sup> In Nash, 'The Image of the Indian in the Southern Colonial Mind' (1972), 210.

<sup>25</sup> In Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility* (1980), 32.

recourse to a savage state: indigenous peoples had not yet developed from that state, and Europeans frequently slid back into it. In this respect, Todorov provides a most telling assessment of European brutality in the Americas:

Far from the central government, far from royal law, all prohibitions give way, the social link, already loosened, snaps, revealing not a primitive nature, the beast sleeping in each of us, but a modern being, one with a great future in fact, restrained by no morality and inflicting death because and when he pleases. The “barbarity” of the Spaniards has nothing atavistic or bestial about it; it is quite human and heralds the advent of modern times.<sup>26</sup>

To emphasize the precariousness of the relationship between savage and civilized states, and the presentiment of greater horrors to come, one should consider Jamestown itself, and the appalling punishment by Governor Thomas Dale of certain colonists who had fled the miseries of the fort to live among the indigenous people in the area. George Percy describes how “some he appointed to be hanged Some burned Some to be broken upon wheels, others to be staked and some to be shot to death.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Davidson and Lytle maintain that if one looks at the documentary records of colonial Virginia, “life in the young colony was more volatile, acquisitive, rowdy, raw – and deadly – than most traditional accounts have assumed. Between the high ideals of the colony’s London investors and the disembarkation points along the Chesapeake, something went wrong.”<sup>28</sup>

In order to understand clearly what Malick confronts and negotiates in *The New World*, it is necessary to have at least a broad sense of the historical and mythic contexts that have given perpetual life to two founding American narratives: the ‘first’ colony, and the ‘mother of us all.’ If the Jamestown colonists carried with them the assumptions of Christianizing zeal to uplift the noble and quell the ignoble savage, what conditions

<sup>26</sup> Todorov, *Conquest of America* (1992), 145.

<sup>27</sup> In Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), 74.

<sup>28</sup> Davidson and Lytle, *After the Fact* (1982), 9-10.

produced ultimate success out of provisional failure (for the Jamestown colony was a stumbling concern in its first incarnation), and a deathless myth whose protagonists were dead within fifteen years of the colony's establishment?

The first significant point is to recognize the untidy events that led to the Jamestown expedition, as this contextualizes both myths: Jamestown was not the first English colony, and Smith and Pocahontas were not the first of their cultures to meet. Indeed, in many accounts of Jamestown as a factor in the colonization of America the liaison between Pocahontas and Smith is accorded a paragraph or two which shows its lightweight historical character, inversely proportional to its powerful mythic qualities: even in Smith's own records, his encounters with Pocahontas constitute a small percentage of his narrative of exploration. Histories of the Jamestown colony point towards its future economic and political significance, its precarious position in the early years not only as a physical settlement in America but also a going concern financially back in England, and its eventual success as a producer of tobacco. Contextually, it forms part of what David Beers Quinn describes as England's "trial-and-error colonization," an unflattering comparison to the explorations and exploitations in the western hemisphere of the Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Dutch.<sup>29</sup> English colonization of North America in the late 1500s and early 1600s was seldom the focus of genuine investigation during Drake's terrorizing of the Spanish fleets in the 1580s. While plans were made in England to establish colonies, the execution of these plans was often subject to the piratical whims of the captains and crews of privateers who mixed colonizing duties with the opportunistic plunder of Spanish shipping.<sup>30</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh oversaw several ill-fated expeditions between 1585 and 1587 resulting in Roanoke's

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<sup>29</sup> Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America* (1974).

<sup>30</sup> Captain Newport, leader of the Jamestown expedition and the benevolent English father figure of most Smith / Pocahontas stories, was himself a privateer for many years in the 1580s and 1590s. See Andrews, 'Christopher Newport of Limehouse, Mariner' (1954).

famous “lost colony”; however, interest in this doomed group in the 1590s centered more on Raleigh’s rights to materials gathered there and sold in England: as long as the colonists might be alive, Raleigh’s commission (given him by Queen Elizabeth) was valid, and so others could not exploit the territory now named Virginia.<sup>31</sup> Renewed interest in Virginia in the first years of the seventeenth century was interrupted by King James’s imprisonment of Raleigh on suspicion of treason in 1603, though the King was confident enough by 1606 to grant a new charter to The Virginia Company of London (hereafter the Virginia Company).

The significance of the Roanoke experience, however, is that it helps us to understand the thinking, planning and execution of the colonization process. Features of the colony’s establishment and demise are instructive in understanding not only the planning for the Jamestown expedition, but also the volatile relationships with the indigenous people encountered during the first few anxious years. Quinn investigates the lost colonists of Roanoke Island in painstaking detail, and records the failure of the colonists under the command of Ralph Lane “to remain on friendly terms with the local inhabitants.”<sup>32</sup> Francis Jennings, striking a more revisionist note, bluntly concludes: “No one knows precisely what happened to Roanoke; the details hardly matter. Lane’s murderous conduct made survival impossible in the midst of overwhelming numbers of Indians whom he had turned hostile.”<sup>33</sup> One of the details that does matter is the change in strategy between Roanoke and Jamestown, principally the shift from colonies planted very much on military terms to colonization by commerce: it is significant that the Virginia voyage of 1607 took place after the cessation of war with Spain in 1604 and the

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<sup>31</sup> Price wryly observes: “Perhaps fortunately for the natives of Roanoke Island, Raleigh himself never set foot in the New World” in the light of his “enthusiastic butchery of the Irish as an officer in that country.” *Love and Hate in Jamestown* (2005), 8.

<sup>32</sup> Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America* (1974), 283. See 432–481 for an account of the “lost colonists” and a very plausible speculation of what may have happened to them. Quinn’s treatment of the Roanoke voyages in this book is a condensation of his much more detailed work in two volumes published in 1955.

<sup>33</sup> Jennings, *The Founders of America* (1994), 168.

concomitant outlawing of privateering. As a result, there was a greater emphasis on commercial enterprise with the hope that the colony could provide anything from silk, to sassafras, cedar wood to gold. Tobacco, of course, would only come later. Foreign experts in construction, glassblowing, and the manufacturing of tar, were also part of the colonizing effort showing if not enthusiastic cosmopolitanism, then pragmatic business acumen.

As a record of the *encounter* between European colonialists and America's indigenous inhabitants, Jamestown is frequently characterized by two major violent events, the "massacre" of 1622 and a later uprising of Powhatan Indians in 1644, both initiated by the extraordinary figure of Opechancanough, Chief of the Pamunkeys, brother (by either blood or kinship), and successor to Powhatan.<sup>34</sup> Carl Bridenbaugh speculates that Opechancanough had in fact spent several years in Spain in the 1560s, even adopting a Spanish name, before finally returning to his homeland in 1570. In a violent apostasy, he is linked to the murder of Spanish Jesuits at a mission in the Chesapeake region that same year. As a result, Bridenbaugh argues that Opechancanough (and hence Powhatan) had much more knowledge of the English colonists in 1607 than they supposed, and already understood the nature of European colonial aspirations. He appears almost legendary in the historical record: seven feet tall, the English believed he was one hundred years old at the time of the 1644 attack on Jamestown.<sup>35</sup> Less fancifully, Jennings argues that bloody Spanish retaliation for the murdered Jesuits "created a climate of opinion at Chesapeake Bay that was not at all favourable to the later English colonists of Jamestown."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that 'Powhatan' connotes both the tribe (itself a "confederation" of groups) and the paramount chief, who was also known as Wahunsonacock.

<sup>35</sup> Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown* (1980), 11-19. A key part of Bridenbaugh's argument is Opechancanough's extraordinary age in 1644, allowing him to fit into the Spanish chronology of an adopted Indian in the 1560s. Also, see Fausz, 'Opechancanough: Indian Resistance Leader' (1992).

<sup>36</sup> Jennings, *The Founders of America* (1994), 166.

Quinn proposes (though he admits the evidence is circumstantial) that the remnants of the Roanoke colonies were in fact dispatched by Powhatan himself not long before Newport, Smith and company arrived in 1607. Should this be true – and given the persistent interest in those colonists in England – one has to question the revelation of the encounter between the English and Powhatan upon their ‘first meeting’ in 1607. Quinn’s historical judgment of this narrative indicates both the frustration and excitement such historical ‘reconstruction’ entails: “The deduction of such a story – which would add a dramatic gloss to the circumstances of the first landings in 1607 – from what [William] Strachey says in the passages cited would not be an illegitimate use of evidence. On the other hand, it is clearly not the whole story, and it may not be correct.”<sup>37</sup> It is also probable that the colonists of 1607 carried with them some knowledge of regional native dialects recorded by Thomas Harriot who had travelled with the first Roanoke expedition as a scientist, and whose observations were published in 1588. As to the strangeness of the Native Americans to the English eye, there is evidence that Samuel Mace brought Indians to London in 1603.<sup>38</sup>

There is much to suggest that the founding of Jamestown did not take place under conditions of complete ignorance on both sides, a myth that provides the mysterious and romantic ground from which Smith and Pocahontas’s relationship springs. However, ‘knowledge’ in whatever form should not lessen the significance of that encounter; as Hulme writes: “It is difficult to judge just how novel the arrival of three English ships would have been to Powhatan, but the establishment of the fort clearly called for a response.”<sup>39</sup> This is an important distinction and one that underpins the two Englishmen linked with Pocahontas: Smith, though he sought to establish a permanent colony, represents the vicissitudes of the first encounters between

<sup>37</sup> Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America* (1974), 464–481, 455.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* On Thomas Harriot, 302, 418; on Indians in England in 1603, 403.

<sup>39</sup> Hulme, *Colonial Encounters* (1986), 149.

Jamestown's colonists and the Powhatan, while Rolfe, (who probably died in the 1622 Powhatan attack) represents the consolidation of the English enterprise. Though the romantic myth of Pocahontas and Smith has driven the fairytale version of the story, the marriage of Pocahontas to Rolfe has sustained the political myth of Pocahontas as a bridge between colonial and native cultures. A further conflict in the myth is reconciling Smith's wild, exotic 'romance' with his frequently unsympathetic accounts of the indigenous populations.

## The Fortunate Hero and “The Mother of us All”

In such splendour did Jason appear to her eager gaze,  
yet his coming started the ill-starred miseries of passion.

*The Argonautika*<sup>40</sup>

Fortunate is the hero who links his name romantically with that of a woman. A tender interest in his fame is assured.

Charles Dudley Warner<sup>41</sup>

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For such an important story, it is not long in the telling.

After some six weeks fattening amongst those Savage Courtiers, at the minute of my execution, she hazarded the beating out of her own brains to save mine; and not only that, but so prevailed with her father, that I was safely conducted to Jamestown: where I found about eight and thirty miserable poor and sick creatures, to keep possession of all those large territories of *Virginia*; such was the weakness of this poor Commonwealth, as had the Savages not fed us, we directly had starved. And this relief most gracious Queen, was commonly brought us by this lady *Pocahontas*.<sup>42</sup>

So goes Captain John Smith’s story as related to Queen Anne in 1616 almost ten years after the event. Even if one puts aside, for the moment, the theory that Pocahontas did not in fact save Smith’s life, but acted out a role in a ceremony Smith did not understand, Smith’s language still illuminates some of the crucial social and political forces that have made the myth so resolute over the centuries. The significance of Pocahontas’s actions, not in saving Smith but in facilitating relief for the starving colonists, is further emphasized when Smith writes:

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<sup>40</sup> Apollonius, *The Argonautika* (1997), Book III, lines 960-961.

<sup>41</sup> Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004, originally 1881), I:1. The copy of this book I consulted was downloaded from Project Gutenberg and has no page numbers. All references hereafter will consist of a Roman numeral, denoting the section of the text, and a number denoting the paragraph.

<sup>42</sup> In Lemay, *An Early American Reader* (1988), 392. Extract from John Smith’s *The Generall Historie of Virginia*. All spelling (except for book titles) has been standardized though the grammatical style of the original text has largely been retained.

Jamestown with her wild train she as freely frequented, as her fathers habitation; and during the time of two or three years, she next under God, was still the instrument to preserve this Colony from death, famine and utter confusion; which if in those times, it had once been dissolved Virginia might have lain as it was at our first arrival to this day.<sup>43</sup>

It is interesting to compare Smith's account to Queen Anne with this passage from his *Generall Historie of Virginia* of 1624 where the drama of the moment is emphasized, and Pocahontas's intervention is far more active and physical.

