

The Inexpressible:
The sense of the metaphysical in *The Thin Red Line*

Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) is characterised by a pervasive obscurity surrounding the function of the film's voice-over.¹ Through various whispering male voices, the film's voice-over explicitly addresses apparently inscrutable metaphysical questions, such as the origin of evil, or the possible existence of a spiritual reality that underlies empirical reality. Questions such as 'How did this evil steal into the world?', 'Why does nature vie with itself' or 'Who are you who live among these many forms?' are straightforwardly articulated throughout the film but always remain suspended. The film keeps instigating this kind of philosophical rumination which appears to be constantly nourished and regenerated by the voice-over's own inability to provide verbal answers to the questions it raises. As the implacable interrogative mode of the voice-over persists, it dramatizes the difficulty of accessing a way to answer these questions. Thus, the voice-over seems to become a demonstration of the apparent impenetrability of the metaphysical realm it points to.

So, why does the film construct such an emphasis on this metaphysical discourse, only to leave it pending at the end? Can the voice-over be reduced to a kind of vacuous 'metaphysical posturing' or 'hoax', as critic Tom Whalen has suggested (1999: 165)? Does the voice-over of the film merely gesture towards the ineffability of a certain realm 'beyond understanding' or can it be understood in more concrete terms, in relation to the organization of other aspects of the film? In what follows, I explore the ways in which the metaphysical discourse of the film becomes dramatically pertinent within the film.

The enigma of the film's metaphysical discourse is further complicated because the voice-over is only loosely connected to the visual moment it accompanies. The opening sequence is characteristic: a whispering male voice suddenly pronounces, 'What is this war in the heart of nature?' over a low angle shot of shafts of light coming through branches. Is there a war then necessarily and intrinsically connected with nature in general, and how is this kind of war related to the actual instance of war dramatised in the film? The connection between the moment and the voice-over remains vague.

The Americans' assault on a Japanese bivouac begins to illuminate the kind of connection that the film constructs between voice-over and image. A whispering male voice accompanies a succession of shots presenting suffering and dying Japanese soldiers during the American raid. The voice wonders how 'this great evil' came into the world – 'Where's it come from?' and 'What seed, what root did it

grow from?', it asks. The voice seems to *react* to the sight of the kill, remaining thematically anchored on the image, conceptualising an awareness (and an evaluation – 'evil') of the ruthless massacre during a war. However, even if it may strike us as obvious that 'war is evil', it is far from obvious why an action-packed sequence, geared to portray combat between men, should be accompanied by the sound of a tranquil, ponderous voice contemplating philosophically on the subject of evil. Can the conjunction of these two apparently heterogeneous dramatic registers (of the voice-over and the image) be somehow justified or is this conjunction to be considered offhand or even dissonant?

If one looks more closely at the sequence, one notices that the non-diegetic voice-over is dubbed over the *muted* image. Action and reflection are joined through the mediation of this muteness that seems to surround and suspend the voice-over's questions. Who is doing this? – 'Who is killing us?' – 'Does our ruin benefit the earth?' – 'Does it help



the grass to grow, the sun to shine?’ The pauses between these questions don’t just punctuate the progression of the voice-over; they contain silences that absorb the sight of excruciating human pain (its suffering and its cause). These silences become able to *evoke* what is common to the level of both action and thought, that is, the intensity of the unspeakable. This intensity encapsulates the sensation of petrified stupor at the sight of death. Through the evocative process of the sequence, the question of evil is not posed in a detached, theoretical manner but rather *grows out* of the affective charge of the moment. Thus, the question of evil does not just refer to some ineffable metaphysical truth but rather articulates an affective response to the sight of the intentional destruction of human lives and the agonizing pain that ensues. It is this sight of destruction and of pain *in extremis* which seems intractable, somehow always in excess of itself – hence, so hard to make sense of.

This understanding of the way the voice-over works is echoed in Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s reading of the film. Bersani and Dutoit question the strictly philosophical character of the voice-over: ‘These are very large – one might also say naïve – questions and reflections. The first thing to be said about them is that while Malick’s film takes them very seriously, it doesn’t treat them as philosophical issues’ (2004: 132). Before analysing how exactly the film treats these questions, I would like to subscribe to Bersani and Dutoit’s point. I would like to argue that the voice-over does not seek a discursive, conceptual explanation to the questions it poses but rather collaborates with the dramatic context in which it is placed in order to produce the kind of evocative process suggested above. I will show that even in cases such as the opening sequence, where the connection between moment and voice-over seems strikingly indeterminate, the film’s evocative process is still at work.

