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Exploding Binaries:

Point-of-View and Combat in <u>The Thin Red Line</u>

This book is cheerfully dedicated to those greatest and most heroic of all human endeavors, WAR and WARFARE; may they never cease to give us the pleasure, excitement and adrenal stimulation that we need…

James Jones, Dedication to <u>The Thin Red Line</u>

Combat sequences provide many pleasures. There is the spectacle of battle: the scale of the action, the pyrotechnics, the noise. There is the constant suspense of knowing that death may come to any character, at any moment, and from any direction – the battlefield drips with the anticipation of violence. There is also the violence itself, satisfying our "primordial instinct for bloodshed and cruelty," as Erwin Panofsky called it (18). In addition, there are the stylistic techniques typically used to represent combat: handheld camera, fast cutting, multi-channel sound, and so on. The tendency of combat sequences to provoke aesthetic and kinesthetic responses is a major problem for directors attempting to deal with the issue of war in a serious manner. A reviewer in <u>The New Yorker</u>, writing on the subject <u>Saving Private Ryan</u> (1998), enunciates the problem as follows: "Despite Speilberg's avowed intent to darken and coarsen the formulas of the war film, old moviegoing habits die hard: I was practically standing on my seat and yelling at Tom Hanks to kill more Germans…" (Lane, 77). How, then, is it possible to

represent combat without providing pleasure? How can combat sequences serve a moral function?

This article suggests that one answer lies in the modulation of point-of-view. The ability of a soldier to fight is contingent on his ability to de-individuate the enemy. Analogously, the ability of the viewer to gain "adrenal stimulation" from a combat sequence is contingent on the de-individuation of one side, creating a dialectic "us" versus "them" structure of identification. By re-individuating the (generally non-Anglophone) "enemy," it is possible to undermine this pleasure. The model used by this article to demonstrate how this can be done is a climactic sequence from Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line (1998). The article explores how Malick adapts many of the combat genre's most common stylistic techniques and uses them to subvert the conventional pleasures of the combat sequence. Point-of-view shots, handheld camera, rapid cutting, an orchestral score, and a dynamic sound mix are used not to stimulate excitement but to create an alternative structure of identification that encourages emotional engagement with both American and Japanese combatants.

"Point-of-view" is a slippery and undertheorized concept. The term is most commonly understood in two distinct ways – as a mode of perception, and as a mode of identification. As a mode of perception, it refers to the position of the camera, to what is seen in a given shot and from where it is seen. Point-of-view as identification is partially dependent on point-of-view as perception, but, as Nick Browne observes, the nature of the viewer's emotional engagement is "contingent on a range of factors, only one of which is camera position" (9). Many factors (including narrative, music, and performance) are a product of the film itself, many (including individual viewers'

personal experiences and prejudices) are external to the film. The difficulty of applying the concept of point-of-view to close cinematic analyses is concisely summarised by Edward Branigan, who suggests that "the perceptual approach is too narrow, identification is too broad" (7). This article explores the range of factors internal to The Thin Red Line that influence the viewer's emotional engagement. Its scope therefore extends beyond perceptual point-of-view. However, in order to avoid referential slippage, all uses of the term "point-of-view" in this article refer specifically to perceptual point-of-view. Whenever the issue of identification and emotional engagement are discussed, they are discussed in ways that avoid using the term "point-of-view" in its too broad context.