A long consultation was held, but the conclusion was two great stones were brought before Powhatan; then as many as could laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beat out his brains. Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms, and laid her own upon his to save him from death.<sup>44</sup>

Smith's accounts raise several questions which are pertinent to Malick's film, because in answering them, one can see how *The New World* relates to the existent myths. It is tempting, in light of the myriad theories and (re)interpretations of Smith's "rescue," to conclude as David A. Price has in his brisk and entertaining account, *Love and Hate in Jamestown*, that

there is no compelling reason to believe that the events in Powhatan's assembly hall were anything other than what Smith perceived them to be. There is even less reason to doubt that Pocahontas was just who she appeared to be that day: a girl acting compassionately toward the pitiable stranger in front of her.<sup>45</sup>

Here, Pocahontas is restored as the curious compassionate young girl, and Smith shrugs off his adventurer's reputation for tall tales to reveal a doughty interlocutor and observer. However, as Margaret Holmes Williamson asks, "how willing were the Powhatan to

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 392. Extract from John Smith's *The Generall Historie of Virginia*.

<sup>44</sup> In Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), VIII: 31.

<sup>45</sup> Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown* (2005), 245.

allow the decisions of a ten- or twelve-year old to have such serious consequences?"<sup>46</sup> The alternative suggested by many writers (and which Williamson explores) is that Smith was part of an elaborate ritual wherein he was 'killed' and reborn as kin to the Powhatan tribe on the understanding that a reciprocal relationship would thereafter exist between the English and the Powhatan. Williamson goes on to argue that the relationship between Smith and Powhatan was, in fact, more important than his relationship with Pocahontas because, "If Smith succeeded in saving the colony, he did so with the Indians' consent." Ultimately, Smith's life was "preserved... because Powhatan regarded him as a foreign *werowance* [chief]."<sup>47</sup> Price, in rebuffing this theory, emphasizes the mystery that confronts anyone seeking to understand the story of Pocahontas: what was her motivation in saving Smith? Though he admits that "it is impossible to know for certain," he sardonically remarks, "Smith's own view of her motives is presumably due some extra weight, since, after all, he was there."<sup>48</sup>

The answer to the question is less important than the fact that it is unknowable: Faery, in resolving the compassion / adoption debate, writes that they are both "dependent on Pocahontas's silence." However, over time, "to support the colonial endeavour and to cover up the painful actual histories of settlement, Pocahontas had to be made to love John Smith, whether she did or not."<sup>49</sup> Suggesting the redundancy of the purported facts may seem profoundly unhistorical, but as one prepares to look back four hundred years, the accretion of mythic strata will not be cracked by re-interpretations of the limited facts.

If Pocahontas's silence complicates one half of the myth, then Smith himself complicates the other. Though it is true that much of what is known about Smith is the

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<sup>46</sup> Williamson, 'Pocahontas and Captain John Smith' (1992), 382.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 382, 388.

<sup>48</sup> Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown* (2005), 68.

<sup>49</sup> Faery, *Cartographies of Desire* (1999), 117.

product of his own hand, there is enough evidence supplied by others to suggest that he was a man of considerable skill and nerve as a seaman, soldier, and navigator, and that he was by nature often contrary, blunt, and uncompassionate. Forthright and decisive, he was also paranoid, and those who disagreed with him were soon suspected of plotting against him.<sup>50</sup> His writings are far more than the spinning of fantastical yarns; the inconsistencies in the versions of his adventures appear to be the product of an emerging understanding of the overwhelming strangeness he encountered rather than simple vanity or an attempt to write himself into a history that – even in those early days – announced something of larger import than a trading sojourn.

He is, however, a difficult character to deploy for heroic purposes. Though there are racy passages detailing his pre-Virginia exploits, he also details the minutiae of political intrigue within the colony and was a diligent recorder of the geography of the areas through which he travelled. And though “he took a keener interest in the Indians than anyone else in Virginia for a century to come,” he was also, in Morgan’s words, “sure that kindness was wasted on savages.”<sup>51</sup> Warner, for example, admiringly catalogues Smith’s “prompt way with Indians ... In all his encounters and quarrels with the treacherous savages Smith lost not a man; it was his habit when he encountered a body of them to demand their bows, arrows, swords, and furs, and a child or two as hostages.”<sup>52</sup> Whether he was “ruthless and indiscriminate,” or exercised a “policy of intimidation with limited bloodshed,” it appears unlikely that he was the liberal-thinking and tolerant diplomat of most mythic accounts.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> “Misrepresented in London, and unsupported and conspired against in Virginia, Smith felt his fall near at hand. On the face of it he was the victim of envy and the rascality of incompetent and bad men; but whatever his capacity for dealing with savages, it must be confessed that he lacked something which conciliates success with one’s own people.” Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), XII:18.

<sup>51</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), 76, 77.

<sup>52</sup> Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), IX:16; X:9.

<sup>53</sup> Nash, ‘The Image of the Indian in the Southern Colonial Mind’ (1972), 214; Fausz, ‘Opechancanough: Indian Resistance Leader’ (1992), 25.

One aspect of his heroic quality is his unstinting dislike for bureaucracy and aristocratic power, coming, as he apparently did, from humble origins. Early in film, Smith offers this ode to the 'New World':

Here the blessings of the earth are bestowed upon all. None need grow poor. Here there is good ground for all and no cost but one's labour. We shall build a true commonwealth: hard work, self-reliance, and virtue. We shall have no landlords to wreck us with high rents or extort the fruits of our labour. None shall eat up carelessly what his friend's got worthily, or steal away that which virtue has stored up. Men shall not make each other their spoil.

Framed by class discourse and strongly egalitarian, he is a proto-American who sees opportunity all around if men would only work. Jefferson's yeoman farmer, he is also Turner's ideal frontier exponent, wielding his hoe and turning a savage wilderness into a garden of prosperity. He is 'Adam' to the male protagonists of all Malick's films, seeking life on equal terms but confounded by rank and wealth. The speech condenses Smith's famous passages in *A Description of New England* (1616), where he famously wrote:

If he have but the taste of virtue and magnanimity, what to such a mind can be more pleasant, than planting and building a foundation for his Prosperity, got from the rude earth, by God's blessing and his own industry, without any prejudice to any?

...

Then, who would live at home idly (or think in himself any worth to live) only to eat, drink, and sleep, and so die? Or by consuming that carelessly, his friends got worthily? Or by using that miserably, that maintained virtue honestly? Or for being descended nobly, pine with the vain vaunt of great kindred, in penury?<sup>54</sup>

Smith railed constantly against the 'gentlemen' who formed part of the 'locked box' council, and whose manoeuvring for power almost cost him his life after he had, to his

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<sup>54</sup> In Lemay, *An Early American Reader* (1988), 10.

mind, escaped death at the hands of the Powhatan.<sup>55</sup> The man whom Pocahontas encountered, under whatever circumstances, was aware of chivalric codes – enough, at least, to write in that register – yet also a hardened pragmatist who seldom failed to record the more unpleasant aspects of colonizing the ‘New World.’

Given his approach to the colonial endeavour and the position of the indigenous peoples within that larger project, he appears an unlikely love interest or even figure of sympathy for a young native woman. And yet this bizarre seduction has gained acceptance in the myth with only scattered circumstantial evidence to support it. In 1612, Smith had said (of himself in the third person):

Some prophetic spirit calculated he had the savages in such subjection, he would have made himself a king by marrying Pocahontas, Powhatan's daughter ... But her marriage could in no way have entitled him by any right to the kingdom, nor was it ever suspected he had such a thought, or more regarded her or any of them than in honest reason and discretion he might. If he would he might have married her, or have done what he listed. For there were none that could have hindered his determination.<sup>56</sup>

Smith appears almost the opposite to Rolfe who would later found his claim to marry Pocahontas on its political desirability. At once peculiarly chaste, Smith claims that the thought never crossed his mind, but then – in perhaps his most ugly phrase – that he might also “have done what he listed.” Faery writes that Smith “represents himself as an object of desire for the Indian women of Virginia [which] combined with his eroticizing claim that he could have married Pocahontas or ‘done what [he] listed’ with her, became a foundation for the legend that Pocahontas was in love with John Smith.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The names of those commissioned to form the council upon arrival in the colony were kept in a locked box during the voyage, and opened only once ashore. Smith's name, it appears, was a rude surprise for those who had accused him of mutiny and had placed him under arrest for a large part of the trans-Atlantic crossing. Porter in *The Inconstant Savage* points out that Smith “was not at all against ‘gentlemen’ as such ... what he disliked were ‘gallants,’ ‘loiterers without victuals’” (1979), 299.

<sup>56</sup> In Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), XIII:40. From Smith's *Map of Virginia*.

<sup>57</sup> Faery, *Cartographies of Desire* (1999), 122.

Based on historical fact, the story of Pocahontas and her English 'lovers' has also become a founding myth of America, and a cornerstone of nation-building (the irony being that Thomas Rolfe, the son of John and 'Lady Rebecca' could only settle in Virginia upon his return because other colonial states had banned the act and consequences of miscegenation). In a reframing of Todorov's colonial 'I,' Dearborn reminds one of the fundamental shift that happens in John Smith's account of Pocahontas:

Pocahontas, a sexually and culturally colonized woman, reminds us that, in effect, white males exist as a dominant group only insofar as there are other entities whom they can perceive as ethnic and female, or colonisable. When John Smith – an immigrant, after all – arrived in Jamestown, Pocahontas began to be ethnic.<sup>58</sup>

Though her political significance rests more on her union with John Rolfe, the shrewd tobacco planter enters the story only after John Smith has left Virginia, and after Smith has possibly already romanced Pocahontas and forged the mythic mould which will shape her character in white America right up to the present. In many accounts – like Disney's film – Rolfe does not even appear (though he does in the belated sequel). The main reason for this truncation is the story's deployment in various ideologies. Smith and Pocahontas offer all the frisson of inter-racial romance without the stigma of actual miscegenation, fully manifested in the birth of Thomas Rolfe shortly before the death of his mother.<sup>59</sup> Dearborn argues that "Smith left for us the first erotic version of Pocahontas – a woman whom culture was persistently to eroticize" and later adds that "the Pocahontas tradition has been passed down with more than its share of authorial winks and leers."<sup>60</sup> Compared with Smith's accounts of Pocahontas – one among many

<sup>58</sup> Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters* (1986), 17.

<sup>59</sup> Karen Robertson suggests that "disparagement, the contamination of class" was probably a bigger issue at the time of her marriage than that of race. 'Pocahontas at the Masque' (1996), 560.

<sup>60</sup> Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters* (1986), 9, 113.

“nymphs” who pester him during his stay at Powhatan’s village – Rolfe, in his exhaustingly strategic letter to Governor Dale declaring his wish to marry Pocahontas, stresses that he is “in no way led (so far as men’s weaknesses may permit) with the unbridled desire of carnal affection” and that “it is not any hungry appetite, to gorge myself with incontinency.” In fact, “(if I would, and were so sensually inclined) I might satisfy such desire, though not without a seared conscience, yet with Christians more pleasing to the eye.”<sup>61</sup> Rolfe is thus the dutiful Christian businessman to Smith’s flirtatious, “incontinent” adventurer, to which Malick makes a suitably ripe allusion: when Newport tempts Smith to take up his navigational exploits, he says, “Shall you be a discoverer of passages which you yourself refuse to explore beyond the threshold, that is?” It cannot be accidental that the final words are matched with an image of an uninhibited Pocahontas running through a field of grass.

The spectre of race might be a nineteenth-century concern, but the Pocahontas myth is subject to other censorship too. As Young and Faery point out, many versions of the story omit scenes that don’t fit its overall character: Smith attending a dance of semi-naked Indian girls (Pocahontas among them), Pocahontas’s nakedness in William Strachey’s famous description of her as “well-featured but wanton” cartwheeling, “all the fort over,”<sup>62</sup> and her possible marriage to a Powhatan warrior, Kocoum (also in Strachey). Notably, these incidences all relate to sexual taboos around Pocahontas’s age and the institution of marriage, making Pocahontas, in Young’s words, “the archetypal sacrifice to respectability in America – a victim of what has been *from the beginning our overwhelming anxiety* to housebreak all things in nature, until wilderness and wildness be reduced to a few state parks and a few wild oats” (my emphasis).<sup>63</sup> Young’s poetic anger,

<sup>61</sup> In Billings, *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century* (1975), 216–219. For a discussion of this punning wordplay of discovery and promiscuity within the context of the language of colonial conquest, see Louis Montrose ‘The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery’ (1991), 10–11.