Unsettling the agency of the voice-over

Usually, a film’s voice-over can be attributed to a clearly identified character’s point of view or to an authorial narrator. In *The Thin Red Line*, however, it is strikingly difficult to attribute the voice-over to specific characters. This becomes a crucial dimension of the intricate relationship between the voice-over and the dramatic moment (for example, in the case of the Japanese bivouac invasion sequence, who is the agent experiencing the sensation of stupor?). The majority of the film’s critics seem to have bypassed this difficulty by assuming that voice-over instances which cannot be clearly attributed to a specific character belong to Witt (Jim Caviezel).² Such a blanket characterisation of the film’s voice-over instances seems wrong, though, since it fails to acknowledge that the voice-over can be attributed to various *different* characters. Gilberto Perez (one of the few critics recognising the variability of the voice-over’s speakers) has suggested that the voice-over can be understood as a ‘play of consciousnesses’ that connects the soldiers’ disparate experiences of war into one collective experience (2013, 4-5). In line with Perez’s suggestion, I will argue that the film deliberately creates confusion between

the soldiers’ voices, in order to conflate the identities of the speakers uttering the voice-over.

But, how exactly is this confusion created? *How does it actually become possible?* As I will try to show, the film creates this confusion through the slight yet perceptible variations in the timbre and the accent of the voices heard, as well as through its idiosyncratic use of conventional voice-over devices (such as the interior monologue or the third person commentary).

Through the lack of clarity characterising the voice-over attribution, the voices of the speakers become merged *and* differentiated simultaneously – de-individuated *and* particularised (see also Morrison and Schur 2003: 25) at the same time. In this way, the voices do not express distinct and fully demarcated subjectivities (or ‘consciousnesses’) but only fleetingly relate to specific soldiers. The voices ultimately amalgamate, joined by the effort, or rather the pathos, of trying to make sense of an intransigent and unresponsive world. It is this pathos of understanding, this drama of incomprehension that remains indefinitely subjectivised, always fluctuating between the subjective and the de-subjectivised. The film brings forth the feel of *an uncertain and ever-changing point of view* which, despite being personalised, does not remain firmly attached to a specific character.

Establishing and undermining conventional point of view attribution

The critical attention to the character of Witt as the speaker of the voice-over can be explained by the way the film begins: Witt is presented as the maverick soldier who is separated from his battalion because he has gone AWOL. The film not only focuses on Witt visually, but also associates Witt with a voice-over instance in a straightforward way. While relishing the peaceful Melanesian communal life, he suddenly recollects his mother’s death. The film lingers on a medium long shot of a Melanesian mother bathing her baby in a lake as Caviezel’s voice begins narrating:

Witt: I remember my mother when she was dying – all shrunk up and grey ... I asked her if she was afraid ... She just shook her head. I was afraid to touch the death I’d seen in her ... I couldn’t find anything beautiful or uplifting about her going back to God ... I heard people talk about immortality but I’ve not seen it ...

The voice’s narration lingers over two subjective shots of Witt staring at the Melanesian mother. The change of scale in the two shots (from long to medium shot) pronounce, by way of a structural convention, the film’s increasing focus on Witt’s interiority. The set-up of the sequence, as well as the distinctness of Caviezel’s voice, anchor the moments within the subjective experience of Witt. The film signals a direct continuum between character interiority and voice-over.

This pronounced focus – right at its beginning – on the interiority of one specific soldier recalls the similar

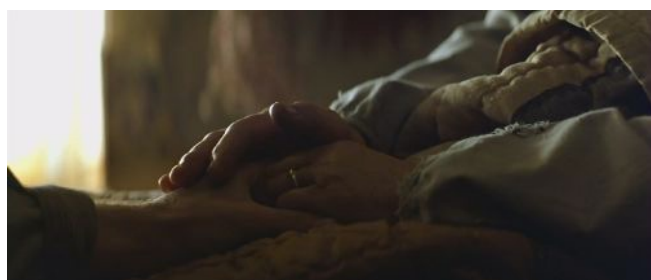


narrative structure of war films such as *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola 1979) and *Platoon* (Oliver Stone 1986). Both establish a protagonist soldier whose subjective experience filters the dramatic action of the film. This filtering is reflected in the interior monologue that accompanies pensive silent shots of Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) in the opening sequence of *Apocalypse Now* and moments of Chris' (Charlie Sheen) activity in *Platoon* (Chris' letter to his grandmother is delivered as an interior monologue accompanying shots of him digging a hole). However, *The Thin Red Line* challenges the conventional reading that it initially suggests. The film draws on the conventional interior monologue device only in order to complicate its use. Even though Witt is evidently the speaker,³ the film manages to disrupt the strictly subjective character of the experience he narrates. More specifically, the film establishes a discontinuity between the content and the tone of Witt's discursive account, on the one hand, and the content and tone of the memory sequence that Witt's account gives rise to, on the other.

The memory sequence of the dying moments of Witt's mother is introduced by a close-up of Witt's pensive face.



