

WWII in the Pacific: Cinematic Aesthetics and Ethics of American War

Tatiana PROROKOVA

American Studies Department
Philipps University of Marburg, Germany
tatiana.prorokova@gmx.de

ABSTRACT

U.S. involvement in both theatres of WWII, i.e., in Europe and in the Pacific, has been widely reflected in literature, film, music, and art. This paper investigates the way American intervention in the Pacific is showcased in Terrence Malick's film *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and the miniseries *The Pacific* (2010), directed by, among others, Jeremy Podeswa, and produced by, among others, Tom Hanks. I seek to analyze the aesthetics and ethics of U.S. war in the Pacific that these two media project. Do the chosen examples justify American intervention? How was the war in the Pacific different from that one in Europe? Were U.S. soldiers ready to fight in the Pacific? How did the war influence its participants? These are some of the questions the paper will meditate upon in large detail.

Keywords: WWII, U.S. Intervention, Film, Aesthetics, Ethics.

La Segunda Guerra Mundial en el Pacífico: estética cinematográfica y la ética de la guerra americana

RESUMEN

La participación de los Estados Unidos en ambas escenas de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, esto es, en Europa y el Pacífico, se ha reflejado ampliamente en la literatura, el cine, la música y el arte. Este ensayo investiga cómo la intervención americana en el Pacífico se retrata en la película de Terrence Malick *La delgada línea roja* (1998) y la mini-serie *El Pacífico* (2010), dirigida por, entre otros, Jeremy Podeswa, y producida por, entre otros, Tom Hanks. Mi intención es analizar la estética y la ética de la guerra de los EEUU en el Pacífico que estos dos medios proyectan. ¿Justifican los ejemplos escogidos la intervención americana? ¿En qué se diferenció la guerra del Pacífico de la europea? ¿Estaban preparados los soldados americanos para luchar en el Pacífico? ¿Cómo influyó la guerra a sus participantes? Estas son algunas de las preguntas que este ensayo analizará en detalle.

Palabras clave: Segunda Guerra Mundial, Estados Unidos, intervencionismo, cine, estética, ética.

«Yeah, people think they're going to see *Saving Private Ryan* in the South Seas, and they don't know what to make of it» – that was one of the critiques of *The Thin Red Line* (qtd. in Millett 1999:1429). Indeed, Terrence Malick's highly ambitious film that was released in 1998, half a year after Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, viewed the role of U.S. intervention in WWII from a starkly different perspective. Entwining human beings and nature, Malick does not simply question the war, he allows the spectators to look at it from the perspective of U.S. soldiers and meditate upon their role in the war. The director clearly demonstrates that war itself is evil. His censure of U.S. involvement in it notwithstanding, Malick gives one a chance to view the intervention from two perspectives, i.e., the audience observes how the intervention is perceived, first, on the level of command and, second, by ordinary soldiers. Yet Malick apparently focuses more on the latter, demonstrating that soldiers are nothing but pawns in every war; they do not have to think but rather, they have to obey the orders from above.¹

Based on James Jones's novel, *The Thin Red Line* narrates the story of Charlie Company during the battle for Guadalcanal on the Solomon Islands. It is interesting that the very first image that appears on screen as the film begins depicts a crocodile descending and slowly plunging into dirty water full of green scum. The scene is reinforced by dramatic music. It creates tension and already foretells terror and trepidation that permeate Malick's work. The switch to tropic jungles with twittering birds is, on the one hand, a visual relief for the audience; however, on the other hand, the voice-over and the camera angles force a wave of anxiety and uneasiness. «What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?» These questions are the opening lines of the film that transmit the philosophy of life that *The Thin Red Line* generates. From the very beginning, the audience is taught that everything is doomed to an endless fight for survival: the nature may seem peaceful but within the circle of life every day the new is born while the old passes away; the strongest survives whereas the weakest dies. The director complicates perception with an unusual position of the camera: the camera is directed at the sky so that the viewer can see dense tops of the trees and sun light that bursts through them. The camera continues to shoot the surroundings from a low position, manifesting the superiority of nature.

Later, the audience is informed that the island is not uninhabited but there are aborigines on it. One views the acts of their everyday life: they eat, play, and swim.