<sup>62</sup> Dearborn, *Pocahontas’s Daughters* (1986), 113.

<sup>63</sup> Young, ‘The Mother of Us All’ (1962), 415.

however, overlooks the fundamental historical fallacy that characterizes the Pocahontas myth: that her meeting with Smith is, in American terms, always the beginning, not the continuation of a European process that had been underway for over a hundred years.

Pocahontas's fulfilment of her role in the discourse of nation-building is impregnable. Even in the light of historical revisionism, she still saves Smith and seldom meets Rolfe, though she is more likely to make Smith understand the error of his ethnocentrism, allowing him to evolve beyond the monstrous prejudices of his fellow colonialists. This is the case in both Disney's *Pocahontas* and a clunky TV film called *Pocahontas: The Legend* made the same year.<sup>64</sup> Curiously, she briefly escapes the confines of predetermined saintliness in *Addams Family Values* (1993) where Wednesday Addams (as Pocahontas) sabotages a summer camp play about Thanksgiving by leading an attack of the camp's misfits and outcasts on the parodically villainous upper-class snobs. While delivering a speech foretelling the destruction of America's native peoples by white invaders, the Pilgrim lead (and chief snob) is scalped, the village set ablaze, and the camp organizers are tied to a giant spit.

A notable – and notoriously scabrous – literary attempt to confound the myth appears in John Barth's postmodern 'revisionist' epic *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960, re-edited in 1967). In two extensive passages to the reader is revealed John Smith's "Secret Historie," and the account of a second man held captive with Smith at Werowocomoco, Sir Henry Burlingame. In the first passage, Smith details a gross eating contest between his despised compatriot and an Indian which, should Burlingame loose, will result in their deaths. In the second passage (written by Burlingame, who despises Smith to a similar degree) the same consequence hangs over their heads if Smith cannot successfully deflower Pocahontas, a task that has proved beyond the abilities of the Powhatan braves.

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<sup>64</sup> In *Pocahontas: The Legend*, Wingfield's villainy is established immediately by his shooting of a bald eagle as the colonists come ashore.

With the use of an alchemical brew learned from “the blackamoors of Africka ... what erst has been more cause for pity than for astonishment, was now in verie sooth a frightful engine.”<sup>65</sup> Barth tackles every trope of political correctness as he puts myths of black masculinity and primitivism to use in supplementing Smith’s (self-proclaimed) skills in seduction as he commits the ritual rape of Pocahontas who enthusiastically awaits it. It is irreverent and, within the context of Barth’s novel, entirely appropriate, but within the “dirty joke of epic proportions”<sup>66</sup> lies a bitter critique of the romanticizing myth of America’s cultural origins.

Malick persists with the myth even as he attempts to recover some of the overlooked historical accounts of the period. This is particularly true of Smith who, like his brooding twin, Witt, in *The Thin Red Line*, develops less as a character than as an ideal representation of man encountering strangeness and engaging with it. Pocahontas, though she has agency, still cannot escape being the sexual object of the colonial gaze: radiant, compassionate, and semi-naked, she is both of nature and in nature. Her spiritual ‘journey’ home recalls Carl Sandburg’s contemplation in Lindsay’s poem: “Pocahontas’ body, lovely as a poplar, sweet as a red haw in November or a pawpaw in May – did she wonder? does she remember – in the dust – in the cool tombs?” In one sense, Malick draws on the modernist project to recover connectedness through myth as seen in the poems of Crane and Lindsay: the most explicit link lies in Pocahontas’s opening voiceover in which she says, “Come spirit, help us to sing the story of our land. You are our mother, we your field of corn. We rise out of the soul of you,” which appears to be an adaptation of two separate lines in Lindsay’s poem: “We rise from out of the soul of her,” and “Because we are her fields of corn.” However, it is in the shifting pronouns that a difference may be detected. Lindsay, like Crane, makes Pocahontas and the land

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<sup>65</sup> Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (2002, originally 1967), 148, 556-565; 730-738.

<sup>66</sup> Faery, *Cartographies of Desire* (1999), 131.

inseparable, whether she is “wooing the forest” in the former, or “our native clay” in the latter. Malick’s *Pocahontas* is ultimately a more complex project.

At the conclusion of the film, with the score swelling over images of ships returning to Virginia, and finally rushing river waters, it is hard to ignore Lindsay’s *Pocahontas* who “heard the forest talking, / And from her grave came walking / Across the sea came walking.”<sup>67</sup> However, the returning ship also bears John Rolfe and his son (even though Thomas did not make the journey),<sup>68</sup> the father of cash crop farming, which would be the major reason for expropriating more land from indigenous people. Malick’s original script promotes the weaving together of Earth Mother and National Matriarch in Rolfe’s voiceover – “She said she would be in our breath and in the ground beneath our feet, bearing us up” (scene 178) – but then concludes on this puzzling note: “The new World pines sway back and forth in ecstasy, forever awaiting the determined sailor” (scene 181). This is as succinct a conflation of the colonial and erotic gaze as one finds anywhere in the discourses of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European discovery. In the film, Rolfe’s voiceover is stripped of its metaphysical musing, leaving behind the bare emotion of grief – “She gently reminded me that all must die. ‘Tis enough,’ she said, ‘that you, our child, could live’” – while the final image is precisely that described in the script but, I would argue, without the colonialist underpinning. The consequence of this change from script to film is a philosophical shift in Malick’s work, one that recognizes the national myths of America as modern nation state, but now sees these myths transcended by a more fundamental concern with human origin and spiritual growth.

This ‘transcendent’ change will form part of the conclusion to this thesis; the following sections will consider *The New World* – and particularly the character of John

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<sup>67</sup> Lindsay, ‘Our Mother Pocahontas.’

<sup>68</sup> Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown 1544-1699*, 40.

Smith – in terms of history and myth as part of an argument that finds the New World also a Lost World, a place that, upon being discovered, is lost forever.

“Scandalous reports of a viperous generation.”

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Historical ‘detail’ takes many forms in film. *Badlands*, for example, is a very free adaptation of a particular event where undisputed facts (such as the names of victims and places) have been changed. And yet in Kit’s James Dean fascination is a striking quality of the original Charlie Starkweather: it represents both the strongest link between the film and the event as well as its most evocative myth. *Days of Heaven* is the most allusive of Malick’s films in its literary and artistic references, but his use of period technology and subtle referencing of historical chronology provides a vision of a society dealing with the fallout of the late nineteenth-century’s rapid industrialization and a nation embracing its role as a global power. In the two ‘post-sabbatical’ films, the engagement with history is more explicit, and the deployment of myth is more layered.

The previous chapter demonstrates not only Malick’s complex adaptation of Jones’s account of combat – the reality of combat and the difficulty of introspection – but also a more direct negotiation of filmic genre in the combat film’s concomitant requirement of verisimilitude. The question of history and detail becomes more interesting here. While Kenneth Jackson debates the type of troop carrier used in the film, John Streamas cites the scene where Dale extracts the gold teeth of dead and dying Japanese as an example of taboo history, quotidian battlefield brutality erased from the depictions of the Pacific War for several reasons (offending a new post-war trade partner and disgracing the valour of veterans, for example).<sup>69</sup> Malick is accused of betraying Jones’s intent, and yet Jones sabotages the historical claims of his own book and emphasizes, instead, the experiential and the psychologically deviant aspects of combat.

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<sup>69</sup> Jackson, *The Thin Red Line* (1999); Streamas, ‘The Greatest Generation Steps Over *The Thin Red Line*’ (2003), 137.

*The New World* (the original script and final product) is packed with references not only to material relating directly to John Smith, John Rolfe, and Pocahontas, but also to accounts of the colonial settlement of America and the extraordinary myths that have sprung from that period. Every adaptation represents a dialogue between myth and history – they cannot operate independently. Davidson and Lytle argue that “the reconstruction of an event is quite clearly different from the event itself.”<sup>70</sup> And if, as Richard Slotkin writes, “myth is the language in which a society remembers its history,” then *The New World* is properly mythic in character *because* of its attention to historical detail.<sup>71</sup> It is precisely the narrative aspects of the history of Jamestown’s early colony that provide the momentum for an exploration of its documentary character which was unarguably part of film’s production.

Though explicitly a narrative centred on the three principal characters, Malick was at pains to recreate as closely as possible the look of Jamestown and the Powhatan villages, even going so far as to attempt a reconstruction of historical Algonquin dialect.<sup>72</sup> Narratives of Jamestown tend to emphasize the same processes (starvation, the establishment of law, half-hearted attempts to find precious metals, treacherous natives resulting in the attacks of 1622 and 1644, and the tobacco boom) punctuated by alarming single incidents, like the man who, during the winter of 1609-1610 – commonly known as the “starving time” – murdered his wife and salted parts of her body for consumption. (Cannibalism represented that most profound descent into the primal savage state, the ultimate failure to uphold European civility). This episode was related in both Smith’s *Generall Historie* of 1624 and also in the Virginia Company’s own *True Declaration of the State of the Colonie in Virginia* of 1610. In the latter account it was not denied, but was seen

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<sup>70</sup> Davidson and Lytle, *After the Fact* (1982), 3.

<sup>71</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), 655.

<sup>72</sup> Wilford, ‘Linguists Find the Words’ (2006).

as an attempt at sabotage by those who had fled the colony during its deepest troubles, the “scandalous reports of a viperous generation.”<sup>73</sup>

Smith’s narratives, too, have become distilled into vivid individual experiences: the mysterious ‘off-screen’ death of his two companions on their journey up the Chickahominy River, rendering his own account unassailable (and parodied by Barth in *The Sot-Weed Factor*); the compass that initially arouses enough curiosity in his captors that his life is spared (recovered by a friendly racoon in Disney’s version); Pocahontas’s intervention and her subsequent relationship with the colony; and Smith’s departure in 1609 due to a powderburn injury, at which point ends part one. There is a dull interregnum before Rolfe appears, whereupon the story picks up with salvation and marriage for Pocahontas, childbirth, fame in London, and death at the outset of the voyage home. The story has prevailed, as Young has written, “despite the profound awkwardness of a climax that comes in the very opening scene.”<sup>74</sup>

One has to ask, then, what is historical about *The New World*? As with any purportedly ‘historical’ film, particular inaccuracies have been noted by a range of observers, from a contemporary Patowomeck chief doubting the infamous betrayal of Pocahontas to the English by the Patowomecks in exchange for a copper kettle, to the observation that the real Captain Newport suffered the rather obvious disfigurement of having only one arm (having lost the other while privateering off the coast of Cuba in 1590).<sup>75</sup> And while Malick has cast the two principals quite close to the age of the real characters, Colin Farrell’s contemporary tattoos are not hidden, as is common in period films. The more significant historical qualities of the film concern the depiction of the Jamestown colony and the ‘reinvention’ of John Smith himself.

<sup>73</sup> In Warner *Captain John Smith* (2004), XIV: 3, 7, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Young, *The Mother of Us All* (1962), 399.

<sup>75</sup> Zitz, ‘Stafford History goes to Hollywood’ (2005); Andrews, ‘Christopher Newport of Limehouse, Mariner’ (1954), 30.

In building the replica James Fort close to its original site and based on its original plans, Malick also emphasizes its haphazard construction, almost constant dilapidation and the paralleled instability of its bickering leadership. As many historians have noted, leadership of the Jamestown colony in the early years was a chaotic and seditious affair. The first President of the council, Edward Maria Wingfield, was deposed after only four months and replaced by John Ratcliffe – who, it was revealed, was going by an alias, and who was later killed in a skirmish just before Smith returned to England. Smith, himself, was President for a while, but was also (by his own account) sentenced to die after being found guilty (in absentia) for the deaths of two men killed on the Chickahominy trip.

As is common in historical films, a good deal of compression takes place in terms of character and narrative, and it is here that Malick not only follows conventions but also demonstrates a skilful appreciation of the historical context. In constructing something close to a villain (and given that Smith had a fractious relationship with everyone at Jamestown at some time or another) Malick has gathered together the ‘villains’ into the person of Wingfield. Rather than combine Ratcliffe’s false identity and his attempts to have Smith executed into a suitable rival to Smith, Malick picks out the well-documented rivalry between Smith and Wingfield, particularly Wingfield’s allegedly weak leadership and scorn for Smith’s origins. Smith wrote in his *Generall Historie* that his imprisonment on the passage from the Canary Islands issued from “the scandalous suggestion of some of the chiefs (envying his repute) who fancied he intended to usurp the government.”<sup>76</sup> The crucial element here is the parenthesis. In a typically succinct exchange early in the film, Captain Argall suggests that Smith lead the exploratory party up river. Wingfield objects nervously: “What are his qualifications?” to which a voice off screen replies, “Those you lack.”