The sequence is accompanied only by a bleak minimalist melody constituted by a sparse progression of piano chords over a background of a continuous, subdued electronic chord. By evoking the hollowness of the upcoming death, this melody initially echoes Witt's assertion that he 'couldn't find anything beautiful or uplifting' about his mother 'going back to God'. Nevertheless, the depiction of Witt's mother's dying moments becomes unhinged from the sombre tone suggested by the music and Witt's voice-over: the visual sequence is constituted by a series of shots accentuating moments of serenity and vivid physical tenderness between an old woman, a person who remains off-screen and a little girl. The first shot of the sequence is a close-up lingering on the old woman's hand slowly and lovingly caressing the hand of the person who remains off-screen. Witt's confessed fear ('I was afraid to touch the death I'd seen in her') seems to be laid aside by the physical gentleness of the woman's caress. The tonal tension between the dryness of Witt's words and the welcoming tranquility of the woman's caress suggests a significant affective shift. The steady, knowing pace of the old woman's caress seems to become able to appease the fear of death and absolve it.



Instead of *illustrating* the meaning of Witt's words, the close-up of the woman's caress constitutes a *reaction* to it. As Bersani and Dutoit have suggested, the film

does not exactly answer Witt's questions and yet takes them all into account. [...] The film's verbal questions are responded to visually. Or, more exactly, questions about the world are coupled with different ways of *looking at* the world. [...] Looking at the world doesn't erase questions about the world but it does inaccurately replicate those questions as a viable relation to the world' (2004: 143, original emphasis).

Through this 'inaccurate replication' that Bersani and Dutoit suggest, the memory sequence *overrides the stagnancy* of Witt's words by exuding a generosity of affect able to overpower the fear of death through its benevolence. Through the emphasis on the woman's caress, the film runs ahead of Witt's impasse, acting preemptively, as it were. While 'taking into account' the meaning of Witt's words, the affective logic of the memory sequence *also manages to transform this meaning*. In this way, the film dissociates the experience of the mother's death from Witt's point of view as discursively expressed.

The rift between Witt's voice-over and the memory sequence is reinforced by the fact that the memory sequence withholds Witt from view, stressing the unfolding of the old woman's gesture in isolation. The conventional reading of the moment prompts the viewer to assume that the person off-screen is Witt. This might well be so but, contrary to other similar memory sequences in the film, such as those between Bell (Ben Chaplin) and his wife (Miranda Otto), this sequence becomes visually disengaged from the bearer of the memory. In this way, the film injects a crucial ellipsis into the sequence and construes the status of the sequence as only vaguely identifiable (the old woman and the little girl appear only once – this time – and the girl remains unidentified throughout the film). The fact that Witt's voice-over has stopped before the introduction of the memory sequence (again contrary to Bell's memory sequences) reinforces the separate status of the sequence. The presence of Witt seems to become downplayed, suppressed in a way, in favour of the sequence's anonymity. Through the tension between the personal and the de-personalised quality of the sequence, the film brings forth an instance of this ethereal realm of de-subjectivised affective meaning that will re-emerge repeatedly. Although the sequence is not cut off from Witt's subjectivity (given its placement right after Witt's interior monologue), it does become extracted from it, hovering over it, as it were.

Moreover, the focus of the sequence does not lie exclusively on the recollection of Witt's personal moment with his mother but becomes *refracted* in various directions. In the second shot of the sequence, the unseen person is now a shadowy figure sitting still in the foreground, observing the actions of the others: the old woman raises herself in bed and slowly stretches her body towards the little girl in a white lace dress standing by; the little girl reciprocates by stretching her hand towards the woman. The shot is followed by a close-up on two little birds chirping in their cage. A close-up of the girl's torso, registering the girl's heartbeat follows. It then gives way to one more close-up recording the girl's hand touching the woman's chest just before the girl places her smiling face on the woman's torso while tightly embracing it. As the focus of the sequence becomes spread out, the sequence becomes further abstracted from Witt's subjectivity.



The presence of the camera *behind* the shadowy figure's back destabilises the viewpoint of the sequence. The film simultaneously expands and restricts the limits of Witt's subjective perception: Witt sees or becomes conscious of his former self; but the figure in the foreground remains pronouncedly obscure. More importantly, the interrogation of Witt's subjective perception is gradually turned into a more general reflection on the potential of subjective perception *per se*: The heightened sound of the girl's heartbeat evokes the physical closeness of an absent agent listening to this heartbeat. The agent of this physical closeness is not shown to be Witt, although it could be, at a different time. It could also be the old woman listening to the girl's heartbeat while embracing the little girl. Through these indeterminate evocations, the spatio-temporal limits of subjective perception undergo an upheaval. The evoked instances fluctuate between the affective order of subjective impressions and the affective order of dispersed, uncentred sensations dissociated from their concrete perceptual coordinates. Through its elliptical and diffusive character, this imagery transfigures Witt's memory into a distillation of feeling that does not remain firmly embedded within Witt's point of view.

