

Narrative Vistas:

Subversive Voice-over in Terrence Malick

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Introduction

The complexity of Terrence Malick's filmic language makes his films worthy of close, sustained academic analysis with respect to the vagaries of their voice-overs, to augment the growing body of work dedicated to his visual style, work which often alludes to the voice in passing, but less often as a central focus. Crofts' illuminating study of Malick's *Days of Heaven* observes the critical privileging of the visual track¹ and Malick's tendency to "defamiliarise and disturb"² the relationship between sound and image. James Monaco articulates this troubled relationship as "an electric current between the positive pole of the voice-over narration and the negative pole of the images on the screen"³. I analyse the same relationship, but where Crofts foregrounds Malick's "intention to supplement and trouble the traditional hierarchisation of synchronised dialogue"⁴ through the use of asynchronous voice-over, I examine Malick's voice-over narration against the cinematic traditions, not of dialogue, but of narration. Thus where Crofts argues for Malick's reorganisation of the soundscape away from a "vococentrist,"⁵ hierarchical privileging of the *synchronous* voice by the viewer, I start from the conventional bestowal of uncanny narrative authority⁶ upon the offscreen 'storyteller'. As Sarah Kozloff articulates, "We put our faith in the voice not as created, but as creator,"⁷ and this imbues the narrator with deific conjuring power. The unseen voice therefore becomes, in Doane's terms, the voice of the (personified) film:

even when asynchronous or 'wild' sound is utilised, the phantasmatic body's attribute of unity is not lost. It is simply displaced – the body *in*

the film becomes the body *of* the film. Its senses work in tandem, for the combination of sound and image is described in terms of ‘totality’ and the ‘organic’.⁸

My concern is the narrative *conventionality* of the voice-over narrator, regarded with the same critical suspicion de Lauretis⁹ attributes to all narrative conventions, by analogy with Dora’s suspicion of Freud’s narrativising psychoanalysis. In the terms of de Lauretis’ narrative theory, Malick’s narration attains a “self-subverting coherence,”¹⁰ and therefore:

because of [its] capacity to inscribe desire and to direct, sustain, or undercut identification – [is a] mechanism to be employed strategically to construct other forms of coherence, to shift the terms of representation, to produce the conditions of representability of another – and gendered – social subject.¹¹

I argue that Malick’s use of voice-over consistently constitutes a visceral, sensory ‘anti-voice-over,’ using the viewer’s familiarity with the technique of voice-over narration to systematically subvert expectations of the heavily encoded conventions of traditional narration in film. Chion articulates the role of traditional narration thus:

The voiceover and offscreen voice function like a home base, central and autonomous, from which the speaking happens, and it orders, comments, delivers information, and so on.¹²

Kozloff notes traditional voice-over’s key functions as its “capacity for creating intimacy,”¹³ to add a “certain slant or even definite bias”¹⁴ and in “conveying expositional information”.¹⁵ Traditional narration therefore clarifies, establishes interiority and intimacy with the audience, crystallises character subjectivity, provides a moral gloss and informs the audience of anything which cannot be represented visually or through dialogue. Viewers familiar with these traditions of filmic narrative come to expect voice-overs to behave in this way. All of Malick’s prominent voice-over

narrators, however, evoke uncertainty rather than narrative clarification, establishing distance rather than intimacy, shared consciousness rather than interiorised individual subjectivity and often existence as physical object rather than human agency, obscuring the status of the flashbacks they anchor. I have selected *Badlands*¹⁶ and *The Thin Red Line*¹⁷ among Malick's four films as they typify his 1970s and 1990s work respectively, but his other films share this striking use of voice-over. Typically, the unseen voice tends to be imbued with panoptic power by virtue of its unverifiability. Conventionally the viewer is conditioned to trust the filmic narrator unless the image explicitly contradicts him (the traditional filmic narrator being male). Malick's voices, divorced from the individual authority or agency of, for instance, Orson Welles' Charles Foster Kane¹⁸ or Norman Bates' mother in Hitchcock's *Psycho*,¹⁹ are allowed to accompany the viewer, with neither pure candour nor simple irony, through the films' diegeses. Malick's narrators either resist the mythologising impulse typical to conventional voice-over, or use it with stark self-reflexivity. His subversive voice-over thus challenges the status of film as visibly mediated reality. The complex interaction of voice-over narrators with spectacular visual tracks and integrated, symphonic audio tracks (voice-over and diegetic sound often operating like separate instruments in a polyphonic musical soundscape²⁰) adds to the transcendent beauty and unique environmental sense of Malick's work.