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<sup>76</sup> In Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), V:8.

In order to dramatize Wingfield's antagonism towards Smith, Malick produces an invented scene that compresses both characters and chronology: in a triangular face-off worthy of Sergio Leone, Argall shoots Wingfield as Wingfield is about to execute Smith. Argall (who, in reality, would not arrive in Jamestown for another two years) publicly reveals Wingfield's secret identity ("Woodson"), overlaying Wingfield with the historical Ratcliffe.

Malick, however, retains a few aspects common to stories about the council's leadership. Wingfield charges Smith (as Ratcliffe and Archer had done at the time) "under a chapter in Leviticus" for the deaths of his two companions on the Chickahominy expedition, revealing the colony's 'kangaroo court' attitude bred of factionalism, and shot through with puritanical zeal. Argall interrupts Wingfield by accusing him of hoarding food for himself, to which the character Lewes adds, "He does nothing but tend his own pot, his spit and oven" a charge made by John Martin originally, and contained in Wingfield's *Discourse of Virginia*, his own version of his experiences.<sup>77</sup> Just after Wingfield is pronounced dead, another man says, "Were we in England I should be ashamed to let my servant keep company with such fellows," to which Lewes retorts, "You never had a servant, you were a servant." Lewes's response plays up the ill feeling around class in the fort, while the first comment bears a striking resemblance to that made by Wingfield on Smith's initial omission from the council; "If he were in England, I would think scorn this man should be in my company."<sup>78</sup> Of note, in this regard, is that in his earliest account, *A True Relation* (1608), no mention is made of Levitical law or a death sentence, and that neither Wingfield nor Newport mentions Smith's imprisonment on the Atlantic in their versions of events.<sup>79</sup> Given that the record of leadership of the colony is so variously described by different parties, in all this it can

<sup>77</sup> Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), VI: 21.

<sup>78</sup> In Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown* (2005), 36.

<sup>79</sup> In Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), VI: 32, 34; V: 9.

be said that Malick employs “true invention,” which in Robert Rosenstone’s words, is a narrative construction that “engages the discourse of history.”<sup>80</sup>

The reason for Malick’s compression in this respect may be as follows. His deliberate reassembly of the historical record does not seek to demean Ratcliffe or Wingfield, but, along with Argall’s interventions, seeks to show the lack of trust and the manoeuvring for power that characterizes the council during this period. If one takes into consideration Newport’s arbitrary delegation of an unseen Radcliffe (sic) to lead the colony in his absence early in the film – and, later, his equally cursory countermanding of Argall’s authority – it becomes clear that Malick has chosen to ignore the council’s political structure and, in fact, one of the colony’s significant historical claims; that when “the general assembly convened in 1619 it became the first representative body in the English colonies.”<sup>81</sup> As with the Powhatan confederacy and its organization, Malick is less interested in the political complexity of the Jamestown colony and focuses more on how this new experience undermines the political and social structures with which they arrive.

Argall is present earlier in the story because his primary role is to kidnap Pocahontas and he thus compresses the awkward gap in the original story. Smith had left by the end of 1609, and Argall only kidnapped Pocahontas in 1613; at this point, Rolfe was already at Jamestown, and “was raising his first good crop of tobacco.”<sup>82</sup> Argall twice fosters a mutiny by stepping away from the president and making public accusations for all to hear, first against Wingfield, then against Smith, where he voices the allegation (noted above) that Smith wished to “make himself a king by marrying Pocahontas.” His untrustworthiness, politicking and cruelty, culminate in the kidnapping of Pocahontas

<sup>80</sup> Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past* (1995), 72.

<sup>81</sup> Davidson & Lytle, *After the Fact* (1982), 13.

<sup>82</sup> Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown* (1980), 36.

and his brutal punishment of Smith. “Conscience is a nuisance,” he says to Pocahontas on the ship back to Jamestown, “a fly, a barking dog.”

Compression of a different sort comes to light in the depiction of conditions at Jamestown as Malick pans for nuggets in the alluvium of the period. In tersely edited series of shots he catalogues the social ills of the time and place: cruel punishments, appalling depravity, and clawing desperation. In a sharp turnabout, Newport moves from avuncular peacemaker to brutalizing enforcer when he orders a man to be branded and have his ears cut off as punishment, one presumes, for stealing food. Malick emphasizes the pitiable incident by depicting the thief as a scared, dishevelled character. In another scene, a dead man is found in the centre of the fort, his hands having been eaten, while men are later seen boiling their leather belts for food. Upon his return to the fort after his sojourn at Werowocomoco, Smith is accosted by ragged looking boys, demanding food, and telling increasingly terrible stories about the suffering of the colonists; and Rolfe’s recognition of Pocahontas comes when he sees her offering water to a man pilloried in the street. All of these represent aspects of the historical record, from the cruel punishments meted out for various crimes, to the incident of cannibalism that appears in most Jamestown narratives, and the terrible conditions faced by children – often orphans – who had to endure a long period of service. Davidson and Lytle relate the story of Richard Hatch who

had commented, in a private house, on the execution of a recent settler, one Richard Cornish, for sodomy ... For this offence he was to be “whipped from the fort to the gallows and from thence to be whipped back again, and be set upon the Pillory and there to loose one of his ears. Although Hatch had nearly completed his term of service – to Governor George Yeardley, who also sat on the council – he was ordered to begin his term anew.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Davidson and Lytle, *After the Fact* (1982), 21.

This passage reveals not only the cruelty of the period, but also – and this is something that Malick does not directly address – the terrible imbalance between the gentlemen and planters, and those who made the crossing as workers. Morgan notes that this excessively punitive approach continued after women had arrived at the colony, bringing with them (hopefully) the right ingredients for civility and growth. Two settlers (a man and a woman), along with some of their servants had beaten to death two other servants, Elizabeth Abbott and Elias Hinton, the former suffering five hundred lashes before she died. Morgan notes that not only is there no indication that the couple were punished for the crime, but that Abbott was returned to her master and mistress when she came seeking help.<sup>84</sup> This incident certainly casts a critical light on Morison's bustling description of the reforms that helped turn the colony around during the first tobacco boom.

The Company then undertook to recruit “young and uncorrupt maids” and ship them to Jamestown, where a planter who wanted a wife paid the Company 150 pounds of best leaf tobacco. Every lass promptly found a husband, and every married couple had the right to build a house for themselves, whilst bachelors continued to bunk in barracks.<sup>85</sup>

Morison's military approach to history gleams like a polished boot throughout this passage, but it is not difficult to detect beneath the cheerfully prompt marriages between “lass” and husband a hellish future for an “uncorrupt maid” bought in exchange for tobacco, and shipped to a colony for the purposes of breeding and working where the mortality rate was more than fifty percent (perhaps as high as seventy-five).<sup>86</sup>

Newport may dispense brutal justice at one point, but overall he remains a sympathetic figure and the colony's paramount leader under the auspices of King James. Parts of his dialogue reflect the directives of the Virginia Company at the time – seeking

<sup>84</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), 127.

<sup>85</sup> Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (1965), 53.

<sup>86</sup> Davidson and Lytle, *After the Fact* (1982), 15.

a route to the Indies, for example – as well as its policy on indigenous peoples. The Company's instruction "not to offend the Naturals"<sup>87</sup> is spoken by Newport, as is the desire not to behave like conquistadors which, despite peace with Spain, was significant in profoundly anti-Catholic times: "We are not here to pillage and raid. We are here to establish a colony." In his longest speech, he produces the mythic ideal of the founding of the United States of America.

[voice fades in] ... we shall lose not only our lives and our land, but our eternal birthright. Look beyond these gates. Eden lies about us still. We have escaped the Old World and its bondage. Let us make a new beginning and create a fresh example for humanity. We are the pioneers of the world, the advance guard sent on through the wilderness to break a new path. And our youth is our strength, and our inexperience our wisdom. God has given us a promised land, a great inheritance. Woe betide if ever we turn our back on him. Let us prepare a land where a man may rise to his true stature, a land of the future, a new kingdom of the spirit.

There is a grand vision here: sanctioned by God and framed in explicitly Biblical terms, it also declares the navigational superiority and moral courage of the colonists in their escape from old (corrupt) Europe to a new land of opportunity, freedom and equality. It is significantly different in tone to Smith's speech (cited above) which emphasizes equality and hard labour rather than destiny and genius. Captain of the expedition, delegator of responsibility, father figure to Smith, Malick's Newport provides the limping, dislocated colony with some semblance of purpose and hope.

One salve for the sore relations in the original colony was the Reverend Robert Hunt who was the expedition's minister. Though his time at Jamestown was miserable – his library was destroyed in a fire in 1608, and he died a short time thereafter – Hunt, by many accounts, appears to have been a trusted mediator amongst the quarrelling leadership. Warner notes that he is "the only one of these first pioneers of whom

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<sup>87</sup> In Nash, 'The Image of the Indian in the Southern Colonial Mind' (1972), 214.

everybody speaks well.”<sup>88</sup> However, Malick not only excises him from *The New World*, but also characterizes the colony’s religious temper as aberrant and almost deranged. Other than a brief reference to the dead Reverend Whitaker, in whose house Pocahontas is installed, there is no sign of religious leadership or council in the film (Alexander Whitaker was, in fact, very much alive when Pocahontas arrived in Jamestown as it was he and Governor Thomas Dale who oversaw her religious education.) Even Pocahontas’s marriage to John Rolfe – conducted by the Reverend Richard Buck – is here administered by Captain Newport, augmenting his role as the colony’s father figure.<sup>89</sup>

Instead, Malick produces the same jarring note as he did in *The Thin Red Line*, a muttering shell-shocked John Savage who rants around the fort, spewing fragmented Puritanism.<sup>90</sup> “Take away from me the noise of your music and your songs, so I will not hear the melody of thy harp,” he shouts, as Malick amplifies the discord with a superimposed second monologue and the image of a strange spider crawling over scalloped lichen. Another unnamed character becomes the film’s one true demon, his every phrase a spitting tirade. When Smith is being lashed under the orders of Argall, the viewer is presented with an uncomfortable close-up from Smith’s point of view of this character whose garbled vicious speech – punctuated by the crack of a whip – is so alarming as to be almost Pythonesque.

Oh, oh, oh, high and mighty, lord and ruler. No! No! We must have order, huh? We can’t have everyone running around giving themselves airs and graces, ‘cause then, then we would have chaos, huh? Scream. Getting the strokes. You say, you say, “Friend, friend, dear friend, I pray to the gods for your good health for the rest of my life I will.”

<sup>88</sup> Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), VI: 36.

<sup>89</sup> Reverend Whitaker: Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country* (2001), 72; Reverend Buck: Bredenbaugh, *Jamestown* (1980), 37.

<sup>90</sup> The character played by John Savage is named in the credits only as ‘Savage’.

Earlier, Malick characteristically interrupts the film's one battle as Smith attempts to sue for peace, though by now the situation has escalated beyond his control. Selway first voices the fundamental colonial complaint – “How can you own land? This earth was made for such that shall improve it, and knows how to live” – before the unnamed man steps forward: “Seeds of sulphur! Sons of fire! Devils in the mouth of hell!” A shot is then fired and hostilities continue.

The decision to omit largely the religious piety of the colony's population is perhaps a comment on piety itself, meaning both devout and hypocritically virtuous. Even if the English colonial enterprise was less explicitly hypocritical in its desire to execute the will of God in the New World than the Spanish, the English were not entirely critical of Spanish policy, seen when Richard Eden describes “the Spaniards, as the ministers of grace and liberty, [who] brought unto these new Gentiles the victory of Christ's death, whereby they, being subdued with the worldly sword, are now made free from the bondage of Satan's tyranny.”<sup>91</sup> However, Malick balances the outbursts of Savage and the other man with a sombre internal monologue from Smith as the battle ends: “Lord, turn not away Thy face. You desire not the death of a sinner. I have gone away from You, I have not hearkened to Your voice. Let us not be brought to nothing.”