Through the configuration of these uncentred sensations, the film calls forth a point of view that transcends the limits of empirical, naturalistic understanding. So, the 'metaphysical' that the film grapples with seems to refer not only to the thematic content of the voice-over's questions

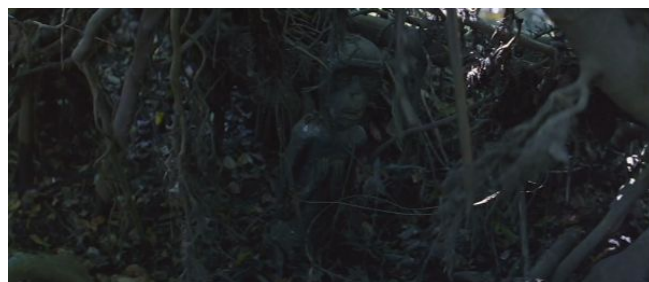
but also to the presence and the workings of this kind of point of view.

The memory sequence ends with a smooth camera tilt (medium shot) moving upwards and to the right, from the inside of the bedroom towards the sky. The tilt, revealing the sky over a room with no ceiling, gently unearths the sequence from any realistic coordinates. In his voice-over, Witt had uttered that he couldn't see anything 'beautiful or uplifting' about his mother going back to God, but the gracefulness of the tilt seems to contradict his words. The film, once again, brings forth a sensation that contradicts the sensation expressed by Witt's voice-over. And, even if Witt had denied having seen the 'immortality' people talk about, it is the sense of this immortality which is momentarily – if only inchoately – made present through the camera's final movement. The final moments of a life are *stretched* towards the sky and continued, within their fading. Immortality is not lost through this fading, the sequence suggests. In fact, the memory sequence as a whole has managed to bring forth immortality not as the permanence of life but, rather, as the *preciousness* of life: the mother's last moments are moments characterised by sensations of physical delicacy and vulnerability, and it is exactly these sensations that are retrieved and reanimated by being remembered and cherished.

Forging a plane of trans-subjective experience

The destabilisation of point of view in the Melanesia sequence does not merely introduce narrative indeterminacy into the film. Rather, it becomes the springboard for a more radical disorganisation of the function of point of view in the film. During the soldiers' arrival on the island of Guadalcanal, the voice-over appears to come from an indeterminate character, encapsulating *multiple* subjective points of view *simultaneously*. Through these utterances, the film manages to render an experience of wonder that *evokes* the various responses of the soldiers to the mysterious landscape. As the soldiers' responses to the alienness of Guadalcanal shade into each other, they amalgamate into a more generalised affect of marvelling at an unreachable 'otherness'.

The soldiers' responses are initially conjured up through the visual configuration of the sequence. Just after disembarking, the soldiers enter a tropical forest. In a long shot of the forest's interior, the soldiers walk warily among entangled roots, under the tall trees. The next shot is a rightward moving shot that reveals an ancient stone statuette, entangled among the tree roots. The camera has come closer to the tree roots, as the statuette appears right in front of it. The guarded pace of the rightward moving shot enacts the intrigued cautiousness of a look that has just alighted upon an unexpected apparition. Although the shot cannot be attributed to the point of view of a particular soldier, it nevertheless seems to allude to this kind of point of view. Exactly like any random soldier walking in the forest, the camera gazes in passing at the stone statuette that just happened to





be there in front of it. The camera is then directed upwards, recording the top of the forest plants and trees through a low angle shot, which again pronounces the workings of a look, staring upwards from the ground. The movements of the camera evoke a human mode of attention which, although disembodied, appears to be present inside the forest.

The whispering voice emerges, appearing exactly as an expression of this behaviour and posing the question: 'Who are you to live in all these many forms?'²⁴ The camera pans rightwards, scanning the plants and the tree branches puncturing the sunlight, echoing the rightward moving shot that discovered the ancient statuette in the forest, while extending the camera's movement upwards. The upward perspective of the shot charges the voice with a sense of awe that seeks for an absent (divine?) interlocutor beyond the trees' reach, beyond what a look can capture. The presence of the ancient statuette, that is, the presence of a *personal form* that just happened to be there on the ground, seems to have triggered the voice's quest for an invisible 'you'.

Although the voice is dubbed *over* the sequence, it seems to arise spontaneously as a reaction to the sight of the statuette. In this way, the voice-over acquires a strikingly ambivalent status. It does not merely interrogate what the camera records, in the manner of a commentary hovering above the action, but it also appears to be *physically engaged* in its surrounding space. Rather than coming forth as external to the image of the forest, its resonance intermingles with sounds coming from the forest, like the chirping of birds or the sound of soldiers' footsteps cracking the leaves on the ground. As the voice-over blends with these sounds, it appears to physically interact with the space of the forest. The sense of this interaction also affects the temporal status of the voice. Although, in a technical sense, the time of the voice's question runs separately to the dramatic action of the sequence, it is as if the time of the question arises directly from the time of the action.