¹ The issue is also raised, although from a strikingly different perspective, in Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) that narrates the events of the battle of Iwo Jima (1945). Examining the issue of heroism and how one deals with it, the film's main story centers on the famous picture of six soldiers raising the flag of the United States on Iwo Jima. The tragic irony of Eastwood's film consists in the inability of soldiers and officers to identify two people on the picture. *Flags of our Fathers* therefore implies that while politicians and businessmen speculate and earn money on war, real heroes become forgotten. «Selling» the best story about war thus turns into the main goal for those who are far from the front line. Ultimately, even if heroes are honored, they are forgotten as soon as a new, better story trickles through. Most heroes are faceless in history because they often die unknown; as the film suggests, they are the ones who most devotedly fulfill orders.

All these actions are accompanied with majestic and solemn music that consecrates these people, making them closer to nature, merging them with nature, thus rendering them innocent and fragile to the civilized world. Filming swimming aborigines, the camera moves up to the surface and focuses on the white man on a boat, whom the viewer later knows as Pvt. Witt (James Caviezel). From the very first emergence of Americans in the film, Malick positions them as superior in relation to nature. This above-ness of the soldier becomes shocking when one recalls how supreme nature seemed in the opening scene. Speculating on how one can perceive *The Thin Red Line*, Tom Doherty and Thomas Doherty's claim that «Malick's Guadalcanal diary is more a mediation on nature than an evocation of war» (1999:83). Tom Whalen's argument that *The Thin Red Line* is not a film about war but rather a reflection «on the relationship of man to nature» (2009:22) supports the previous statement. Indeed, Malick devotes a lot of time to the images of nature as well as to philosophical and frequently obscure reasoning. Whalen makes an accurate observation about the ambiguity of Witt's voiceover – «Why does nature vie with itself?» – because the only ones who really fight in the film are people, whereas nature remains «implacable, mysterious, grand» (2009:23). The war and U.S. intervention are therefore portrayed so grotesquely horrifying that even the endless war in nature fades as the audience observes the battle between Americans and the Japanese.

Calmness and tranquility that reign on the island are disturbed not by the terrifying crocodile from the first scene but by the warship that moors to the island in order to take away Pvt. Witt – the army deserter. Censuring Pvt. Witt's deed, 1st Sgt. Edward Welsh (Sean Penn) says to him: «The truth is, you'll never be a real soldier, not in God's world.» This comment, however, makes one think what it means to be a good soldier. What does it mean to be «a real soldier» to the person who in the course of the film constantly questions war, his participation, and the role of other soldiers in it? Pvt. Witt has to rejoin the army. Later, he partakes in the battle against the Japanese for a hill at Guadalcanal. The combat becomes the climax of the film. Yet the fight is anticipated as a platoon of American soldiers finds two mutilated corpses of their comrades.

The fight at the hill is undoubtedly one of the most powerful scenes in the film. However, it does not differ much from any other combat scene that one might witness in a war film: young men run and fall dead, attack and move forward, shoot and scream. Although the depiction of Malick's war was criticized by James Morrison («Its battle scenes are poetically matter-of-fact» [1999:36]) and Whalen («Malick's war scenes – bullet traces of light, exploded bodies, soldiers falling as easily as tent-pins – disturb» [2009:29]), I contend that such impressions are formed because the audience identifies with Pvt. Witt and perceives war and each fight in the way Pvt. Witt does: abstracting from the horror and death, thus focusing on the spiritual rather than physical side of war. Whalen's argument corroborates my speculation: «There may be a war going on and bodies are blown to pieces and soldiers hold their guts in their hands . . . ; nonetheless, for Malick's Witt Guadalcanal is a place for metaphysical rumination – a Zen monastery, say, with fireworks and tropical flora and fauna» (2009:24-25).