Colonial Christianity thus seems based upon judgment, veering between the hope of paradise and the threat of apocalypse, its proclamations violently at odds with the spirituality espoused by Pocahontas and taken up, to some extent, by Smith. This critique of colonial piety is part of a larger colonial critique involving industry, land, trade, and perceptions of civilization against which Smith and Pocahontas's agonized spiritual journeys are played out. While *The New World's* narrative context is impressively historical, these two journeys are profoundly mythic.

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<sup>91</sup> In Porter, *The Inconstant Savage* (1979), 27.

**“Real what I thought a dream”**

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One could argue that, given the fragmentary and mostly circumstantial accounts of Pocahontas the person, invention is required on the part of the writer to transform an apocryphal story into a full-blown mythic narrative. Thus, one might take a brief comment made by John Chamberlain during Pocahontas’s time in London – that “she is on her return (though sore against her will) if the wind would come about to send them away” – and propose that her reluctance to leave London supports the view that she fell in love with English culture and ‘came over,’ so to speak, from her own.<sup>92</sup> It is upon interpretations such as this and, of course, Smith’s own words, that the ‘official’ myth is founded, as limned by Lemay: “Captain John Smith and Pocahontas were not just two star-crossed lovers; their story is a parable about the love and the unity of the races of man.”<sup>93</sup>

However, Pocahontas’s only reported words have generated the counter-myth where political machinations compete with the protestations of love.

We need not idealize either the motives of Powhatan or the unanimity of his people to appreciate the genuine, if fragile, potential that Pocahontas’s adoption and marriage represented or the ways in which that potential resonated with traditional Native practices. When Pocahontas took the name Rebecca and went to live among the Europeans, she did so not to abandon her culture but to incorporate the English into her Native world, to make it possible for them to live in Indian country by Indian rules. In this light, it could not be more wrong to assert that she broke decisively with her people.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> In Robertson, ‘Pocahontas at the Masque’ (1996), 552.

<sup>93</sup> Lemay, *An Early American Reader* (1988), 390.

<sup>94</sup> Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 78.

The particular focus of the following discussion is how Malick retains much of the mythic Pocahontas whose journey really drives the film, but that he completely mythologizes the historical Smith (of whom we know a fair amount) to assert the power of the indigenous origin in American culture. This might appear identical to Disney's project in *Pocahontas* where Smith is also made to understand cultural relativism in the lyrics of Pocahontas's song, 'Colours of the Wind': "You think the only people who are people / Are people who think and look like you." However, I think Strong is right when she peels away the lesson on tolerance to reveal the film's "ideological work," which is, "in the end ... to level the English and Powhatan people to the same state of ethnocentric brutishness, portraying ignoble savagism as natural and universal rather than having particular cultural and historical roots."<sup>95</sup> Malick's project is, as one would expect, not didactic as Disney's is (understandably, Disney's message is targeted at children and, as many reviewers have pointed out, its intentions are noble even if the execution is problematic).<sup>96</sup> However, there is still "ideological work" to be done. Malick does not posit a simplistic relativist argument, that the Indian and the colonist have much to learn from each other; neither does he propose an obvious opposition between Old World and New – the fort may be a dreadful place compared to Werowocomoco, but there is genuine fascination from Pocahontas and Opechancanough upon their arrival in England.

Instead he tries to capture the strangeness of encounter, not only between people, but also the encounter with the artefacts of culture. For example, Newport famously planted a large wooden cross dedicated to King James, symbolically claiming Virginia for the English. Exploiting the barely formed channels of communication that existed with the Powhatan, Newport explained the strange object by saying that "the two

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<sup>95</sup> Strong, 'Animated Indians' (1996), 418.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. See also Edgerton and Jackson, 'Redesigning Pocahontas' (1996).

arms of the cross symbolized Newport and Powhatan: 'the fastening of it in the midst was their united league.'<sup>97</sup> Malick includes the planting of the cross, but there is no ceremony or communication: shorn of its false 'explanation' the cross is shot from an imposing low angle while curious Indians test its resoluteness by pushing against it. Similarly, the touching and smelling of clothes, people, and books by the Powhatan suggests an epistemology different to the written which characterizes the colonial enterprise. This discourse of conquest is alluded to in the maps and etchings which accompany the opening credits – rivers branching out into the hinterland driven by the naming power of cartographer/explorers like Smith – while the fulfilment of this westward drive occurs in the second half of the final credits. However, 'discovery' carries a double meaning for Malick: in a European context, discovery involves the claiming of what existed all along; but the Powhatan also 'discovered' the English in their contact with another culture through the physical presence and the artefacts of the colonialists.

Within this context, Malick reverts to the mythic by promoting Pocahontas and Smith as representatives of their cultures. This is not only mythic in the sense that the encounter has "tended to dominate thinking about the relations between the English and the Powhatan at this particular juncture," elevating the two figures to a point where "her motivations and his veracity, have received disproportionate attention;"<sup>98</sup> but in emphasizing the strangeness of the contact, Malick overlooks the admittedly complex nature of colonial contact in America for a century before the Jamestown voyages. As Richter argues:

[North Americans Indians] probably heard mangled tales of strange newcomers long before they ever laid eyes on one in the flesh, and, when rare and novel items reached their villages through longstanding channels of

<sup>97</sup> In Porter, *The Inconstant Savage* (1979), 287, quoting Gabriel Archer.

<sup>98</sup> Williamson, 'Pocahontas and Captain John Smith' (1992), 373.

trade and communication, they discovered European *things* long before they confronted European *people*.<sup>99</sup>

The Smith/Pocahontas myth is the vehicle for a particular approach to historical detail and Malick's own unique approach to narrative, and it is in this latter aspect of the film that *The New World* attempts a more radical interpretation. In the most explicit display of continuity with his other films, he employs the voiceover not only to provide access to characters' thoughts, but also manipulates the conventional relationship between sound and image in the diegesis. More than in his other films, however, what we hear departs from what we see: speeches bridge montage sequences, interior voices 'converse' almost musically, and external and internal diegetic speech flow together. While the exterior Smith might follow his historical example, the interior Smith is a reconstruction promoting the film's mythic identification.

At the heart of Smith's story – and Malick's invention of him – is the captivity episode and the "rescue" at Werowocomoco. Malick again alters the sequence of events, reversing the narrative so that the rescue is followed by Smith's growing bond with Pocahontas. Originally, Smith spent weeks in captivity during which time he was marched to various other villages (on the suspicion that he might be responsible for the kidnapping of Indians some time previously), and being "fatted" up for what he thought was his execution and possible consumption in a cannibal feast. The film's sequence of events omits the confusing captivity narrative, and instead produces a logical space for Pocahontas and Smith to strengthen their relationship, while its idyllic qualities (seen in the free-moving camera, plaintive Mozart piece, and conversing voiceovers) emphasize, by contrast, the squalor, disharmony and volatility of the situation upon his return to Jamestown.

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<sup>99</sup> Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country* (2001), 11 (original emphasis).

It is worth considering this sequence in detail because it is here that Malick produces his most significant historical sleight of hand. Starting with the scene of Smith's capture, Malick produces a succinct compression of its most symbolic moment – the compass and his discourse with Opechancanough on “the roundness of the earth and skies, the sphere of the Sun, Moon, and Stars, and how the Sun did chase the night round about the world continually.”<sup>100</sup> Swiftly, Smith is marched to Werowocomoco for his audience with Powhatan, a setting rendered frightening and strange by the costuming of the warriors and the angled lighting. In the first draft of the script, the encounter is burdened with explicit citations of classical Western myth: Powhatan is flanked by “two young hermaphrodites [who] wave fans to make a breeze ... It seems to Smith that he has stepped out of his everyday world and fallen in with a race of fawns, satyrs – mythical people” (scene 40). As the tension builds in the film, there is a series of jump cuts to a man adorned with feathers as well as the disorienting position of Powhatan who appears seated and lit from the top one moment, then standing and lit by firelight the next.<sup>101</sup> The significance of the feathered man is that, along with the shots of women attending to Smith after the “rescue,” Malick strengthens the interpretation of the “rescue” as a ritual.

Pocahontas's intervention is followed by a strange scene where Smith is surrounded by women who appear to be performing a rite which, given the ensuing scenes of playful camaraderie, makes him a kinsmen to the Powhatan. It does echo a scene in Smith's experience, though the context was very different. Smith and Newport made two journeys to meet with Powhatan, the second involved ‘crowning’ Powhatan in a ceremony meant to encourage friendly relations and make him a prince to King James: it was a task that Newport was commissioned to complete, and with which Smith

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<sup>100</sup> In Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), VIII: 25. From Smith's *Generall Historie*.

<sup>101</sup> Though he does not appear in the credits, this mysterious dancing figure seen just before Smith's “execution” could be the shaman and strategist, Nemattanew (known to the English as “Jack of the Feathers”).

vehemently disagreed. While guests of Powhatan, Smith witnessed a dance, from which this is an excerpt:

These fiends with most hellish shouts and cries, rushing from among the trees, cast themselves in a ring about the fire, singing and dancing with most excellent ill-variety, oft falling into their infernal passions, and solemnly again to sing and dance; having spent nearly an hour in this *Mascarado*, as they entered, in like manner they departed.

Having reaccommodated themselves, they solemnly invited him to their lodgings, where he was no sooner within the house, but all these Nymphs more tormented him than ever, with crowding, pressing, and hanging about him, most tediously crying, 'Love you not me? Love you not me?'<sup>102</sup>

Though Smith is an intelligent observer, it is possible that "Pocahontas was part of a culture whose customs – sexual, spiritual, and social – the English were more often than not at a loss to understand, rendering the descriptions themselves questionable."<sup>103</sup>

Malick's original script, in its extensive conversation between Powhatan and Pocahontas over Smith, definitely supports the love and compassion argument. Powhatan says, "How can you stand up for this creature?" to which Pocahontas replies, "What has he done to you? He's gentle. He's not afraid." Later, Pocahontas the rebellious daughter emerges: when Powhatan asks, "Would you embarrass me?" she replies, "If I have to." As in the film, Smith is carried out of the lodge on peoples' shoulders, but where the script cuts straight to the first of many long conversations between Smith and Pocahontas, the film continues with the ritual. This suggests that the fundamental meaning of the "rescue" might have changed in Malick's mind, and it sets up the major switch in Smith's character.

While Smith is teaching Pocahontas English words, there are several scenes representing village life; woman picking corn, and men practicing combat, for example.

<sup>102</sup> In Warner, *Captain John Smith* (2004), XI: 7,8. From Smith's *Generall Historie*.

<sup>103</sup> Faery, *Cartographies of Desire* (1999), 111.

Then Smith is seen holding a baby, and the shot is accompanied by the following voiceover:

They are gentle, loving, faithful, lacking in all guile and trickery. The words denoting lying, deceit, greed, envy, slander, and forgiveness have never been heard. They have no jealousy, no sense of possession.

These words, along with his speech about building “a true commonwealth” from “hard work, self-reliance, and virtue” are the core of Malick’s Smith. He is a man who recognizes opportunity, but not the banal quest for gold at the cost of permanent settlement. He shares this quality with his historical self: Smith, for example, lobbied Sir Francis Bacon in 1618 to endorse a New England expedition based on Dutch fishing successes in those waters, arguing that “the Hollanders are an example of my projects, whose endeavours by fishing cannot be suppressed by all the king of Spain’s golden powers.”<sup>104</sup>

However, the sensitivity to his surroundings suggested by his speech is a clever transference that makes Smith a composite of the several prevailing colonial attitudes. In the original script, this speech appears as follows:

“We have never in the world so far encountered a kinder people,” wrote James [sic] Barlowe, captain of Raleigh’s ill-fated 1584 expedition. “We were entertained with friendship and were given everything they could provide. We found (them) gentle, loving, and faithful, lacking all guile and trickery. It was if they lived in a golden age of their own” (scene 19).