Malick's films all employ first person character narration, a single voice in his 1970s films (exemplified by *Badlands*) and a collective, multi-voiced interiority in his work from the last decade (exemplified by *The Thin Red Line*²¹). The early films employ a past-tense narration, positioned sufficiently soon after the events that the teenage women narrating each film retain their perceptive and comprehensive limitations and immature physical voice. The largely present-tense narration of the later films, with the voice-over enunciating thoughts, prayers, letters, journals, memories and unseen

dialogue interchangeably, evoke the films' complex nostalgia and often a state of apparent timelessness, without interrupting narrative flow. Malick's extra-diegetic narrating perspectives, belonging to characters within the narrative but removed from the primary diegesis by either chronology or uniquely detached interiority, fuse objective authority with ironic subjectivity to expose the filmic mediation of narrative truth. These perspectives tend to be wildly speculative and tangentially removed from diegetic reality, not simply the incidental thoughts of characters. It is because of this singularly expansive quality in Malick's vocalised thoughts that I depart from Kozloff's widely accepted exclusion of present-tense, first person interior monologue from the term "voice over narration".²²

Malick's use of voice-over epitomises its filmic possibilities, transcending the documentary, summarising use of voice-over and satirising its literary (and *film noir* in the case of *Badlands*) legacy. Typical condemnation of the technique of voice-over,²³ for its lazy, denotative approach to interiority, therefore does not apply to Malick's subtle, metaphorical blend of voiced interiority with visually represented thought. However clichéd conventions of voice-over, the source of such condemnation, form a backdrop to the cinematic experience of Malick's work. Malick's voice-over narration may not enact Vertov's kinok warning to filmmakers to:

Flee – the sweet embraces of the romance, the poison of the psychological novel, the clutches of the theatre of adultery; to turn your back on music,²⁴

but the "sweet embraces of romance" are meticulously made to collide with their cynical opposites in Malick's work, the psychological uniquely collectivised in the later films, the nostalgia self-aware and without unacknowledged distortion. Malick's auteuristic, lyrical audio-visual quality is fundamentally filmic, driven equally by figurative montage, narration and music. Thus while Malick's humanism may offend Vertov, his use of voice-

over easily transcends the hackneyed, reflexive imitation of literature for which voice-over is usually criticised, reflecting soberly and honestly on film as an artificial, 'told' medium.

Malick's careful manipulation of vocal authority reflects Chion's identification of the "acousmètre," an avoidance of the naturalistic fusion of sound and image, in distinguishing between the implied panoptic authority of the invisible "acousmatic"²⁵ voice and the finite humanity of the onscreen speaker. The viewer's senses of sight and hearing are thus placed in ironic tension with each other. This is best exemplified in *Badlands*, as male protagonists embody physical onscreen dominance while female characters occupy the uniquely authoritative position of off-screen narrative voice, which makes them therefore difficult to locate²⁶ and quantify. Their perspective, however, is limited by subjectivity. Another isolated but significant manipulation of acousmètre concerns the uncanny vocal authority of the mute maid (Dona Baldwin) in *Badlands*²⁷ and various analogously non-Anglophone characters in *The Thin Red Line*, whose voiceless visual presence similarly avoids logically fusing voice and gaze.²⁸ Further, through the collocation of Malick's voice-over narrators, the different regional accents allow the voice itself to exist independently as an aesthetic object (with a seductive capacity to focus the audience's inherent "vococentrism"²⁹) of the kind identified by Mladen Dolar:

an object voice which does not go up in smoke in the conveyance of meaning, and does not solidify in an object of fetish reverence, but an object which functions as a blind spot in the call and as a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation.³⁰

This residue of the voice after meaning has been conveyed thrives in Malick's work to privilege the aesthetic over the meaning, the connotative over the denotative and the vista over the plot.

Malick's voice-over narration contributes to the mythic quality of his work, each film being his unique reading of a dominant historical myth in

formative America³¹, the outlaw couple myth (specifically Charles Starkweather and Caril Fugate, but also evoking Bonnie and Clyde) in *Badlands*, the climactic World War II battle for Guadalcanal in *The Thin Red Line*, a pre-World War I, 'Old Testament' love triangle in *Days of Heaven* and the highly mythologised (and Disneyfied) history of Pocahontas in *The New World*. Each myth resounds in overdetermined imagery and events, and the presence of voice-over narration in Malick's portrayals immediately evokes expectations of particular preordained historical glosses. Malick's voice-over narrators sporadically, problematically and partially fulfil these expectations.