The idiosyncratic spatial and temporal status of the voice's presence begs the question of what point of view the voice embodies. If the voice represents the point of view of a narrator somehow internal to the action, then whose point of view is this?

The film appears to forge an indirect bond between the voice-over and the character of Doll (Dash Mikok). Aspects of Doll's physical behaviour evoke the state of amazed curiosity encapsulated in the voice-over's question. The medium close-ups of Doll walking through the reeds reveal Doll's facial reactions to the unexplored exotic territory encountered. Doll's face is absorbed in an expression of stunned aporia. Fear suspended within awe carves a tense stillness on Doll's face. This expression on Doll's face becomes sharper when a short unknown Melanesian passes by, without even looking at him. Again, an unknown personal form just happens to appear suddenly in front of a gaze. The question 'Who are you to live in all these forms?' silently reverberates through the surface of Doll's face. The physiognomy of Doll epitomizes a sense of astonishment *analogous* to the astonishment encapsulated in the voice-over's discourse. Through this analogy, the voice-over becomes obliquely connected to Doll's subjectivity.

The film transposes the affective intensity of Doll's facial expression to the order of the voice-over but breaks the connection between Doll's visual presence and Doll's voice. Although the timbre and the depth of the voice-over recall Doll's voice, the connection between the two voices does not take the form of a clear and firm correspondence. This connection remains loose since the film does not provide us with a recognisable device of voice-over attribution, such as an interior monologue type of correspondence between image and voice. Finally, the sequence does not actually focus on the dramatic significance of Doll as a character. The actions of Doll do not stand out during the sequence because he appears as just one of the soldiers



scouting the island. Thus, the correspondence between the voice-over and Doll's subjectivity is not *established* by the film, in any strict sense, but it is rather just *alluded* to.

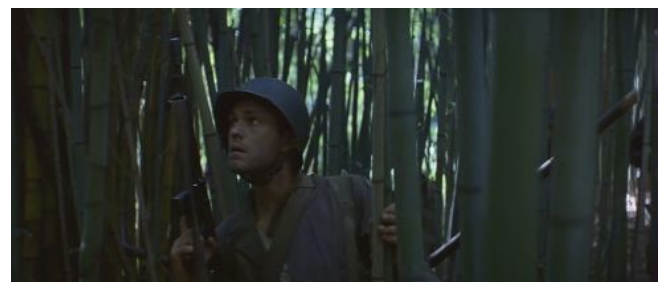
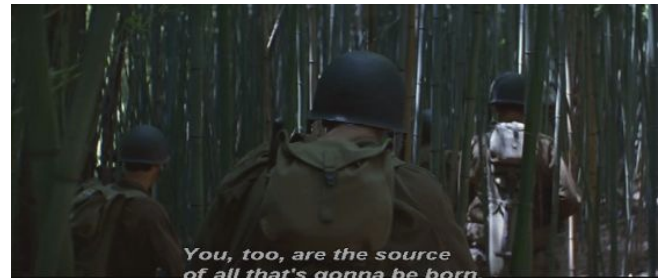
The experience evoked by the voice-over co-exists with Doll's subjective experience only in a fractured continuity. The tension between the subjective and the de-subjectivised – initially evident in the Melanesia sequence – now reappears. This time, the film uses this tension not only to dissociate the rendition of an experience from the subject of this experience but also to forge a plane of trans-subjective experience.

If the voice-over could be said to reflect Doll's subjectivity, it does not remain anchored in it. The voice-over is characterised by a distinct Southern United States accent. Throughout the film, the voices of various characters possess this characteristic. Doll may be one of these characters, although it is not exactly clear, when he actually speaks, what kind of accent he has. Given that the Southern accent of characters like Bell (Ben Chaplin) and Train (John Dee Smith) is much more pronounced in the film than Doll's, it may be that the voice-over belongs to them. Thus, although the voice-over's texture alludes to Doll's voice, its accent may suggest Train's or Bell's voice. The film uses this uncertainty in order to establish a dramatically crucial equivocation regarding the identity of the voice-over's speaker. This speaker is indeed a character who, nevertheless, remains indefinite. The voices of Train, Bell and Doll blend into one another, and, through this fusion, the state of wonder expressed by the voice reflects a *wider* – personalised – experience, indeterminately inclusive of many subjective experiences.

The voice re-emerges over shots of various soldiers exploring the forest. In a mobile long take, the camera records Welsh (Sean Penn), Doll and other unknown soldiers interchangeably, when the voice-over utters: 'Your death that captures all ... You too are the source of all that's gonna be born ...'. The camera does not centre on any soldier specifically, so the film avoids, once again, a conventional interior monologue attribution. When the voice-over's words are heard, the camera is felt roaming *among* the soldiers, surrounding them unevenly, moving closer to some of them, then withdrawing, and moving away.