In order to contextualize my analysis of The Thin Red Line, it is worth briefly exploring some of the ways in which post-war directors have approached the combat sequence. The earliest World War II combat films, dating from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s, tended to be patriotic and celebratory in tone; prominent examples include Henry King's Twelve O'Clock High (1949) and Michael Anderson's The Dam Busters (1954). Given their mythologizing agenda, it is hardly surprising that many of these films chose to depict aerial and sea combat rather than the less easily sanitized combat of the battlefield. The first wave of revisionist combat films, originating in the mid-1950s, included Robert Aldrich's Attack (1956), Nicholas Ray's Bitter Victory (1957), Don Siegel's Hell is for Heroes (1962), and Andrew Marton's The Thin Red Line (1964), the first screen version of James Jones's novel. These films brought combat down to earth and showed horrors as well as heroics. The necessity of war was still rarely questioned, but its execution (generally by commanding officers) was opened to critique. At the same

time, many of these films still singled out as heroes those who were the most effective killers, thereby demonstrating that depicting the horrors of combat does not necessarily entail a condemnation of combat. It is no coincidence that two of the most prominent examples of this group of films are by Robert Aldrich and Don Siegel, both known for their prurient fascination with the mechanics of violence.

The metaphorical death of John Wayne in Vietnam brought with it a new wave of films that questioned the politics of war on a deeper level. Yet many of these films are no less contradictory than the revisionist combat films of the 1950s. Despite the numerous denunciations of war by Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) in Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now (1979), the "Ride of the Valkyries" helicopter assault remains one of the most exhilarating combat sequences in film history. Furthermore, by focusing on the subjective consciousness of one individual, by turning war into a nightmare, the film becomes more about Willard's tormented psyche (and, by extension, 1970s America's tormented psyche) than about war itself (Tomasulo, 149). An even more extreme example of cultural introspection is provided by Oliver Stone's Platoon (1986). By focusing on the conflict between a "good," counter-cultural sergeant (Willem Dafoe) and a "bad," implicitly conservative sergeant (Tom Berenger), the film becomes a struggle of American ideologies transplanted to Vietnam. In the film's final voice-over, the main character comments: "I think now, looking back, we didn't fight the enemy, we fought ourselves." In this way, the Vietnamese are reduced to the level of a MacGuffin.

In contrast to the narcissism of Platoon, many of the most celebrated combat films have involved re-individuating the "enemy." Often made outside the studio system on a relatively low budget, these films have resisted the imperative to channel violence into

profit through excitement. Examples include Lewis Milestone's All Quiet on the Western Front (1930), Gillo Pontecorvo's The Battle of Algiers (1965), and Danis Tanovic's No Man's Land (2001). All Quiet on the Western Front re-individuates the "enemy" by the simple fact of being an American film based on a German novel about the German experience of fighting in the trenches. The Battle of Algiers takes the more sophisticated approach of focusing unjudgementally on both sides in the Algerian war of independence; by not taking sides, it takes sides. No Man's Land provides a bitter variant of this strategy by closely observing two metonymic protagonists – one Serb, one Croat – each of which is revealed to be as stupid as the other.

The Thin Red Line is based on a novel whose narrative catchment never extends beyond a single American company ('C-for-Charlie'). Given this narrative constraint, the film's only opportunity to re-individuate the "enemy" occurs when American soldiers are confronted with the presence of Japanese soldiers, i.e. during and after combat. The first two-thirds of the film focuses on Charlie company's arrival on the island of Guadalcanal, its movement inland, and its subsequent stalled progress, as the Americans find themselves pinned down by gunfire from an unseen Japanese bunker on top of a hill. Despite numerous shifts in point-of-view within Charlie company, the Japanese remain an absence. At last, about ninety minutes into the film, a group of Americans engages in close combat with the Japanese. Over the length of the two combat sequences that follow, point-of-view is gradually modulated to include Japanese as well as American subjects.

The shot structure of the first combat sequence encourages identification with the Americans. It commences with a small American assault group, led by Captain Gaff (John Cusack), launching an attack on a Japanese hilltop bunker. The majority of shots in