While Malick's use of voice-over often consciously defies conventional expectations, the effect of his use of off-screen voices remains, broadly, the suturing of the cinematic gaze to extract coherence from disparate images³², albeit in a highly sophisticated form. Dolar's identification of the use of the voice to unite verbal signifiers into a temporal chain may thus be equivalent to Malick's use of voice to anchor meandering visual montage into a complex act of filmic communication:

If signifiers form a chain, then the voice may well be what fastens them into a signifying chain.³³

'A Magical Land' – Holly's voice in *Badlands*

Holly's (Sissy Spacek) desolate, cliché-ridden voice-over narration in *Badlands* challenges traditional associations of narrative agency with empowerment, and of interiority with independent self-construction. Holly meticulously narrates her liaison with Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen), his murder of her father and their increasingly violent flight together across America. Holly remains a startlingly passive presence throughout, allowing herself to drift from her father's custody, to Kit's, ultimately to police custody as the pair are separated and caught, and Kit is executed. Holly's nostalgic narrative mode, alternately ironised and endorsed by juxtaposition

with the stark beauty of Malick's mise-en-scène, problematically positions Malick's 1970s audience relative to the 1950s he constructs. Neither simple ironic detachment from the past nor an Edenic golden age are transparently evoked, the resulting uncertainty rendering Holly's oral account surprisingly seductive.

Holly's "patter of dime-novel clichés"³⁴ deconstructs deliberate self-narrativisation within *Badlands*, as exemplified in the account of her courtship of Kit:

Kit went to work in the feedlot while I carried on with my studies. Little by little we fell in love. As I'd never been popular in school and didn't have a lot of personality, I was surprised that he took such a liking to me, especially when he could've had any other girl in town if he'd given it half a try. He said that I was grand, though, and that he wasn't interested in me for sex and that coming from him, this was a compliment.

Declining to partake of Kit's grasping self-construction as a virile (able therefore to "compliment" Holly by excluding her from his sexual gaze) "cowboy," Holly candidly admits his position in the feedlot, while adopting a strikingly self-diminishing posture by admitting she "didn't have a lot of personality." Close-ups of Kit at work, juxtaposed over Holly's account, emphasise the bars of the feedlot apparatus, suggesting a physical "cage" motif typical to Malick³⁵, and Kit's low status within the feedlot hierarchy. Malick's evocation of the Western genre through the stoical, squinting, cigarette-smoking farmhand and the prominent wind in Kit's hair in close-up is contradicted in the mise-en-scène of the ensuing long shot as Kit is visually subjugated to the centrally framed cow. Kit's repetitive physical motion with the bar of the feedlot, juxtaposed with an anonymous series of cattle, lends ambiguous irony to the accompanying suggestion that "he could've had any other girl in town if he'd given it half a try." The audience's perception simultaneously of Kit's physical beauty and prowess, his diminished social rank, and his limited female acquaintance (the only

“girls” Kit interacts with here being bovine) problematically interacts with Holly’s voice-over.



Figure 1: *Kit the Cowboy*

Holly’s subjective romanticisation of events with Kit undermines her account, particularly her self-confessed “love” for Kit, diminished by her monotonous delivery and reliance on such clichés as “Little by little we fell in love”. Holly’s use of clichés divides critical reception of *Badlands*; Anne Latta suggesting that

such clichés signal her immaturity and lead us to question the reliability of her statements. There is a sense of irony in some of these grand phrases.³⁶

Latta’s “sense of irony” presumably alludes to the dramatic irony between the filmic world as observed by the audience and the romantic fairytale naively imposed on it by Holly’s narration. Comparison with Adam Duncan Harris’ reading, however, denotes the arbitrariness of this privileging of the visual track (also emphatically romanticised, if in a different tone) over the oral narration:

This visual evidence (the geographically incongruous llama, among other things) of her unreliability as well as her descriptions of the thoughts circulating around Kit’s head ask us to question the validity of

her entire presentation, ask us to remember these images and words are coming from a teenage girl recollecting events and dialogues.³⁷



Figure 2: Disbelieving eyes on seeing a llama.