The film's portrayal of war scenes is intense. The audience observes young men cautiously moving along the hill, looking around in fear, waiting in the grass with their eyes wide open, and running to meet their death. It is a horrifying feeling that the viewer experiences, looking at all these young men and realizing that the majority of them will remain on that hill forever. Nonetheless, Morrison accentuates the mood of «inconsolable lyricism» that accompanies the battle scenes: «[S]udden cuts to the unbearable beauty of a breathtaking, twilight sky that heralds only doom, or protean inserts of a fissured leaf with blinding light streaming through the holes» (1999:36). Allan R. Millett claims that «calling *The Thin Red Line* a war movie is like calling *Moby Dick* a book about fishing» (1999:1429), which implies that the film is not to be read as a mere war story but rather it is a complex cogitation on the state of war and U.S. intervention in particular. Malick lets the viewer realize this fact through the characters who are «as alienated from each other as from the enemy» (Cull 1999:1050). The director does not focus on the depiction of the army brotherhood, as it is explicitly done in the majority of films on WWII; on the contrary, Malick contrasts his characters. This opposition, however, plays an important role: American soldiers are not portrayed as good *per se*; quite the contrary, the audience sees how rotten and corrupt the inside of the army is. As a consequence, *The Thin Red Line* does not purely focus on WWII as a «good» war but rather questions this label. The contrast is vividly illustrated by Capt. James «Bugger» Staros (Elias Koteas) and Lt. Col. Gordon Tall (Nick Nolte). The latter does not care about his soldiers, and even when he is explained that casualties would be too heavy, he commands the military men to continue moving up the hill. Nolte's character is obviously interested only in a higher military rank that he can be awarded after the successful attack, whereas Capt. Staros, realizing how absurd the order is, refuses to send his soldiers to sure death. In this situation, he is apparently displayed as a hero because he is the one who takes responsibility for the entrusted soldiers. Despite the fact that he can be dismissed, Capt. Staros remains firm. Such an action might be considered far-fetched or hardly probable in real life but one can speculate that specifically during WWII such cases, indeed, took place in the army. This assumption underscores my argument that *The Thin Red Line* is not a surreal and dream-like representation of war, but rather behind the beauty of nature and multiple philosophical questions, one finds a rough and cruel world of survival where, borrowing from Nicholas J. Cull, «death and life, honor and ignominy are apportioned at random, with no regard to a character's moral worth or military prowess» (1999:1050).

After having successfully completed the operation, U.S. soldiers wander through the place that used to belong to the Japanese. Then, the following scene takes place: an American soldier squats down near the pile of Japanese soldiers, some of whom are already dead, others moan because of pain they feel due to severe injuries. The American soldier says to one of the Japanese who tries to crawl out of the pile: «I'm gonna sink my teeth into your liver. You are dying. See them birds up there? You know they eat you raw? Where you're going, you're not coming back from.» Then, the audience observes the U.S. soldier stopping up his nose with cigarettes and checking a handful of golden teeth he has pulled out of the mouths of the dead and dying Japanese. The scene finishes with the voiceover, «What are you to me? Nothing,»

when, preparing the pliers, the same soldier turns to the corpse that lies nearby. The scene overtly demonstrates that marauding, barbarism, and vandalism are parts and ramifications of war. However, one might wonder whether the scene corresponds to the principles of a «good» war,» as WWII is now usually referred to by Americans. Yet the brutal and merciless killings are somewhat justified since the Japanese were the enemy.

It is significant that Malick chooses a «compassionate depiction» of the enemy (Cull 1999:1050). Although the Japanese are the bad guys in the film, the audience sympathizes with them and disapproves of the actions taken by Americans. Rijdsdijk argues that the director's «sympathy» for Japanese soldiers can be interpreted as «sympathy for all men in war» (2011:41). Therefore Malick raises a very important ethical question of «how to treat both sides of the conflict equally» since the viewer tends to choose the side he/she can identify with and then fully supports it in the course of the film (2011:41). Consequently, the sympathetic treatment of the Japanese is used to question the role of Americans in the Pacific, making the film far from being a pro-American one.

One big disadvantage of *The Thin Red Line* is the emergence of a great number of stars. While Sean Penn and James Caviezel whom the audience sees from the very beginning are clearly here to play the main characters, the appearance of John Travolta, John Cusack, Adrien Brody, George Cloony, and Jared Leto is very disturbing as it arguably turns this highly philosophical film on war into a triumphal farce. The hill at Guadalcanal therefore becomes a shooting area in Hollywood, which distracts the audience from the important issues of war. One's emotional involvement in Malick's war gets completely ruined by the emergence of all these painfully familiar faces. Nonetheless, Morrison argues that all these faces serve to create «confusion between the characters,» which is explained by the voiceover at the end of the film: «Darkness and light, strife and love – are they the workings of one mind, the features of the same face?» (1999:38).