this sequence are handheld, at the American soldiers' eye level, filmed in their immediate proximity. In addition, the camera rarely anticipates an event but instead follows it. When something catches the American soldiers by surprise, as does the suddenly burst of gun fire in which one of their number is hit in the chest, it catches the camera by surprise too – the shot man is in the background of the frame, partially obscured by another soldier in the foreground. When the characters anticipate an air strike, the camera points up at the sky and anticipates it with them. Branigan refers to such camera techniques as providing "point-of-view of attitude," a point-of-view that lies between perception and identification (9). As the Japanese soldiers swarm out of their holes to counter-attack, they are finally given physical form. But though visible, they remain anonymous. As the Americans engage in face-to-face combat, the editing accelerates. The combination of handheld camerawork and fast cutting increases the kinesthetic impact of the sequence and ensures that no single Japanese can be observed for more than a few moments or perceived as anything other than a target. These combined techniques result in a relatively conventional point-of-view structure, which in turn results in a thrilling combat sequence. However, the sequence's conventional pleasures are almost immediately subverted. After only a few minutes of fighting, the Japanese bunkers are "reduced." The taking of the hill is a pivotal moment in the film's narrative. For the Americans it marks the transition from stasis to movement, from receiving pain to giving it. For the Japanese it marks the transition from invisibility to visibility, from strength to vulnerability. By extension, it marks a peripeteias in point-of-view too. Literally, it grants the Americans the privilege of looking down over the island (Schaffer). Narratively, it brings about the conditions under which the Japanese can be included in Malick's cinematic embrace.

As Gaff and his men wait for reinforcements, the Americans and their prisoners face each other in near silence. The few surviving Japanese sit in a row, a parody of the line that until a few moments ago was holding back an entire American division. The sequence is framed as an exchange of point-of-view shots – jittery low-angle shots from the eye level of the Japanese, inter-cut with more stable shots of the Japanese from the eye level of the (mainly standing) Americans. As both sides continue to regard each other, subject-object differentiation becomes indeterminate. Americans watch Japanese watching Americans, Japanese watch Americans watching Japanese. What is most important in this silent network of looking and being looked at is not the angle of the shots but something new within the shots – Japanese faces. Over the period of ninety minutes, the Japanese have moved from abstraction, to invisibility, to anonymity, to individuation. So the shots used to represent them have moved from none, to panoramic wide shot, to medium wide shot, building to long duration close-ups of their faces. The individual humanity that has been submerged under continual references to "the Japs" at last surfaces. As Béla Balázs observed, close-ups "lift a character out of the heart of the greatest crowd and show how solitary it is in reality and what it feels in this crowded solitude" (63). Formerly part of a mass, each Japanese soldier is now alone in his suffering. On each face is inscribed a unique perception of and reaction to defeat (Bersani and Dutoit, 145). One prisoner defiantly gazes back at his captors, one stares at the ground, one bangs his fist on a stone, one prays.

There follows a short exchange between Gaff and Lieutenant Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte), who declares his intention to keep pressing forward. Just before the Americans start moving, Private Witt (James Caviezel) sees the half-buried face of a dead Japanese

soldier. As well as a face, the enemy is now given a voice. "Were you loved by all?" the dead soldier asks in voice over, "Know that I was…" Malick not only allows an enemy to speak, but a dead enemy at that – someone who, as a Japanese solider and a corpse, would conventionally be silenced twice over. Through the dead solider, the Japanese are incorporated into the hypothetical single human soul that Witt speculates about. This may not, in itself, seem especially radical; it is not the direct engagement with political ideology that is traditionally associated with radical cinema. However, in the context of thirty five years of American films about the Vietnam War in which the Vietnamese still wait to be given an authentic voice, of Hollywood's fifty year silence on the subject of the Korean War, and more broadly of high budget films' seemingly structural inability to engage in any kind of serious ethical discourse, it is a detail of quintessential importance. Perhaps the most efficient way of changing perceptions of war is not through the overtly political, which – depending on viewers' personal ideologies – is always vulnerable to wholesale refutation, but through the irrefutable force of the humane.