Harris' reading of Holly as visual "image-maker"³⁸ interestingly implies Holly's direct, comprehensive responsibility for both visual and voiced elements of the film's diegesis, and hence for any dislocation between them. For Harris, *Badlands* in its entirety "can be read as a version of the tale that was presented to the court – Holly's version meant to prove her innocence."³⁹ For Harris then, the irony falls between two contrasting manifestations of Holly's account. Malick's own interpretation of Holly's narrative voice, in a rare interview, emphasises her control of the narrative but ambiguously positions her intended audience:

There is some humour in the picture, I believe. Not jokes. It lies in Holly's mis-estimation of her audience, of what they will be interested in or ready to believe. (She seems at times to think of her narration as like what you get in audio-visual courses in high school.)⁴⁰

Holly's narrative awareness, telling the story in the clichés she feels to be appropriate, allows the film's irony to consist in her sense (compared with the audience's) of narrative appropriateness, mediated like her lexicon through literary artifice, embodied in the books she reads throughout her

journey. After her account of Kit's work at the feedlot, Holly's subsequent recollection emphasises the significance of social perception in defining their relationship:

Of course, I had to keep all this a secret from my dad. He would've had a fit, since Kit was ten years older than me and came from the wrong side of the tracks, so-called. Our time with each other was limited and each lived for the precious hours when he or she could be with the other, away from all the cares of the world.

Kit's socio-economic status as "from the wrong side of the tracks, so-called" is thus revealed as a cliché embedded within a recycled discourse; the superficiality of equating Kit with the garbage he throws is exposed. Its superimposition over Kit driving to meet Holly, literally on the "right side of the tracks," parodies the figurative cliché by over-literalisation. Most of Holly's derivative narration could be similarly qualified as "so-called". Holly's verbosity in "when he or she could be with the other," clumsily universalised by the laboured use of third person, gendered pronouns foregrounds the self-consciousness of her narration. Holly's pronounced lack of erudition individualises her. Holly's clichés, however, universalise her experience, as Malick notes in defence of cliché:

When people express what is most important to them, it often comes out in clichés. That doesn't make them laughable; it's something tender about them. As though in struggling to reach what's most personal about them they could only come up with what's most public.⁴¹

Holly's awkward, limited awareness of her audience, therefore, establishes the unique mundanity of her perspective. Malick's irony again combines with genuine romance as the couple's refuge "away from all the cares in the world," under a football grandstand and hence symbolically 'below the gaze,' is sympathetically portrayed as a site of affectionate seclusion. As John Orr notes, "If (*Badlands*) is too chill to be cool, it also balances irony, very finely, on the edge of romance."⁴² Malick's affirmed

identification with Holly, and his instruction to the performers to avoid “winking at the audience”, further complicates the film’s irony:

I grew up around people like Kit and Holly. I see no gulf between them and myself. One of the things the actors and I used to talk about was never stepping outside the characters and winking at the audience, never getting off the hook.⁴³

Holly’s awareness of being observed interrupts her account by enforcing performative clichés, seamlessly combining irony and candour on Malick’s part, thereby complicating irony.

Kit’s self-conscious vocal performances, on the two occasions he records his voice, suggest anxious, conscious self-construction by analogy with Holly’s private, retrospective voice-over narration:

My girl Holly and I have decided to kill ourselves, same way I did her Dad. Big decision, huh? Uh, the reasons are obvious, and I don’t have time to go into them right now. But uh, one thing, though. He was provoking me when I popped him. That’s what it was like, a Pop.

Malick’s extended close-up on Kit emphasises his subjection to the confronting publicity of the microphone, his apparently unmediated sincerity subtly parodied in the distorting broken glass of the recording booth. Kit’s resonant “the reasons are obvious” highlights the nihilistic arbitrariness of his actions (particularly his violent actions) throughout the film. Kit’s lack of time to elaborate on “the reasons” ironically foregrounds his failure to discuss them even when he “runs out of things to say” within the minute-long message. His irreverant pun on “pop” expands beyond fatherhood and gunplay to include pop culture, hinting for the first time at fame as a relevant motivation. As Hannah Patterson observes:

Although they may appear motiveless, it is possible to view their actions in the film as motivated by their need to find, and more fully construct, identities for themselves.⁴⁴