It is a curious extract because there is no indication of who speaks these words, or whether they should appear on the screen. The words actually belong to Arthur Barlow from the first Roanoke expedition, and appear in his account as follows: “We found the people most gentle, loving, and faithful, void of all guile, and treason, and such as lived

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<sup>104</sup> In Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown* (2005), 223.

after the manner of the golden age."<sup>105</sup> In this, Barlow was clearly speaking in the spirit of the age, for one finds two other passages that are strikingly similar. Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Dominican friar who famously excoriated the Spanish for their atrocities in Mexico and Peru, described the natives who suffered this genocide as

very simple, without subtlety, or craft, without malice, very obedient, and very faithful ... very humble, very patient, very desirous of peace making and peaceful, without brawls and strugglings, without quarrels, without strife, without rancour or hatred, by no means desirous of revengement.<sup>106</sup>

Around that time in 1580, Michel de Montaigne published the first version of his *Essays* which were translated into English for the first time in 1603. In 'On the Cannibals,' he writes: "The very words that import lying, falsehood, treason, dissimulations, covetousness, envy, detraction, and pardon, were never heard of amongst them." The archaic form of this translation is strikingly similar to that used by Malick in Smith's speech: whereas Barlow's words describe the people's attitudes, Montaigne goes further by saying that *the very words themselves* do not exist in their language.<sup>107</sup>

The words Smith speaks are thus not just Barlow's but represent, broadly, a particular attitude to colonial encounters in England towards the end of the sixteenth century. However, what is more interesting is the various contexts of these similar utterances which Malick amputates, allowing Smith's solitary speech to stand alone in the film as the obvious alternative to the other colonists' declamations of devilry and barbarism. For example, Barlow's description of the North Carolina Indians was not entirely rosy; he also related how their wars were "very cruel and bloody, by reason whereof, and of their civil dissentions, which have happened of late years amongst them,

<sup>105</sup> In Jones, *O Strange New World* (1964), 19. From Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*, Volume VIII.

<sup>106</sup> In Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility* (1980), 26. The first English translations were available in 1583.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 28. Compare this translation to Screech's translation: "Among them you hear no words for treachery, lying, cheating, avarice, envy, backbiting or forgiveness." 'On the Cannibals' (2003), 233.

the people are marvellously wasted, and in some places, the Country left desolate.”<sup>108</sup> This is no innocent description of the political situation he encounters, because it feeds into a growing belief amongst English planners at the time that the best approach for prospective settlers was to ally with ‘friendly’ Indians by helping them out against other ‘hostile’ groups.

A more fundamental aspect of these passages is the tendency to reduce indigenous peoples to simple innocents and uncorrupted children. For example, Sheehan notes that de Las Casas, “believed that American natives should be transformed into good Christians,” and that, despite their gentleness (as opposed to Spanish brutality), “they seemed to possess none of the complex substance out of which culture takes form.”<sup>109</sup>

Malick’s Smith is no friar, then. He seems closer to Montaigne who criticizes ancient thinkers for their “ingenious fictions about Man’s blessed early state,” but who could only sustain his criticism of European culture “by opposing European life to the pristine design of nature represented by the societies of the New World.” Ultimately, the only alternative offered for native peoples is to be as gentle and trusting as Europeans are brutal and deceitful: “Those peoples, then, seem to me to be barbarous only in that they have been hardly fashioned by the mind of man, still remaining close neighbours to their original state of nature.” It is, of course, through embracing of this “original state” that Montaigne is able to defend the act of cannibalism on relative terms: “while judging correctly of their wrong-doings, we should be so blind to our own.”<sup>110</sup>

The Smith of Malick’s *New World* is thus a transformation of the man who was untrusting and sometimes brutal in his practical approach to surrounding Indian groups.

<sup>108</sup> In Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), 26.

<sup>109</sup> In Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility* (1980), 26.

<sup>110</sup> Montaigne: “ingenious fictions” and “original state of nature,” ‘On the Cannibals’ (2003), 232. Montaigne’s opposition to European culture: Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility* (1980), 27. Montaigne’s defence of cannibalism: ‘On the Cannibals’ (2003), 235.

As impressed as he may have been by their skill and bravery in battle and the structure of their society, they were firstly an obstacle to the establishment of a free, unencumbered life for settlers in the New World.

The context for Smith's speech on innocence that Malick does offer lies in the conclusion: "Real what I thought a dream." At this point he could be an earlier incarnation of Private Witt, a military man fulfilling his role in the institutions of Western society, yet unable to exist on those terms alone. Smith and Witt seek understanding in their sojourns among indigenous people: however, just as Witt cannot take off his dog-tags – can never be 'not-army' – Smith cannot resist the pull of discovery in its acquisitive European sense. Upon his return to Jamestown, Smith begins to equivocate. "Tell her. Tell her what? It was a dream, now I am awake. I let her love me. I made her love me." During their final meeting, he returns to his earlier belief, "I thought it was a dream, what we knew in the forest. It's the only truth."

The unstable border between dream and reality is a defining feature of all Malick's films. "What's keepin' us from reachin' out, touching the glory?" inquires the voice in *The Thin Red Line*. It seems that "the glory" comes only in death and dreams and Witt comes close in his island sojourn, only he can't lose that figurative connection to the reality that recuperates him. Smith the dreamer is all Malick, not because the historical Smith lacked whimsy or ambition, but because Smith becomes the typical male protagonist in Malick's films: a man of "hidden fire" who keeps striving for a new beginning based on labour, freedom and equality. Like Kit, Bill, Witt and Bell, his idealism is not without its faults and his journey is always a negotiation between the dream and the reality which always escapes his control. Whether it is shooting someone because he feels he has no other choice, stabbing a man in self-defence, volunteering for a doomed mission, or trying vainly to stop a bloody conflict, Malick's man is always "seeking his Indies."

## Conclusion

### Remembering the Garden

[Man] faces the psychological and biological crisis of living in a world that has come to be shaped in such a way that it precisely matches his world view – i.e., in a man-made environment that is increasingly mechanistic, atomized, soulless, and self-destructive.<sup>1</sup>

For, the suppressed infantile desires unleashed in the promise of a primal garden were inevitably frustrated and thwarted by the equally pressing need to turn nature into wealth. In a capital-accumulating economy, this demanded, on the one hand, competition ... and, on the other, a willingness to violate the very generosity that had once promised an end to such patterns.<sup>2</sup>

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In seeking to draw together the relationship between myth and history in Malick's four films, this conclusion will also address the argument that *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* expand on the themes in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. Simply put, *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* are representations of competing nineteenth-century American myths – the wilderness and the garden, related by the transforming power of the machine – while *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* explore 'the golden age', both as an apocalyptic myth and a historical myth that underlies America's desire to set itself apart from Europe, to define itself in terms of newness. While prognostication is not the province of this thesis, Malick's latest project, *Tree of Life*, could prove to be a radical development of this apocalyptic theme. The failed returns of Smith and Witt to their perceptions of the golden age, and nature's ineffable elision of human agency that closes the narratives of the two recent films suggest that Malick is digging ever deeper into myths that have perpetuated America's national sense of self.

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<sup>1</sup> Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (1996), 442. See author's note (468-469) on the contextual use of the word 'man' in the argument.

<sup>2</sup> Kolodny, *The Land Before Her* (1984), 4.

Henry Nash Smith argues that in nineteenth-century America, “the forces which were to control the future did not originate in the picturesque Wild West beyond the agricultural frontier, but in the domesticated West that lay behind it.”<sup>3</sup> Smith sees Frederick Jackson Turner, and his Frontier (hypo)thesis, as not only the most famous proponent of the ‘myth of the garden’ but as the inheritor of an historical tradition that stretches back before America’s coming of age as a nation. For Smith, the ‘myth of the garden’ lies at the heart of America’s development in the nineteenth-century – through the nurturing of democracy – and also its utopian isolationism as an “introspective, even narcissistic symbol.”<sup>4</sup> The garden here is no longer Eden, but the tended and ‘productive’ lands that follow the advancing frontier, enabling settlement and prosperity to those who seek a new beginning. The passages by Tarnas and Kolodny at the head of this conclusion suggest not only the gendered language of this transformation (as Kolodny discusses in her earlier study, *The Lay of the Land*), but also the consequences of ‘shaping’ (or violating) nature in the mind and in practice, which I explored in chapter one. For, coiled in the garden are two paradoxes that will fatally undermine the myth from within while the utter disillusionment of World War I will make a return to the garden impossible.

The political paradox of the agrarian ideal lay in Turner’s conception of it: “He had based his highest value, democracy, on free land. But the westward advance of civilization across the continent had caused free land to disappear. What then was to become of democracy?”<sup>5</sup> The economic paradox of the agrarian ideal was rooted in the most divine quality of the myth of the garden: the new land, ‘discovered’ in the seventeenth century, ‘won’ in the eighteenth century, and ‘opened’ in the nineteenth century, was so rich and life-giving that it produced too much. With the production of

<sup>3</sup> Smith, H.N. *Virgin Land* (1978), 123.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

surplus came trade, and with trade the means to trade – steamboats, and the ultimate “machine in the garden”, the railroad.<sup>6</sup>

In the long run the virtuous yeoman could no more stand his ground against the developing capitalism of merchant and banker and manufacturer in the Northwest than he could against the plantation system in the Southwest.<sup>7</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, the historical John Smith’s ideal settler “planting and building a foundation for his Prosperity, got from the rude earth, by God’s blessing and his own industry, without any prejudice to any,” had become a driver on one of “Magnus Derrick’s thirty-three grain drills, each with its eight hoes ... clamouring past, like an advance of military, seeding the ten thousand acres of the great ranch.”<sup>8</sup>

Kit, Malick’s first doomed male, is similarly divided between the myth of the frontier and the reality of Fort Dupree, South Dakota. Not a cowboy but a man with cowboy boots, no range to ride but feedlots to patrol, Kit is dimly aware of the ‘new frontier’ that will make President John F. Kennedy and Neil Armstrong famous, though it is an unimaginable version of the frontier he was born too late to experience. Regardless, he and Holly fully embrace the frontier myth, for a while at least. Holly may read tabloid gossip to Kit in the car but, as I cited earlier, her narration is pure western: “Through desert and mesa, across the endless miles of open range, we made our headlong way, steering by the telephone lines toward the mountains of Montana.” This “open range” is Turner’s “rejected land” conquered not by scientific farming – as he proposed in 1914 – but by telecommunications networks and oil pipelines from which Kit and Holly steal gas.<sup>9</sup> As Nash notes, the featureless plains form a counter-myth to the

<sup>6</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), particularly chapter one, ‘Sleepy Hollow, 1844’.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>8</sup> In Lemay, *An Early American Reader* (1988), 10. From John Smith’s *A Description of New England* (1616); Norris, *The Octopus*, Book I: 170.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, ‘The West and American Ideals’ (1962), 294.

garden of agricultural development,<sup>10</sup> and represent the perfect space for outlawry, self-definition and the dream of a new beginning. Tearing across the flat prairie, the blue mountains of Montana are tantalizingly visible for Kit, though he never seems to get any closer. This is the first appearance in Malick of “blue hills” and the unconquerable distance that lies between them and the observer (in *The Thin Red Line*, Bell longs to “get to those other shores, to those blue hills” even as his wife back home plans to leave him).

Bill, the restless, ambitious steel-worker of *Days of Heaven*, is a particle in the fallout from the failed agrarian ideal of Jefferson and Turner. With no more ‘open land’ to tame, and the land itself controlled by landowners like the Farmer, Bill cannot head west like Tom Cruise’s feisty, Irish, bare-knuckle pioneer in *Far and Away*. Bill can only overthrow or replace the Farmer, his energies not channelled towards a “true commonwealth [of] hard work, self-reliance and virtue” like Malick’s John Smith, but rather towards intrigue, deceit and capitalist inheritance. Men have, indeed, “[made] each other their spoil.”

While the agrarian ideal may be extinguished, the myth of the garden still operates powerfully in the film. As in the heady naturalism of Norris, Malick celebrates the magnificent scale of agriculture, the horizons of wheat and the magic of the individual plant. His time-lapse sequence is a filmed realization of this passage from *The Octopus*:

There it was, the Wheat, the Wheat! The little seed long planted, germinating in the deep, dark furrows of the soil, straining, swelling, suddenly in one night had burst upward to the light.<sup>11</sup>

Norris’s heroes wage a futile battle against the railroad which incorporates the greed of S. Behrman (a dark, anti-Semitic strain in the book), the dispassionate economic sense of

<sup>10</sup> Smith, H.N. *Virgin Land* (1978), 174-183.

<sup>11</sup> Norris, *The Octopus*, Book II: 82-83

Cedarquist ("the great word of the twentieth century will be ... Markets"), and the cold industrial logic of Shelgrim ("try to believe this – to begin with – *that railroads build themselves*").<sup>12</sup> However, the railroad in *Malick* not only brings Bill, Abby and Linda to the farm, but also brings President Wilson on his Whistle-stop Tour; and the Farmer is neither absentee-landlord nor cruel agricultural baron. In *Days of Heaven* the railroad and the land-baron – two of the dominant 'villains' of the classic Western – represent instead a history that acknowledges the agrarian myth but coolly confirms its passing.