Immediately following the dead Japanese soldier's voice over, the action returns to Charlie company's point-of-view. As stretches of forest catch fire, the advancing Americans are engulfed by smoke. They peer about, attempting to locate the enemy, but – like the viewer – see nothing but smoke and hear nothing except their own breathing and an occasional bullet skimming past. The tiniest sounds, such as the snapping of twigs underfoot, are subtly accentuated in the sound mix to reflect the soldiers' heightened perceptual alertness. Occasional jump cuts reflect their disorientation and physical agitation. This brief sequence provides a textbook example of how to create identification through concealing the source of a threat. Its techniques are those of hundreds of

antecedent war films, horror films, and thrillers. But again, as in the hilltop sequence, the excitement is brief and is stimulated only in order to be subverted.

At last, the enemy is heard charging and the smoke clears. After suspense comes action in the form of a burst of close-up inserts, some so fast they are barely perceptible: bayonets gouging and stabbing, rifles firing, bodies slumping on the ground. The close-ups are accompanied by the terse, wet sound of blades penetrating flesh, gruesomely boosted in the sound mix to the same volume as a gunshot. These shots act as a transition and lead into The Thin Red Line's second climactic combat sequence, which focuses on the Americans' attack on a Japanese bivouac. The bivouac sequence is a model of how a combat sequence can use stylistic techniques simultaneously to avoid "adrenal stimulation" and re-individuate the enemy. It is on these techniques that the rest of this paper focuses.

The dominant set-up throughout the bivouac sequence is that of a forward-moving medium wide shot. As the Americans advance, the camera is positioned among their number, surging ahead with them. As in the hilltop sequence, the camera does not anticipate events but follows them. None of the shots in this sequence are choreographed, or at least none appear to be choreographed, for the camera. Malick's usually precise framing descends into the uncertain, distractible movement of a documentary set-up, albeit slightly smoothed out by the use of a steadicam as opposed to a shoulder mount. While the soldiers are busy killing, the camera allows itself to be distracted by the detritus of the battle. This detritus mainly takes the form of Japanese soldiers. As the battle turns into a rout, the camera lingers on such sights as an injured Japanese soldier weakly brandishing a sword in defense of an even more injured friend. By building the

bivouac sequence out of these "documentary" elements, Malick allows attention to fall not only on the perceptions of the Americans but also on the effect of their actions on the Japanese, resulting in a "double structure" of identification which "implicates the spectator in both the position of the one[s] seeing and the one[s] seen" (Browne, 8).

If anything, the presence of the ones seen is more prominent than that of the ones seeing. As the seen, Japanese soldiers are ever-present. By contrast, the structures of looking in this sequence are far from stable, and so those doing the looking often lose their presence. The sequence is littered with "un-rooted" point-of-view shots. The traditional set-up for a point-of-view shot comprises either two or three elements: firstly, a medium close-up of a character's face looking, then a wide shot of what s/he sees, and then an optional return to the character's face showing a reaction to what has just been seen. Malick's point-of-view setups tend to be incomplete. They rarely involve a reaction shot. In addition, it is often ambiguous whether the initial glance and the shot following the glance are connected. Malick's point-of-view shots can perhaps better be regarded as "implied" point-of-view shots, in which the identity (and even, sometimes, the existence) of the perceiver is ambiguous. For example, as the American soldiers run towards the Japanese bivouac at the start of the sequence, there is a medium close-up of Witt's face. This is followed by a forward-moving shot of the bivouac, a shot which one might reasonably assume to represent Witt's point-of-view. Yet this is not necessarily the case – there has been no obvious glance by Witt or other indicator of the existence of 'looking' to cue the shot. Neither is there any clear temporal or spatial continuity between the two shots. To further confuse matters, a couple of seconds into the supposed point-of-view shot, an American soldier overtakes the advancing camera and runs into view in the

foreground. This figure may be Witt, or may not; he is seen only from behind, so it is impossible to tell. In such moments of un-rooted point-of-view, the American subject momentarily blinks out of view and becomes an absence. All the viewer has left to engage with is the object of the gaze – namely, the suffering Japanese.