Not only *The Thin Red Line* fails to provide the reasons for U.S. intervention in WWII, it generally does not reflect a «convincing historical past» (Doherty and Doherty 1999:84). The film promotes the image of Americans as cruel «invaders» of the Islands who «rape the virgin land,» while their enemy – the Japanese soldiers – blend with the natives, thus becoming «part of the landscape» (1999:84). Speculating on these issues, I suggest raising another important question, namely the film's capacity to provide explanations for a political or military interference. Is every film that deals with war capable of giving reasons for intervening? Does every director have to raise and develop such issues in their films, ultimately giving answers to all the key questions? In connection with that I propose to make a distinction between a «war film» and the «cinema of intervention.» While the «cinema of intervention» undertakes the task to deal implicitly with the issue of interventionism questioning its legitimacy, a «war film» establishes different priorities, i.e., it focuses on war as a phenomenon where combat is the central theme, whereas intervention as a political issue is not inferred. Thus it is obvious that *The Thin Red Line* is a «war film» that sets the goal to reflect the way soldiers fought WWII rather than to discuss the factors that were decisive in conducting the intervention.

Malick's version of WWII does not seem phony, but it is not purely authentic either. Ian-Malcolm Rijdsijk argues that in his film, Malick solves the «conflict between memory and objectivity»: «As an event grows more distant in time, so the memory hardens particular aspects and lets slip others, providing the impetus for the generation of myths, which sacrifice individual experiences to a collective narrative» (2011:34). Indeed, the numerous characters, who are involved in *The Thin Red Line*, show the variety of «individual experiences» (yet not fully as the viewer hardly gets to know all these people). However, what specific message *The Thin Red Line* sends to its audience concerning war experiences remains unclear. Is it that there is, in principle, no brotherhood in war and every war is fought individually? Is it that many people were forced to fight WWII instead of being driven by the feeling of patriotism? Or is it that every war is a crime against nature, a distortion of balance that was initially created by God or some other supreme power? Or maybe Malick's intention is to show the radical difference between war and peace that is aptly demonstrated by means of contrasting the opening scenes of idyll with the further chaotic scenes on the battlefield.

This ambiguity and obscurity of Malick's project brings me to the analysis of the film's title. Cull suggests two interpretations. First, the title can be understood directly as a saying goes: «There's only a thin red line between the sane and the mad» (qtd. in Cull 1999:1050); second, there is Malick's «visual meaning» in it – «a thin, futile trail of human blood through the all-pervading jungle green of the South Pacific of 1942» (1999:1050). Tom Doherty and Thomas Doherty claim that «the thin red line» may stand for Charlie Company that «walk[s] through a mythic state of nature beyond history» (1999:84). I find the last interpretation very accurate in a sense that if Malick questions the power of human beings compared to that of nature's, then those who fight on the hill are just a miserable quantity, a small dot on a map, and thus a thin line in the film. However, such an interpretation belittles the role of those who gave up their lives for peace in our world. That is why I prefer to construe «the thin red line» as a certain barrier – physical or moral – that sooner or later each soldier transgresses. The crossing of the thin red line can be realized from the last words of the film's voiceover: «Oh, my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.»

HBO's miniseries *The Pacific* (2010) focuses on the military theatre of WWII deployed in the Pacific Ocean, too. Although Douglas A. Cunningham generally criticizes the miniseries because it «narrow[s] the scope of the Pacific war and neglect[s] the complexities of its execution» (2010:900), he underlines that *The Pacific* succeeds at moving the audience both emotionally and physically, representing the «true epic of horrific war» (2010:897). Significantly, the WWII the audience sees in this miniseries differs dramatically from the one that is portrayed in films and miniseries, including, for example, *Band of Brothers* (2001), that deal with the European theatre of war. *The Pacific* accentuates this difference in the final episode «Home,» when PFC Robert Leckie (James Badge Dale) arrives home and tries to pay for a taxi. The taxi driver responds: «No, I ain't touching that. Mighta jumped into Normandy, but least I got some liberties in London and Paris. You Gyrenes? You got nothing but jungle, rot, and malaria.» These words are arguably the gist of