The myth of the garden in *Days of Heaven* implies its victory over the myth of the wilderness. In perhaps the most eloquent deployment of frontier iconography in the film, bison graze nonchalantly while workers bathe nearby. The garden is no longer a wilderness but a bread-basket, though the two are always in Hopper-like proximity – gnomes hide in the grass and peacocks mingle with ducks. While Bill and the Farmer may exist at opposite ends of the class scale, they are both associated with man-made environments. There is very little nature – in the sense of wilderness – in *Days of Heaven*: the waterfall seen during Abby and the Farmer's honeymoon is toured, and, in the next scene, the Farmer is seen photographing the massive antlers of a caribou (so begins the modern, conservationist pun of 'shooting' wildlife). Nature is either ploughed under or utilized for leisure.

The myth of the wilderness in *Badlands* registers the full disarticulation of the myth of the frontier from the history of the frontier in Turner's sense. There is no possible return to the wilds of Boone and Leatherstocking in a world of self-recording gramophone booths and Cheyenne, an electrified city not a people.

One could argue that both films are based on nineteenth-century myths and the consequences for those myths of historical transformation (capitalist agricultural practice and expanding industrial output both in the service of increasingly global trade). Kit and

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<sup>12</sup> Norris, *The Octopus*, Book II: 21, 285.

Bill will never rise out of the workforce, and recourse to the mythic offers only temporary fulfilment before inevitable destruction by the machinery of the state. Within both films are remembrances of the garden before its cultivation, though these are precarious idylls: the road is closer to Kit and Holly's jungle hideout than the viewer first thinks, and the river in *Days of Heaven* cannot lead Bill away from the police. A remembrance of the garden in anticipation of its passing dominates *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*.

## “Seeking the other shore”

American democracy was born of no theorist's dream; it was not carried in the *Sarah Constant* [sic] to Virginia, nor in the *Mayflower* to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier. Not the constitution, but free land and an abundance of natural resources open to a fit people, made the democratic type of society in America for three centuries while it occupied its empire.

Frederick Jackson Turner<sup>13</sup>

Hours like months, days like years. Walked into the golden age. Stood on the shores of a new world.

Private Doll, *The Thin Red Line*

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“The appeal of the undiscovered is strong in America,” Turner said in 1914. In a brave show of optimism, Turner stoked his audience of university graduates with the stirring account of America's democracy cited above, before conferring upon them the responsibility for its future health.

A new era will come if schools and universities can only widen the intellectual horizon of the people, help to lay the foundations of a better industrial life, show them new goals for endeavor, inspire them with more varied and higher ideals.<sup>14</sup>

As a final huzzah, he recited excerpts from Tennyson's ‘Ulysses’ (1842) and it is here that the frailty of his thesis and its passing into myth becomes apparent. Turner begins his reading of ‘Ulysses’ in a way that echoes Ishmael's bold opening declaration in *Moby-Dick*: “I am become a name / For always roaming with an hungry heart,” thus eliding the poem's rather weary first sentence:

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,

<sup>13</sup> Turner, ‘The West and American Ideals’ (1962), 293.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 293, 310.

Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
 Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
 That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

While Turner recognizes the “gray spirit yearning in desire” of Ulysses, he constructs for the restless voyager a heroic send off:

Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
 The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
 Of all the Western stars until I die.  
 ...  
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

His amendment produces in the closing line a typically American optimism out of a peculiarly English sense of grim determination, in Tennyson’s words, “a sense of loss and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end.”<sup>15</sup>

Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
 We are not now that strength which in old days  
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,  
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Shorn of its bitter resilience, the final line becomes a buoyant affirmation of the spirit of discovery that Turner finds characteristic of the American character. In his shift from the frontier as an economic theory based on robust democracy, to his invocation of English colonial metaphor based on a myth from classical antiquity, the Frontier’s most hardy intellectual exponent completes the theory’s move from history into myth.

Before the end of World War I, Vachel Lindsay would write his poem ‘Out Mother Pocahontas’ in another attempt to claim for America an ‘indigenous’ originality.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In Ricks, *The Poems of Tennyson* (1969), 560.

<sup>16</sup> In this sense, ‘indigenous’ refers not only to Native American, but also more broadly to an American sense of national identity separate from Europe.

In the language of myth, Lindsay claimed the very heritage that Turner consistently erased from his thesis, America's truly indigenous culture living in a golden age, "in the springtime, / in Virginia."

Malick's two recent films are explorations of the "matured Western spirit" and its longing for 'the golden age.' Though the historical settings are three centuries apart in history, both films are concerned with characters seeking the other shore, less as a geographical signifier, than a quest for spiritual renewal. In *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, the frontier is gone, the wild edge now staked out by fenceposts and telegraph poles. In *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*, the myth of the garden is not remembered but made present. However, the attainment of this state of bliss is possible only through death.

Malick's John Smith has in common with his historical antecedent his democratic ideal – "one equal tempter of heroic hearts" – and the restlessness of a compulsive discoverer. However, where the historical Smith was a hardened pragmatist (of the sort who would eventually succeed in 'settling' Virginia), Malick's Smith takes a radical departure, explicitly associating himself with the myth of the golden age. His time amongst the Powhatan has convinced him of another world, one perhaps that he was seeking while a captive on the crossing: "How many lands behind me? How many seas?" The original script cites Arthur Barlow's famous description of the Roanoke Indians, including the line, "It was as if they lived in a golden age of their own." However, in the film, this passage ends with Malick's own words, "Real what I thought a dream." Caught, literally, midstream, Smith says in monologue:

That fort is not the world. The river leads me back there. It leads onward, too. Deeper. Into the wild. Start over. Exchange this false light for a true one. Give up the name of Smith.

If Smith seems to see clearly the difference between his life before and after his

encounter with Pocahontas and the “wilderness” she inhabits (and of which she is a metaphor), then why does he not join her, “exchange this false light for a true one”? Later, he will offer half an answer. During their last conversation Smith says to Pocahontas: “I thought it was a dream, what we knew in the forest. It’s the only truth.” This is clearly the influence of Witt on Smith; he gains a glimpse of that longed-for “other world” but can only comprehend it in terms of dreams in opposition to his reality. Smith turns away from the “true light” searching for his terrestrial Indies while Witt and Pocahontas both, in effect, return to ‘mother’ through death.

Harry Levin describes the myth of the golden age as “a nostalgic statement of man’s orientation in time, an attempt at transcending the limits of history. Since it concentrates mainly upon a prehistoric epoch, a foreworld once perfected and now lost, its usual corollary is a recoil from the belated decadence of the present epoch, whenever that may be.”<sup>17</sup> Even Hesiod, who, in the eighth century B.C. originally conceived the four ages of metal (five, if one includes the “nonmetallic” race of heroes), denounces his own age as an iron race.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the golden age always exists as an unattainable ideal prior to our attempts to conceive of it.

The myth of the golden age was particularly popular in the Renaissance and its invocations (some of which were detailed in chapter five) are characteristic more of sixteenth-century European settlers than the mercantile and Puritan stock who settled the east coast of America in the seventeenth-century. However, the golden age fits America’s post-Renaissance identity in two significant ways: it nourishes the Turnerian belief in America’s home-grown democracy, and it lights the path back to America’s pre-colonial state through the regret of Manifest Destiny and nineteenth-century industrial blight. Smith yearns for both; anticipates the failure of the one (democracy of working

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<sup>17</sup> Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (1970), xv.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

men) and “sails past” the other (returning upriver and giving up his name). Private Witt, too, stages a return to a golden age in the village where “kids don’t fight” but he also cannot give up his identity (this time, his army dogtags). Smith and Witt are discoverers not as actual people but as representations of the fundamental search in all humans seeking elemental bliss. The Ulyssean pull draws Smith back to the sea, while Witt’s quest for immortality in ultimate calm takes him back to Charlie Company and his martyr-like tending towards death. Colonel Tall directs the compassionately malfunctioning Captain Staros to the cruelty of nature as a way of explaining the futility of Staros’s position – war is natural, and death comes to all things. However, Malick does not provide Tall’s defence of war and its requisite sacrifice with a suitably heroic pose; instead he is left isolated, detached from his men, melancholy rather than triumphant. Witt returns to the village and finds argument, sickness and death in Arcadia too; with his terrestrial golden age undone, he seeks the celestial, sacrificing himself and reclaiming the cool seas of his earlier adventure.

It is in the endings of *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* that one also sees the new arc to Malick’s films. Though the final shot of *Badlands* is of clouds seen from an aeroplane, we know that it is Holly’s point of view: her life is due to continue, just as Abby and Linda continue (even allowing for the uncertain nature of their new adventures). In *The Thin Red Line*, restoration of the natural world is seen in the progression from human, to animal, to vegetable after the major characters have left the scene.<sup>19</sup> In *The New World*, this process is emphasized by the interruption of the swelling score with the creaking of stately trees, and the forest sounds audible during the final credits which replace the traditional closing score.

A clue to the quest of Malick’s divided characters can be found in the final voiceover of *The Thin Red Line* (often attributed to Witt but, I believe, spoken at least

<sup>19</sup> See Chion’s discussion of these shots, *The Thin Red Line*, 72.

partly by Private Doll). As Doll – isolated from the rest of Charlie Company – looks out to sea, the voiceover intones: “Darkness and light, strife and love, are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face?” The lines are taken directly from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* where the poet and a companion cross over the Alps, and walk down through a terrific mountain valley:

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light  
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,  
 Characters of the great Apocalyps,  
 The types and symbols of Eternity,  
 Of first and last, and midst, and without end.<sup>20</sup>

The film opens with a voice (probably Witt’s) asking if there is, in nature, “not one power but two?” and this sets up a series of tensions that define the film. Witt, like John Smith, cannot reconcile the two parts of himself – the part that goes AWOL (or ‘native’) and the part that constantly returns to the world that he knows – just as the characters, in general, cannot be at peace in the natural world. Witt and Smith seek a unity of the self which Pocahontas recognizes at the time of her death, imparting the same calm to John Rolfe that Witt thinks he sees in his dying mother.

I believe that these endings are a form of revelation, different from the suspended conclusions of *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* which find their human characters constantly on the move. If there is something apocalyptic in an eschatological sense in the fires that occur in all four films – the burning of Holly’s house, the burning of the Farmer’s wheatfields, the fiery battles and razing of the Japanese camp in *The Thin Red Line*, and the destruction of the Powhatan village in *The New World* – then there is something hopeful and revelatory in the sprouting coconut and gigantic tree that conclude the latter two films. The close relation to the Book of Revelation is clear:

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<sup>20</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (of 1805), Book Sixth, lines 567-572. My profound thanks to Craig Carey who first made this observation on Yahoo’s Terrence Malick forum.

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.<sup>21</sup>

Over the course of four films, Malick has examined myths that develop out of history, and deepened his sense of the revelatory power of cinema. His eclectic intertextual references have enriched the telling of quintessentially American stories of lost innocence and eternal quest, while his bold and often experimental aesthetics have challenged the conventions of contemporary narrative filmmaking. As his characters strive for their “blue hills” and “Indies” so Malick attempts increasingly complex representations on film of our capacity to be astonished by the world in which we find ourselves.

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<sup>21</sup> Revelation 22:1-2 (Authorized King James Version). Though the subject of Malick’s next project is shrouded in mystery at present, it can be no accident that it is titled *Tree of Life*.

## Appendix One

Paintings by Edward Hopper



**Figure 1:** *House by the Railroad* (1925)



**Figure 2:** *The Bootleggers* (1945)



Figure 3: *Rooms for Tourists* (1945)

## Appendix Two



Charles Sheeler – *American Landscape* (1930)

## Appendix Three



Thomas Anshutz – *The Ironworker's Noontime* (1880)

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# Filmography

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## Reader's Note

This filmography contains information that I believe is germane to this thesis. In the case of Terrence Malick's feature films, production companies and producers, major crew, and cast are listed, but do not necessarily follow the order of the final credits. For films referred to in the thesis, the year of release and director have been supplied, and the list is arranged alphabetically. In the case of television productions, producers are listed.