Un-rooted point-of-view shots pervade The Thin Red Line, providing a key component of the film's disjunctive editing style. They also provide a shot-by-shot manifestation of what Michel Chion refers to as the film's overall structural parataxis (13). The narrative focus on multiple protagonists, the presence of A-list actors in cameo roles and unknown actors in leading roles, and the frequently unidentifiable voice overs (sometimes referencing the images they accompany, often not) have all been discussed at length in previous responses (see Smith, Morrison, Schaffer, and Leigh), so I shall not linger on these aspects of the film. Suffice it to say that all of these elements work together with un-rooted point-of-view shots to deny the viewer a stable subject with whom to identify. An extreme instance of an absent subject occurs in the bivouac sequence when a Japanese soldier is seen in a trench with his hands up, looking directly into the camera, pleading for his life. This shot not only implies a subject but also, through the Japanese soldier's response, tells us something of what the subject is doing and what he is about to do. Yet the subject remains unseen. In the light of this absence, and of the Japanese soldier's stare straight at the camera, it is we who become subject to the Japanese soldier's object. The result is a moment of diegetic instability in which the dividing lines between viewer, actor, and character break down. We are directly addressed and so drawn into the action, but at the same time confronted with our passivity. The shot lingers for several long seconds, before a quick insert of a rifle being

fired drives home the humbling fact that we occupy a very different moral space to that of the battlefield.

The kinesthetic charge of the combat sequence is also de-fused by the use of music and sound. The music in the bivouac sequence is an original composition by Hans Zimmer. Behind Danny Elfman and John Williams, Zimmer is probably the most famous and prolific film composer in Hollywood. His specialty is action cinema, and he has written soundtracks for over a hundred films including <u>Crimson Tide</u> (Tony Scott, 1995), <u>Broken Arrow</u> (John Woo, 1996), <u>Gladiator</u> (Ridley Scott, 2000), <u>Pearl Harbor</u> (Michael Bay, 2001), and <u>Batman Begins</u> (Christopher Nolan, 2005). His quasi-orchestral scores for these films are typical of the kind that Anahid Kassabian refers to as creating "assimilating identifications" (2). By paralleling the changing emotional states of films' protagonists, Kassabian suggests, they coerce audiences into identifying with these protagonists – usually white, American, male leads involved in heroic, life-threatening activity. Zimmer's score for <u>The Thin Red Line</u> is more subtle. For much of the film, the soundtrack comprises a bricolage of twentieth century classical music (Pärt, Ives, Fauré), Melanesian songs, and traditional American hymns and folk tunes. Zimmer rearranges much of the "found" music, adds themes of his own, and weaves these disparate elements into an intricately patterned whole. However, on a few occasions, the coercive tendencies of Zimmer's music are allowed to surface. The bivouac sequence is one such occasion.

The sequence begins with a slow, mournful, harmonic texture scored for low strings. After about a minute and a half, the harmony is augmented by a melody comprising three plaintive descending tones. The motif of three descending tones is one of the most important musical statements in the film. It is first heard near the start of the

film, in F minor, as Tall (Nolte) wanders around the deck of an American frigate. Following a number of variations, the theme reaches its fullest development in the bivouac sequence, where it is stated not in F minor but in E flat minor. The movement into a lower key (E flat is a tone below F) is crucial. The original F minor theme becomes even more sombre, even more intensely lamenting in this key. The result is reminiscent of a requiem. Over the length of the sequence, the theme gradually swells into an orchestral climax, complete with a brass section and a chiming bell that makes explicit the music's religious overtones. By juxtaposing a hymn to the dead with images of dead and dying, Malick turns the entire sequence into a requiem for the (predominantly Japanese) dead and dying. In this way, he exploits the power of Zimmer's music to create "assimilating identifications" and harnesses these not to the members of Charlie company but to the Japanese.