Kit's desire to "have someone scream out his name when he died" reflects this self-mythologising impulse, which is enacted as Holly's retrospective narration records Kit's experience (caustically undercut here, however, by Malick's juxtaposition of the word "scream" with Holly's onscreen yawn, a scream inverted by its silence and boredom). Telotte alternately figures this self-mythologising impulse as a souveniring impulse, involving the conferral of significance upon objects, rather than identity-construction:

The various things which Holly and Kit seize upon in their exploits signal a kind of souvenir mentality at work; they desperately try to hold onto the moment and to locate something meaningful in their world, while their eventual discarding of those same things suggests the elusiveness of meaning here.⁴⁵

Kit's explanation after his arrest: "I always wanted to be a criminal, just not this big a one" similarly betrays a yearning for recognition, his need to play a role within a pre-ordained niche transcends any specific need to kill or break the law. The cult of celebrity here intervenes as Kit is finally assigned an identity: "I'll kiss your ass if he don't look like James Dean".

Immediately after losing his "outlaw-on-the-run" persona and the wealth symbolised by the hat he stole from the rich man, Kit finds solace in the James Dean label. Earlier in the film when Holly's narration first identifies that "He looked just like James Dean," however, his deliberate concurrent visible posturing both confirms and satirises this identification. Later Kit further cements this identification by posing with his rifle held over his shoulders in imitation of Dean in George Stevens' *Giant*.⁴⁶ Counterpointing his earlier laconic nihilism, Kit's second oral recording relentlessly moralises, extolling an incongruously conservative ethos:

Listen to your parents and teachers. They got a line on most things, so don't treat them like enemies. There's always a chance you could learn something. Try to keep an open mind. Try to understand the viewpoint

of others. Consider the minority opinion, but try to get along with the majority of opinion once it's accepted. Course Holly and I've had fun, even if it has been rushed, and...so far we're doing fine. Hadn't got caught. Excuse the grammar.

Kit's conservative morality suggests his sense of the power and responsibilities of celebrity, obviously aimed at impressionable teenage fans. Kit's limited literacy (demonstrated by his choice of medium) undermines his first sentence, his patricide undermines his second. Confronted by his transition from outcast to celebrity, from working class hero to Cadillac owner, Kit tries awkwardly to accommodate minority status into the mainstream of his conventional "wisdom". His allusion to "having fun" recalls his previous recording, although his increasing alienation from Holly subverts the assertion. Like Holly's narration, the artifice of Kit's vocal relics is manifest in the tonal contrast between his recorded and spoken dialogue; the recordings are thus symptomatic of Kit's insecurity, as Patterson observes:

Much of the conversation in the film is phatic communication – empty of content, concerned with maintaining contact and keeping the channel of communication open. It is in his attempts to speak then – his urgent need to display his words to others – that he actually reveals his faltering sense of identity.⁴⁷

The visibility of Kit's recording devices increases the irony of his verbal self-construction relative to Holly's extra-diegetic narration, whose acousmatic nature increases its authority. Further, his soliloquies, both recorded and simply spoken, are diegetically exposed as conversations with himself; suggestive of psychotic solipsism as Holly's, purely by convention,⁴⁸ are not. As Dolar notes:

The voice whose source cannot be seen, because it cannot be located, seems to emanate from anywhere, everywhere; it gains omnipotence.⁴⁹

Holly's voice, since its general source can be located in her onscreen persona (albeit not in the moment of narration, which is located after the events of the movie and appears to be orated from a written source), falls short of such "omnipotent" acousmatic authority and into the uncertain authority of first person narrators in framing positions, peripheral to the main narrative.

The complex nostalgia in Holly's narration subtly deconstructs Edenic myths of "prelapsarian" America. Holly's melodramatic use of prolepsis:

Little did I realize that what began in the alleys and back ways of this quiet town would end in the Badlands of Montana

emphasises the fragility of her initial peace, compared visually to the delicately balanced baton-twirling accompanying her words. Similarly during Kit and Holly's happier times together:

Kit made a solemn vow that he would always stand beside me and let nothing come between us. He wrote this out in writing, put the paper in a box with some of our little tokens and things, then sent it off in a balloon he'd found while on the garbage route. His heart was filled with longing as he watched it drift off. Something must've told him that we'd never live these days of happiness again, that they were gone forever.