Because of the distinctness of the camera's movement and because of the agile ubiquity of the voice, both camera and voice acquire a separate status, independent from a particular soldier's subjectivity. Thus, when the voice is heard over a shot closing in on a soldier, the personal address of the voice seems to be more *directed* towards the image of the soldier, rather than coming from it. The subject of the address and the addressee become conflated – the distinction between the 'I' and the 'you' of the voice becomes unsettled. The reversibility of these two agents crucially affects the status of the voice-over. If the voice-over initially conjured up a human agency seeking for a divine absence in the sky, the divine absence is now seeking for a human presence on the ground: 'You *too* are the source of all that's gonna be born,' utters the voice. As the camera points towards the soldiers, the sublime becomes the human and the human becomes the sublime. A manifestation is turned into a question and a question is transformed into a manifestation. They interpenetrate, both looking for each other, tracing each other.

'Your glory... Mercy... Peace... Truth...' the voice continues. But *whose* glory, *whose* truth does the voice summon now? Who is the one '*your* glory' refers to? A long take records the various groups of soldiers proceeding outside the forest and over the hills. Soldiers like Storm (John C.



Reilly) or Bell – as well as an unknown Melanesian – all enter and leave the frame. The fluidity of framing that accompanies the voice allows the latter to point both to characters (soldiers) and to anonymous extras – both to recognisable and non-recognisable persons. Although the words of the voice-over could be understood simply as addressing God (terms like 'peace', 'mercy' or 'truth' resonate a Christian conception of God), they could also be understood as addressing each person that passes in front of the camera. The voice-over's address, in a way, becomes continuously expansive. As Bersani and Dutoit suggest, 'The "you" of the voice-over is ultimately more of a trap than an enigma. It leads us to pinpoint "who" it is, whereas the connectedness (that the film brings about) dissolves the separate identity that a "who" falsely presupposes' (2004: 170). The film



does not seek to identify a singular 'you', but rather seeks to point to an ever-extendible 'you'. This extendibility becomes paradigmatically evident when the film cuts to a muted medium close-up of an unidentified Melanesian talking to the soldiers, and the voice-over utters 'truth'. An unknown and, *prima facie*, random human presence is turned into a bearer of this non-verbal, metaphysical truth that the film sets out to grasp.

Over the medium close-up of the Melanesian and a close-up of Bell listening pensively to the Melanesian's speech, the voice-over utters: 'You give calm a spirit ... understanding ... courage. The contented heart.' The latter words accompany the image of Bell and linger over the sequence of his wife caressing him. They now resemble Bell's interior monologue, addressed first to the Melanesian and then to his wife. Through the shifting meaning of the voice-over's 'you', the film brings together a soldier's encounter with the people of Guadalcanal with this soldier's intimate recollection of his beloved one.

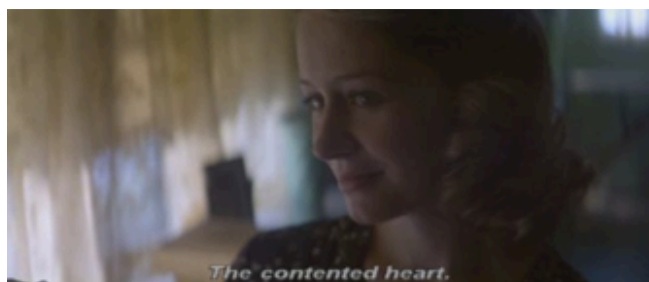
As the film centres on the image of the tender embraces *between* Bell and his wife, the voice-over's 'you' gradually vanishes ('courage ... understanding ... The contented heart'). The tone of the voice-over releases an affect of loving togetherness in which the 'I' and the 'you' amalgamate into an unstable union. The voice's quest to relate to the 'other-ness' it addresses reaches its climax. An extreme close-up allows Bell's and his wife's heads to intertwine.

From fondling each other's hands to pressing them together, the characters enact the vivid choreography of their entanglement. The affection between Bell and his wife, rather than merely constituting a mutual expression of emotion, is transformed into a mode of receptivity that dissolves the otherness of the 'other', de-polarising and synthesizing the conceptual categories of the 'I' and the 'you'.

Dissociating thought from subjectivity

The voice-over of the sequence is not simply construed as a means of expressing Bell's interiority (that is, the character's personal memory) but it is rather construed as an idiosyncratic mode of thinking able to transcend its private origin. The slippery relation between interiority and thought becomes finally striking during the scene of Welsh's wandering around the fields after the battle. In this case, although the film *gears* its progression towards the initiation of an interior monologue, it subsequently disrupts this progression by introducing a voice-over that could also be a third person commentary.