The effect of the music in the bivouac sequence is accentuated by the sound mix. Initially, the music remains at an almost subliminal level, subsuming itself to the aural immediacy of the battle. As the sequence progresses and the camera's attention focuses ever more on the suffering Japanese, the score's audio levels imperceptibly build while the sounds of battle imperceptibly decrease, emphasizing the gradual crescendo of the music itself. The continuum of mixing volumes also reinforces the sequence's affective move towards the Japanese. Though the balance between music and diegetic sound is repeatedly re-adjusted throughout the sequence, there occur a few moments in which shifts in balance are clearly audible. The first such shift coincides with the first lingering shot of suffering Japanese. As the camera moves past the aforementioned Japanese soldier guarding over his wounded friend, the three-tone melody makes its first entrance

in the soundtrack and is followed by a gradual fade up in the sound mix. Aurally, as well as visually, the sequence's emotional pitch is raised. The next major fade up coincides with the shot of the Japanese soldier looking straight into the camera. Again, a key moment of Japanese suffering coincides with a fade up in the music. The last major shift in the balance of the sound mix coincides with the orchestral climax. The first ring of the bell is synchronized with the thud of an American helmet hitting a Japanese prisoner's face. Though the requiem theme is an original composition, all the film's original music was composed in advance of the editing, as opposed to the more usual practice of being composed in response to the rough cut. The images chosen to accompany each of the escalations in the music are not the result of rhythmic chance, but are deliberately placed to occur at those precise moments, further contributing to the music's subtly didactic function.

In the wake of the two Gulf Wars, it has become a commonplace to liken journalistic war coverage to combat films. Certainly, the presence of fictional techniques in television journalism is pervasive: for example, the appeal to identification implicit in references to "us" and "our soldiers," and the focus on individual war reporters to provide a narrative continuity over the weeks and months of a campaign. At the same time, if television news is like a war movie, it is a strange war movie – a fragmentary movie, without main characters, a bloodless PG rated movie in which nobody is ever seen to die. In fact, the more one explores this metaphor, the more obvious it becomes that war journalism does not result in the equivalent of a "movie" at all. I would suggest that what commentators most often mean when they say that war coverage is like a movie is that

they respond to it like a movie. They experience Virilio's "derealization of military engagement" (1). In a recent report, a consensus was expressed among international war correspondents that combat reporting needs to be freer to reveal the violent consequences of conflict (see Lewis, et al). War must be re-realized.

In cinema, however, re-realizing war requires more than the provision of visual and aural authenticity. The technique of loading combat sequences with carefully researched physical details to create a quasi-documentary aesthetic, a technique which reached its apotheosis in the Omaha beach sequence of Steven Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan (1998), is inadequate. The most effective re-realization of war, I would suggest, involves not only representing but also contextualising the processes of physical conflict. What is needed is a plurality of points-of-view. This may mean showing not only combat but also broader political and military decision-making structures at work, as in Stanley Kubrick's Paths of Glory (1957). It may mean showing the effect of trauma on whole communities, as in Michael Cimino's The Deer Hunter (1978). Alternatively, it may mean doing what The Thin Red Line does, and making point-of-view open-ended and so potentially all-inclusive. Malick's film includes not only American and Japanese points-of-view, but also the points-of-view of native Melanesians living at the fringes of the combat zone. There is also the point-of-view of nature. In a canopy of trees, a parrot turns its head and glances indifferently at a column of soldiers below. And, of course, beyond humankind and nature, there is God, who is omniscient, who has infinite points-of-view. Films, like Saving Private Ryan, which restrict themselves to one point-of-view propagate the unnatural divisions that cause war in the first place. "War is a terrible thing..." seems to be their message, "... after all, look at what those Germans did to us

Americans." In the bivouac sequence, Malick reconciles two opposed points-of-view, and then transcends them, so providing a radically different approach to representing conflict. Once the fighting dies down, over images of controlled chaos, Witt speculates in voice-over about the origins of war. "Who is killing us?" he asks, moments before an unarmed Japanese prisoner is shot in the back at point blank range. "Us," it is clear, does not only mean "Us Americans."

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