Malick's portrayal of Kit's balloon, imbuing it with serene majesty in a beautifully framed long take ending in a slow fade to black, transcends the worthless frailty suggested by Holly's proleptic past tense voice-over. Her temporally privileged position subtly intrudes beyond her experience, as Malick allows her to comment (reasonably, in the circumstances) on the emotions of the silent Kit. Malick's frequent portrayal of the banality of Holly and Kit's "days of happiness" which are "gone forever," however, exemplified by Holly's resonant post-coital question "is that all there is to it?", strips the conventionally nostalgic device of the voice-over of its euphoric possibilities.

As in the Edenic myth, arbitrary disproportion abounds in the catastrophe which immediately “ends the dream”:

Then, sure enough, Dad found out I'd been running around behind his back. He was madder than I'd ever seen him. As punishment for deceiving him, he went and shot my dog.

The callousness and inexplicable violence of Holly's father (Warren Oates) is heightened by “double telling” as the audience hears Holly's account and simultaneously sees the event (Holly's visible protests, a rare emotional outburst, typically muted), but fails to attribute meaningful causality to the actions of Holly's father, as they later cannot comprehend Kit's; the visual track and the soundtrack concordantly emphasise randomness. Kit's association with dogs throughout the film inflects this scene; the viewer sees him interacting with dogs in the introduction, his boss' dog prevents him counter-attacking when attacked, and Holly's loyalty to him is figured as dog-like as he communicates with her using whistles while on the run. By shooting Holly's dog her father in effect transfers her obedient loyalty to Kit.⁵⁰

Vera Dika notes the cultural dimension to *Badlands'* indefinite relationship with nostalgia:

(*Badlands*) uses the image of the 1950s as an American ideal to cast doubt on the 1970s, the historical present of the film itself.⁵¹

Thus after Holly and Kit establish a consciously Edenic, primitivist existence in which “there wasn't a plant in the forest that didn't come in handy” (Kit remains, however, a flawed “Adam,” as his repeated attempts to “name” Holly provoke consternation and rejection), Kit's unmistakable use of guerilla warfare to kill the bounty hunters evokes the cultural loss of innocence, familiar to 1970s audiences, of American involvement in the Vietnam War.⁵² This loss of innocence between the 1950s and 1970s is subtly

complicated, however, by Kit's earlier allusion to the Korean War; while under the football stand he encourages Holly to eat a discarded fudgesicle with the remark "Kids eat that kinda stuff in Korea". Undermining historical nostalgia also subverts the myth of 1950s rebellion embodied in James Dean:

The 1960s had irrevocably damaged the American innocence and vigor James Dean once signified. *Badlands* thus evokes a marginalised James Dean, one whose profession is that of a garbage man, and whose rebel status is transformed to that of a sociopath.⁵³

Reverent mythologising of the past is satirised in the interaction, particularly, of Holly's voice-over with the montage of sepia 'photographs'. The shots contain slight movement as subjects consciously pose for photographs, their forced stasis analogous to the historical fossilisation of events:

The whole country was out looking for us, for who knew where Kit would strike next? Sidewalks cleared out. Stores closed their doors and drew their blinds. Poses and vigilantes committees were set up from Texas to South Dakota. Children rode back and forth to school under heavy guard. A famous detective was brought in from Boston. He could find no clues.

Here the "stills", literally enacting each of Holly's assertions, reinforce the impression that Holly's words paraphrase contemporary reports rather than her own observations, however the slight motion in the shots, revealing the world before, after and around the photographs themselves, constitute a rare moment of explicit irony. Malick's juxtaposition of voice with posing subjects rather than photographs themselves, thereby exceeding Holly's narrating perspective, reveals the sensationalised artifice of the newspaper reports, also subtly undermining all of Holly's borrowed discourse. Holly's voice-over also evokes nostalgia by superimposing, most fundamentally, the ancient art of retrospective oral storytelling⁵⁴ over the younger, less overdetermined medium of film,⁵⁵ also in this case superimposing the

fanciful verbosity and lexical colour of fairytale (“At times I wished I could fall asleep and be taken off to some magical land, but this never happened.”) over the laconic aridity and visual modernism⁵⁶ of the western. By discarding binoculars in favour of her father’s stereopticon Holly similarly blends fairytale “vistas” with stark observation, resulting in the voice-over revelation that Holly “was just a little girl, born in Texas whose father was a sign painter, who only had so many years to live.” The stereopticon, too, represents an outdated medium for observing the world. Holly’s voice-over, therefore, challenges the straightforward nostalgia typical of retrospective narration, employing conventions ironically to subvert utopian myths of modern American history.