## 1. Feature films directed by Terrence Malick

### *Badlands* (1973)

A Pressman/Williams Presentation  
 A Jill Jakes Production  
 A Warner Brothers Release  
 Colour. 95 minutes

Executive Producer: Edward R Pressman

Written, Produced and Directed by Terrence Malick

Photography: Brian Probyn, Tak Fujimoto, Steven Lerner  
 Editor: Robert Estrin  
 Associate Editor: William Weber  
 Art Director: Jack Fisk  
 Sound Effects: Sam Shaw

Original Music Composed and Conducted by George Tipton  
 "Music Poetica" by Cal Orff and Gunild Keetman  
 "Trois Morceaux En Forme de Poire" by Erik Satie  
 Theme "Migration" by James Taylor  
 "A Blossom Fell" (H. Barnes—H. Cornelius—D. John), sung by Nat "King" Cole  
 "Love is Strange" (M. Baker—B. Smith—M. Robertson), sung by Mickey and Sylvia.

#### Cast

Kit – Martin Sheen  
 Holly – Sissy Spacek  
 Father – Warren Oates  
 Cato – Ramon Bieri  
 Deputy – Alan Vint  
 Sheriff – Gary Littlejohn  
 Rich Man – John Carter  
 Visitor – Terrence Malick (uncredited)

*Days of Heaven* (1978)

Paramount Pictures

Colour. 93 minutes

Executive Producer: Jacob Brackman

Produced by Bert and Harold Schneider

Written and Directed by Terrence Malick

Director of Photography: Nestor Almendros

Additional Photography: Haskell Wexler

Editor: Billy Weber

Art Director: Jack Fisk

Costumes Designed by Patricia Norris

Music Composed and Conducted by Ennio Morricone

"Enderlin" written and performed by Leo Kottke

"Swamp Dance" words, music, and performance by Doug Kershaw

"Carnival of the Animals – The Aquarium" by Camille Saint-Saëns, performed by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Title Sequence Photographs:

Lewis Hine

Henry Hamilton Bennett

Frances Benjamin Johnston

Chansonetta Emmons

William Notman

Eddie Baskin

Cast:

Bill – Richard Gere

Abby – Brooke Adams

The Farmer – Sam Shepard

Linda – Linda Manz

Farm Foreman – Robert Wilke

Linda's Friend – Jackie Shultis

Mill Foreman – Stuart Margolin

*The Thin Red Line* (1998)

Fox 2000 Pictures presents  
 From Phoenix Pictures  
 In Association with George Stevens, Jr.  
 A Geisler – Roberdeau Production  
 Colour. 170 minutes

Executive Producer: George Stevens, Jr.  
 Producers: Robert Michael Geisler, John Roberdeau, Grant Hill

Directed by Terrence Malick  
 Screenplay by Terrence Malick, based upon the novel by James Jones

Director of Photography: John Toll, ASC  
 Production Designer: Jack Fisk  
 Edited by Billy Weber, Leslie Jones, Saar Klein  
 Sound Design: John Fasal, Claude Letessier  
 Music: Hans Zimmer  
 “Annum Per Annum” by Arvo Pärt, organ performed by Andrew Lucas  
 “Requiem – In Paradisum” by Gabriel Fauré, performed by Orchestre de la Suisse  
 Romande, conducted by Armin Jordan  
 “The Prophecy from the Village of Kremnus” performed by Arsenije Jovanovic  
 “Sit Back and Relax” performed by Francesco Lupica  
 “The Unanswered Question” by Charles Ives, performed by The Orchestra of St. Lukes,  
 conducted by John Adams.

## Cast:

First Sergeant Welsh – Sean Penn  
 Private Witt – Jim Caviezel  
 Lieutenant Colonel Tall – Nick Nolte  
 Private Bell – Ben Chaplin  
 Marty Bell – Miranda Otto  
 Captain Staros – Elias Koteas  
 Captain Gaff – John Cusack  
 Private First Class Doll – Dash Mihok  
 Private First Class Dale – Arie Verveen  
 Corporal Fife – Adrien Brody  
 Sergeant McCron – John Savage  
 Sergeant Keck – Woody Harrelson  
 Brigadier General Quintard – John Travolta  
 Captain Bosche – George Clooney  
 Second Lieutenant Whyte – Jared Leto  
 Private Train – John Dee Smith  
 Private Tella – Kirk Acevedo  
 Private Hoke – Will Wallace

*The New World (2005)*

New Line Cinema

Colour. 135 minutes

Executive Producers: Bill Mechanic, Toby Emmerich, Mark Ordesky, Trish Hofmann,  
Rolf Mittweg

Produced by Sarah Green

Written and Directed by Terrence Malick

Director of Photography: Emmanuel Lubezki, ASC, AMC

Production Design: Jack Fisk

Edited by Richard Chew, ACE; Hank Corwin, ACE; Saar Klein, Mark Yoshikawa

Costume Design: Jacqueline West

Music by James Horner

“Vorspiel to Das Rheingold” by Richard Wagner, performed by Netherlands Radio  
Philharmonic Orchestra

“Piano Concerto No. 23” by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, performed by Jenő Jandó and  
Concentus Hungaricus

“Cosmic Beam Drone” and “Cosmic Beam Live” written and performed by Francesco  
Lupica

“Water Bearer”, “Ancient Voices”, “Ritual 1”, and “Spiral Journey” written and  
performed by R. Carlos Nakai

“Melt Earth to Sea” music composed by Peter Holman, lyrics by Ben Jonson, performed  
by Philip Pickett / Musicians of the Globe

“Kihshahkuyew Nupuy” written and performed by Q’Orianka Kilcher

Cast:

Captain John Smith – Colin Farrell

Pocahontas – Q’Orianka Kilcher

Captain Christopher Newport – Christopher Plummer

Wingfield – David Thewlis

Captain Argall – Yorick van Wageningen

Powhatan – August Schellenberg

Opechancanough – Wes Studi

Tomocomo – Raoul Trujillo

Parahunt – Kalani Queypo

Ben – Ben Mendlesohn

Selway – Noah Taylor

Lewes – Brian F. O’Byrne

Mary – Janine Davitski

Savage – John Savage

Pocahontas’s Mother – Irene Bedard

## 2. Films referred to in the thesis:

- A Bout de Souffle* [Breathless] (1959, d/ Jean-Luc Godard)  
*Addams Family Values* (1993, d/ Barry Sonnenfeld)  
*Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* [Aguirre, Wrath of God] (1972, d/ Werner Herzog)  
*All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930, d/ Lewis Milestone)  
*Amazing Grace* (2006, d/ Michael Apted)  
*American Graffiti* (1973, d/ George Lucas)  
*Apocalypse Now: Redux* (1979/2000, d/ Francis Ford Coppola)  
*Band of Brothers* (2001, ex-p/ Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, p/ Mary Richards)  
*Battlefield Guadalcanal: Guadalcanal and the Defeat of Japan* (2001, p/ Gavin Bott)  
*Bear's Kiss* (2002, d/ Sergei Bodrov)  
*Beautiful Country, The* (2004, d/ Hans Petter Moland)  
*Big Red One, The: The Reconsruction* (1980/2004, d/ Samuel Fuller)  
*Birth of a Nation, The* (1915, d/ D.W. Griffith)  
*Black Hawk Down* (2001, d/ Ridley Scott)  
*Blade Runner* (1982, d/ Ridley Scott)  
*Blue Velvet* (1986, d/ David Lynch)  
*Bonnie & Clyde* (1967, d/ Arthur Penn)  
*Braveheart* (1995, d/ Mel Gibson)  
*Buffalo Soldiers* (2003, d/ Gregor Jordan)  
*Bullitt* (1968, d/ Peter Yates)  
*Casualties of War* (1989, d/ Brian De Palma)  
*Chinatown* (1974, d/ Roman Polanski)  
*City Girl* (1929, F.W. Murnau)  
*Coming Home* (1978, d/ Hal Ashby)  
*Crowd, The* (1927, d/ King Vidor)  
*Deadhead Miles* (1972, d/ Vernon Zimmerman)  
*Deer Hunter, The* (1978, d/ Michael Cimino)  
*Detour* (1945, d/ Edgar G. Ulmer)  
*Dirty Harry* (1971, d/ Don Siegel)  
*Earth* (1930, Alexander Dovzhenko)  
*Easy Rider* (1969, d/ Dennis Hopper)  
*Endurance* (1999, d/ Leslie Woodhead, Bud Greenspan)  
*Endurance, The: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* (2000, d/ George Butler)  
*Far and Away* (1992, d/ Ron Howard)  
*Five Easy Pieces* (1970, d/ Bob Rafelson)  
*Forrest Gump* (1994, d/ Robert Zemeckis)  
*Full Metal Jacket* (1987, d/ Stanley Kubrick)  
*Geronimo: An American Legend* (1994, d/ Walter Hill)  
*Giant* (1956, d/ George Stevens)  
*Gladiator* (2000, d/ Ridley Scott)  
*Gone with the Wind* (1939, d/ Victor Fleming)  
*Grapes of Wrath, The* (1940, d/ John Ford)  
*Gravy Train, The* (1974, d/ Jack Sharrett)  
*Green Berets, The* (1968, d/ John Wayne)  
*Guadalcanal Diary* (1943, d/ Lewis Seiler)  
*Gun Crazy* (1949, d/ Joseph H. Lewis)  
*Hamburger Hill* (1987, d/ John Irvin)  
*Heaven's Gate* (1980, d/ Michael Cimino)  
*Hidalgo* (2003, d/ Joe Johnston)

*High Sierra* (1941, d/ Raoul Walsh)  
*Immigrant, The* (1917, d/ Charles Chaplin)  
*Indian Runner, The* (1991, d/ Sean Penn)  
*In Cold Blood* (1967, d/ Richard Brooks)  
*King Arthur* (2004, d/ Antoine Fuqua)  
*Lanton Mills* (1971, d/ Terrence Malick)  
*Last of the Mobicans, The* (1992, d/ Michael Mann)  
*Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean, The* (1972, d/ John Huston)  
*Little Big Man* (1970, d/ Arthur Penn)  
*Longest Day, The* (1962, ds/ Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, Bernhard Wicki)  
*Making of the New World, The* (2005, d/ Austin Lynch)  
*Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, The* (1962, d/ John Ford)  
*Marquise von O ..., Die* [The Marquise of O] (1976, Eric Rohmer)  
*Matewan* (1987, d/ John Sayles)  
*Missing in Action* (1984, d/ Joseph Zito)  
*Natural Born Killers* (1994, d/ Oliver Stone)  
*Night Moves* (1975, d/ Arthur Penn)  
*Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968, d/ Sergio Leone)  
*Patriot, The* (2000, d/ Roland Emmerich)  
*Pearl Harbor* (2001, d/ Michael Bay)  
*Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975, d/ Peter Weir)  
*Platoon* (1986, d/ Oliver Stone)  
*Pocahontas* (1995, d/ Mike Gabriel, Eric Goldberg)  
*Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World (V)* (1998, d/ Tom Ellery, Bradley Raymond)  
*Pocahontas: The Legend* (1995, d/ Danièle J. Suissa)  
*Pocket Money* (1972, d/ Stuart Rosenberg)  
*Pulp Fiction* (1994, d/ Quentin Tarantino)  
*Raggedy Man* (1981, d/ Jack Fisk)  
*Raging Bull* (1980, d/ Martin Scorsese)  
*Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (1985, d/ George Pan Cosmatos)  
*Rebel Without a Cause* (1955, d/ Nicholas Ray)  
*Sadist, The* (1963, d/ James Landis)  
*Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949, d/ Allan Dwan)  
*Saturday Night Fever* (1977, d/ John Badham)  
*Saving Private Ryan* (1998, d/ Steven Spielberg)  
*Scarlet Letter, The* (1995, d/ Roland Joffé)  
*Searchers, The* (1956, d/ John Ford)  
*Soldier Blue* (1970, d/ Ralph Nelson)  
*Sunrise* (1927, F.W. Murnau)  
*Taxi Driver* (1976, d/ Martin Scorsese)  
*Thelma & Louise* (1991, d/ Ridley Scott)  
*Thin Red Line, The* (1964, d/ Andrew Marton)  
*Titanic* (1997, d/ James Cameron)  
*Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970, ds/ Richard Fleischer, Tashio Masuda, Kinji Fukasaku)  
*U-571* (2001, d/ Jonathan Mostow)  
*Undertow* (2004, d/ David Gordon Green)  
*Weekend* (1967, d/ Jean-Luc Godard)  
*We Were Soldiers* (2002, d/ Randall Wallace)  
*Wild Bunch, The* (1969, d/ Sam Peckinpah)  
*Wizard of Oz, The* (1939, d/ Victor Fleming)  
*Xingfu shiguang [Happy Times]* (2000, d/ Yimou Zhang)