Initially, the dramatic context of the scene points to Welsh as the bearer of the voice's speculations. The scene takes place right at the end of a lingering medium shot of Welsh in the Copra plantation. Welsh seems concerned, his look is troubled. It seems that his thought has just been *stirred* by a discussion with Witt. Welsh has just confided to Witt that he feels unable to maintain his faith in the possibil-

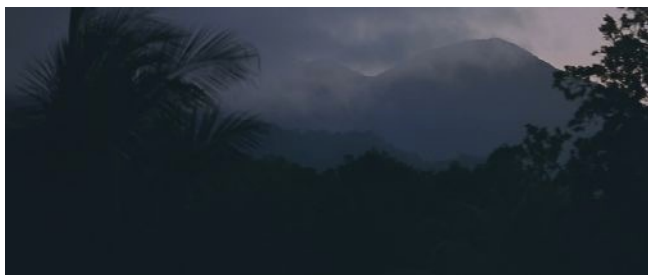


ity of meaning, in a world plagued by suffering and death. He feels unable to see 'the beautiful light', as Witt does.

Now, as if taking up a cue from Welsh's disquiet, a male voice-over utters: 'One man looks at a dying bird and sees nothing but unanswered pain ... But Death has got the final word ... he is laughing at him ...' The words are dubbed over the solitary walk of Welsh amidst the soldiers that night. Welsh is smoking – for quite a while – quietly and pensively observing various soldiers around him. The film seems to construe the voice-over as Welsh's reflection.

However, this construal is undermined by the apparently detached third person narrative mode ('One man ...') of the voice, as well as by the occasionally Southern American accent of the voice (Welsh does *not* possess such an accent). These aspects of the voice-over unsettle the initial connection to Welsh, so that the voice-over acquires an ambivalent quality, representing an activity of thinking that could be both *internal* and *external* to Welsh's subjectivity. The film further extracts the voice-over from Welsh's subjectivity by dubbing the words 'But death has got the final word. It is laughing at him ...' over a medium close-up from *behind* Welsh's head. Because of the position of the camera, the voice-over seems to be *commenting on* Welsh's thoughts, rather than expressing them. If 'the man' who sees nothing but 'unanswered pain' in the dying bird is indeed Welsh (as has been suggested by the characters' discussion prior to this scene), then this man also fails to see that Death has 'the final word'.

And, what kind of 'word', what kind of utterance is that? The film, apparently just dissociated from Welsh's subjective point of view, cuts to a long shot of the landscape. The voice-over pauses. Through the silent pause of the voice-over, the film enacts the unspeakable nature of death which seems unfathomable by Welsh's consciousness and un-interpretable by any sort of answer this consciousness could give.



Finally, the film cuts to a medium close-up of Witt sleeping, taken from right above Witt's body, and the voice-over concludes: 'Another man sees the same bird...and feels the glory'. As the film then cuts once more, this time to a shot of Welsh staring straight towards the ground, the direction of the camera's gaze and the direction of Welsh's gaze appear to be aligned with each other. Through this visual parallelism, the uttered words (pointedly referring to Witt) emerge as obliquely reflecting Welsh's thought again. Still, they do not clearly *express* Welsh's interiority as their source remains obscure.

So, who ultimately utters this voice-over then? Although the voice-over ambivalently detaches itself from the subjectivity of Welsh, it still remains vaguely personalised.



The voice is male, American, with a Southern accent. It reappears in various occasions throughout the film, such as when Witt goes back to the Melanesian village, after the battle or when Doll is staring at the sea from the deck of the battleship leaving Guadalcanal. In both these cases (like in the case of Welsh above), the voice becomes dissociated from the character visually present but, nevertheless, appears to allude to the *same* indeterminate person. In fact, although this person remains obscure, the timbre of the voice does repeatedly recall the timbre of Train's voice (the DVD subtitles sometimes mention Train as the speaker and sometimes not). So, why does the film repeatedly pick out this timbre in order to vaguely personalise the – otherwise, hardly identifiable – bearer of the voice-over?

The film does not seem to construe Train as a significant character, since it shows him only once at the beginning and once at the end. Train only minimally and fragmentarily participates in the film's action. When he first appears, it is in the sequence in the battleship's dungeon-like interior, while the soldiers prepare themselves for their attack on Guadalcanal. During this sequence, the film does not focus on him exclusively, as it introduces other, more significant characters.

In a platoon film, sequences in which the whole platoon appears together usually function as a way to introduce the main characters. This function of the sequence becomes evident not just through the film's emphasis on an actor's recognisability (actors such as Elias Koteas [Staros], Ben Chaplin [Bell] and Dash Mihok [Doll] appear in the sequence), but also through the identification of a character's



role in the platoon (for example, Staros is identified as the captain by one soldier), through the elaboration of a character's personal history (Bell talks to another soldier about his wife), or through the emphasis on a character's particular predicament (Doll wants to get one more gun, apart from his firearm, to protect himself).