the miniseries (2010:897). While both *The Pacific* and *Band of Brothers* are a tribute and reverence to the generation that fought WWII, *The Pacific* seems to reveal a much more terrible environment that soldiers fought in. It would be wrong to compare the war in the Pacific with the war in Europe and claim that one of them was more horrifying than the other. However, analyzing *Band of Brothers*, one spots only two episodes («Bastogne» and «The Breaking Point») that prove the climate to be an obstacle in conducting the war (when the soldiers frostbite their feet and can barely think of anything apart from how to get warm), whereas already the second episode of *The Pacific* «Basilone» starts with the video of a combat film featuring real soldiers, working their way through impenetrable jungles, while the voiceover informs the audience that apart from Japanese soldiers, the marines had to fight another enemy – «the jungle on Guadalcanal.» Later, the fourth episode «Gloucester/Pavuvu/ Banika» also focuses on the severity of the conditions as the voiceover informs the viewer: «It was one of the most brutal physical environments the marines would face in the entire Pacific war.» The audience observes marines eating rice with worms, sharing the rests of water from one's flask among some seven or eight people; one hears them cursing the weather and, specifically, the rain that never stops; one observes soldiers getting stuck in mud, hears them complaining about their uniform that never dries, and witnesses how precious the minutes spent under a tent are; lastly, each episode is graphic as the audience is always reminded of the dead bodies that rot and decompose within some hours due to hot and wet weather.

The main message of *The Pacific* is arguably that American soldiers were physically and mentally not ready for that particular war. The emergence of a military hospital that serves mainly as a nuthouse, as well as delirious soldiers and the powerful scene of suicide in the jungles are used to prove that the war in the Pacific was a real hell for soldiers. The effect is achieved by the formal and aesthetic capacities of the miniseries. Unlike film, whose mode is faster, serial narrative has a chance to linger and meditate on certain aspects or issues that it raises. Thus with the help of a slower pace, a series proves to be more efficient in reflecting, illustrating, and accentuating various problems that frequently, for time or plot reasons, have to be neglected in film. *The Pacific* illustrates that not only newcomers but also those who have already served for a considerable time and seem to have seen a lot in their lives could not cope with the brutality of war. For example, the audience observes Sgt. Elmo «Gunny» Haney (Gary Sweet) sitting on the ground after another attack, his eyes full of tears; speechless and devastated, he is helped by Capt. Andrew Haldane (Scott Gibson) to stand up and walk away from the battlefield. It is obvious that the war has broken him both morally and psychologically.

Yet, unlike *The Thin Red Line*, *The Pacific* vividly underscores good intentions of American soldiers in WWII. In the sixth episode «Peleliu Airfield» Capt. Haldane says to PFC Eugene Sledge (Joseph Mazello): «History is full of wars... But this war, our war, what I wanna believe... I have to believe... Every man that's wounded, every man I lose... that it's all worthwhile because our cause is just.» Although *The Pacific* reflects the marauding of some American soldiers who were pulling out golden teeth of the mouths of the Japanese, the miniseries makes it

absolutely clear that not every soldier did it. *The Pacific* therefore vividly balances the depiction of a good and a bad American soldier. In the ninth episode «Okina-wa,» PFC Sledge together with another American soldier beats up a Japanese prisoner of war, while later in the same episode, Eugene is not able to shoot a severely wounded Japanese woman (who begs him to do so because she cannot stand the pain anymore). Instead, he takes her in his arms and comforts until she dies, tears run down his cheeks.

The miniseries aptly reveals the influence of the war on soldiers' minds and their lives. Upon the soldiers' return home, the horrible visions of attacks and death haunt many of them for the rest of their lives. Thus in one of the later scenes, PFC Sledge screams and turns chaotically in his sleep, whereas his father (Conor O'Farrell) is left desperate since there is nothing he can do to help his son. When Mr. Sledge and his son once go to the forest to shoot ducks, Eugene bursts in tears, holding a rifle and apologizing for not being able to shoot. Although, as Cunningham argues, neither the audience is given an explanation for the «strategic significance» of the attacks depicted in *The Pacific* nor the voiceover «contextualize[s] the reasons» for American soldiers to intervene in those islands (2010:900), *The Pacific* is undoubtedly a vigorous account of hardships, loss, and devastation that American soldiers experienced and went through while fighting against the Japanese in the Pacific.

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