The sequence moves back and forth, from these main characters, to characters played by less known actors. The distribution of the film's focus remains unstable and becomes strikingly ambivalent the moment Train appears. The film initially seems to linger on the actions of Sean Penn (Welsh), who is shaving in front of a mirror. Penn, being an easily recognisable actor, first captures our attention. However, the film also shows him *listening* to the story of another – much less recognizable – actor, John Dee Smith. The character of Smith recalls how afraid he was when his father beat him when he was little, confessing that now that their platoon is about to attack, he is even more afraid because he doesn't want to die. When Penn / Welsh asks him for his name, he replies: 'Edward B. Train, sir'. The moment could be both about Penn / Welsh *and* Smith / Train. At this point the film distributes its attention equally between Smith / Train (as he elaborates on his personal history) and Penn / Welsh (whose face, reflected in the mirror, is prominent in the medium close-up). In this way, even when Train is introduced, the film does not *clearly* favour



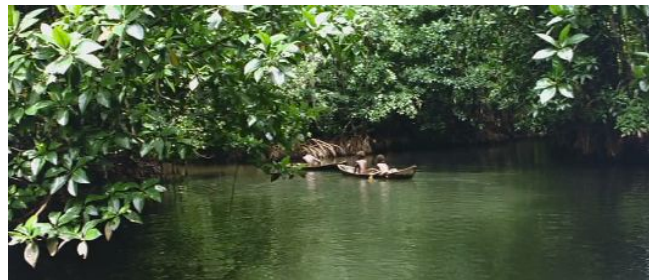
him as the main subject of the sequence. Moreover, although the film names Train, it does not further develop the character's relation to the action. Train is thus identified *only as one of the soldiers* who confront the possibility of dying. Through this identification, he becomes *representative* of any – otherwise anonymous – soldier.

Instead of concretising Train as a character by providing further access to his behaviour, the film renders him a *sheer signifier of a scared soldier*. The sense of such a presence, *like his*, and the residue of such fragility, *like his*, indiscriminately accompanies the other soldiers' solitary moments. As Train's voice also intermingles with other voices, it acquires a chameleon-like affective presence, joining the subjectivities of the various soldiers. In this way, the timbre of his voice, rather than merely alluding to a particular subjectivity, becomes the way through which the film unifies the soldiers' thoughts. The timbre of Train's voice becomes a recurring evocation of the soldiers' *common* predicament.

'Where is it that we were together?' asks a voice at the end of the film. The voice's timbre evokes Train's voice. The question is dubbed over a scene that echoes the one in the interior of the battleship. This time, though, the soldiers are gathered around the battleship about to leave Guadalcanal. The film's focus is dispersed, once again, capturing both recognisable (Welsh) and anonymous soldiers. 'Who were you that I lived with...walked with?' continues the voice. By bringing forth these questions, the voice suggests that the realm of this interconnectedness forged between the soldiers existed only transitorily, ethereally – fading away as soon as each soldier returns to his private life.

Still, the last voice-over of the film, uttered by the same voice again, may suggest otherwise: 'Oh my soul ... let me be *in you now* ... look out through my eyes ... look at all the things you've made ... all things shining'. The 'soul' the voice appeals to seems to refer to a more *inclusive* soul, since it *contains* the uttering 'I'. The 'eyes' it refers to, seem





to refer to eyes capturing the expanse of a luminous *wholeness*, since they are able to see ‘*all things shining*’.

As these words are heard, the effervescent trail of the ship on the sea, extends backwards towards the horizon, and forwards following the ship, inscribing on the water the ephemeral trace of a line without an ending. A flowing line of water reappears in the next shot as the latter captures a little boat streaming through a river. The movement of the water, suggesting the promise of a never ending encompassing, is finally punctuated by a shot of a plant standing alone in the sea, encircled by lapping waves. The solitary figure of the plant seems to be embraced by the promise of the water. The undifferentiated plenitude and encompassing qualities of water, in these closing shots, present an analogue to the voice-over’s construction of an enveloping soul, gathering up and merging those multiple solitary ‘I’s.

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¹ In this essay, I discuss the predominant mode of the film’s voice-over, that is, the mode that imbues and, ultimately, unifies the multiple instances of the film’s voice-over-s. That is why I use here the singular ‘voice-over’ instead of the plural ‘voice-overs’.

² Examples of such critics include Bersani and Dutoit (2004), Ron Mottram (2007), Hubert Dreyfus and Camilo Salazar Prince (2009) and David Davies (2009). More recently, this view has been criticized by Jeremy Millington (2010) and Gilberto Perez (2013).

³ Although the voice-over starts as an interior monologue (and begins, therefore, as a disembodied form of speech), a soundbridge and dissolve leads into a shot of Witt speaking to a friend, so that the disembodied voice-over becomes dialogue.

⁴ The DVD subtitles (see Figure 21) attribute this voice-over to Train (John Dee Smith) although *it is not clear* whether the voice strictly belongs to him or to other characters too (see analysis below in text). *The Thin Red Line* [DVD] 2000. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment (Catalogue number: VFC 14059).