Holly’s subversion of the traditional association between narrative agency and freedom of speech emphasises her nihilistic voyeurism, confronting the same moral ambiguity in the audience. This is most prevalent in her fatalistic voice-over:

Kit accused me of only being along for the ride while at times I wished he’d fall in the river and drown so I could watch.

The couple’s tension, as told by Holly, doubly enforces Holly’s weak agency, the disturbing voyeurism in her wish affirming for the audience Kit’s accusation of “only being along for the ride.” Holly’s selfless honesty in elucidating her passivity as the source of the couple’s tension suggests her similar lack of narratorial agency, her unchallenged sense of what *ought* to be told. Rather than rationally choosing to follow him, Holly simply “senses that her fate now lies with Kit,” and acts (or fails to act) accordingly, confirming that “she didn’t have a lot of personality”. Latta notes the gendered element in Holly’s performative self-effacement:

Holly’s narration displaces male control of the narrative but the woman’s voice remains trapped within the performance of a factitious femininity.⁵⁷

The film's barren landscape effects a further withdrawal of agency in Holly, as even her voice merely "spells out sentences on the roof of her mouth, where nobody can hear them," while for Kit the landscape dooms him to be free (a freedom from which he attempts to alienate himself by spinning a bottle).⁵⁸ Holly's lack of moral agency, evoked in the studied anonymity of her narration, both compels the audience, by appealing to their own flatness of affect, and alienates them, as Johnson notes:

Unlike the traditional narration, however, Holly's comments do not explain, create curiosity, or cue the viewer's emotions. Her expressionless tone and second-hand phraseology...which do not falter even for the killing of her father, serve to chill rather than excite the viewer.⁵⁹

Holly's narration thus undermines conventional assumptions regarding the 'power of the storyteller,' by exposing the unseen causal factors (convention, gender, audience expectation and moral silence) relevant in shaping or censoring Holly's voice.

Ultimately Holly's flatness of affect and whimsical narrative focus challenge associations between voice and authority, and their generic origins, ironising both the 1950s and 1970s historical contexts with equal vigour, while admitting enough candour to further unsettle viewer expectations. The subversive success of Holly's voice-over thus rests upon the viewer expectations of objectivity, wisdom, authority, clarity and moral certainty encoded into the use of voice-over in film.

"One Big Soul" – The Narrative Voice in *The Thin Red Line*

While conventionally first person interior monologue enhances intimacy with character subjectivity and firmly differentiates narrative perspectives, *The Thin Red Line's* twelve distinct (but often interchangeable and rarely visually 'anchored') narrating personae and various narrative forms deliberately obscure the boundaries of self and other, of public and private,

and of subject and landscape. The narrative forms used in voice-over include prayers, letters, orders, meditations and memories, many addressed to an undisclosed interlocutor. *The Thin Red Line* outlines Charlie Company, viewed more as a collective entity than as discreet individuals, in their successful efforts in 1943 to take and hold the strategic target Hill 210 and a Japanese bivouac at Guadalcanal. Where *Badlands* manipulates the nostalgic tone through past tense voice-over narration, *The Thin Red Line* juxtaposes nostalgia (as with the “days of happiness” portrayed in *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven* and *The New World*, the audience observes Witt’s [James Caviezel] and Bell’s [Ben Chaplin] prelapsarian states before their destruction) with immediate beauty, reflected in the “timeless present”⁶⁰ of the voice-overs. Malick’s relentless use of rhetorical questions destabilises the conventionally clarifying or ideologically secure function of narrative voice-over, particularly in the war-film genre⁶¹, with its roots in documentary news-reels and propaganda.

The Thin Red Line’s undifferentiated voice-overs, in predominantly similar southern accents and addressed to an often indistinct other (whether God, the audience, an undisclosed off-screen other or the self), obscures the traditional inviolability of narrative personae, establishing auditory uniformity parallel to the use of physically similar actors and the absence of clear protagonists, with “stars” including George Clooney and John Travolta relegated to the film’s periphery⁶². The voice-overs’ subject matter also reflects ambiguously on the self/other boundary. Thus after the Japanese bivouac is captured, Train’s⁶³ (John Dee Smith) mystified rhetorical questions:

This great evil...Where’s it come from? How’d it steal into the world?
What seed, what root did it grow from? Who’s doing this? Who’s killing us?
Robbing us of life and light? Mocking us with the sight of what we might’ve known?
Does our ruin benefit the Earth? Does it help the grass to grow, the sun to shine?
Is this darkness in you too? Have you passed through this night?

are ostensibly visually “anchored” to Witt, the only significant character identifiable among the mass of bodies onscreen. Train’s pronounced sense of alienation from his own actions is contradicted by the visual pun “steal into the world,” superimposed over an American soldier asserting individual agency by looting a Japanese hut, scrambling for personal profit amidst the carnage. Doll’s (Dash Mihok) stolen pistol also features heavily throughout this scene. The punning musical accompaniment, Charles Ives’ “The Unanswered Question,” extracted to highlight only the “questioning trumpet motif, intended to represent ‘Man asking the Perennial Question,’”⁶⁴ imbues the scene with further spiritual significance. Any xenophobic or patriotic reading of “this great evil” is subverted by its deliberate juxtaposition with a hand-held, zooming close-up of shirtless, emaciated, surrendering Japanese soldiers, all hiding their faces to emphasise their anonymity, implying for Train the enemy’s selfless frailty in common with his own; if the “great evil” is not from the enemy, then its source is unknown. Malick’s final frames, of a sprouting coconut, echo Train’s evocation of the “seed” or “root” of evil, the banal phrase “the root of all evil” imbued with meaning by analogy with Train’s previous evocation of “this war at the heart of nature” (the subject of the film’s first voice-over, and first unanswered question). A close-up of a dumbstruck Captain Staros (Elias Koteas), accompanying the question “Who’s doing this?” intensifies the mystery of agency, as Staros, as both commanding officer and devout Christian, represents dual inert authorities, neither capable of retaining control. Over “robbing us of life and light,” Malick’s superimposed shot of the pacifist Witt, his aggressive shouting silenced to an ominous, emotive low orchestral pedal point, compelled to herd prisoners of war into captivity, further alienates agency from activity. The enigmatic phrase “mocking us with the sight of what we might have known,” juxtaposed over broken Japanese bodies, blurs the thin red line between victory and defeat; why should the sight of conquest mock the

victor? Meditations over “benefit” inherent in the conflict are answered by the marked absence of Malick’s signature shafts of sunlight, smooth camera movement⁶⁵ or digressions into the natural world (even in the height of the battle for Hill 210, such digressions are manifold)⁶⁶; no benefit exists, but nor does any coherent controlling agency. This nihilism, however, is fractured by the jarring shift into second person, addressing an unclear interlocutor but superimposed over a rare moment of embodied malice as Pvt. Dale (Arie Verveen) approaches a dying soldier armed with a pair of pliers to extract his teeth. His gentle posture mockingly mirrors Witt’s in a previous shot, as the latter holds the hand of a dying enemy, rendering the pliers, unique to this scene, more menacingly conspicuous. It remains unclear, however, whether Train’s attribution of “darkness” to his interlocutor means he silently addresses Dale or the unnamed higher or collective power, or from what textual form Train’s narration emerges. Train’s narration thus illustrates James Morrison’s observation that:

Far from seeming to grant any privileged access to the interior lives of the characters, these voiceovers make those interior lives seem *more* mysterious than they would otherwise. They are the fragments of thoughts, prayers, letters home, yet as these forms bleed into one another...their address seems finally constant.⁶⁷

Train is off-screen throughout his voice-over, possibly the hand-held reflects his POV⁶⁸, however its jarring cuts would appear to transcend individual perspective. Train’s voice, however, powerfully inflects the following scenes, ultimately positioning the audience ambiguously relative to “the darkness” in Dale’s actions.

Dale’s subsequent ‘soliloquy’ (to an uncomprehending Japanese soldier) is spoken aloud, emphasising its visceral nature (and by analogy with McCron’s [John Savage] vocalised thoughts, having crossed the “thin red line between the sane and the mad,” Dale’s insanity):

I'm gonna sink my teeth into your liver. You're dyin'. See them birds up there? They're gonna eat you raw. Where you're goin', you're not comin' back from.

Dale's gesture at his own chest and dog-tag as he observes "You're dyin'" blends his sense of self into the Japanese soldier's. The soldier's response, as Chion notes, echoes Dale's, in an untranslated (no subtitles are used in the film) moment of linguistic isolation which extends to the Anglophone audience:

When Dale sadistically tells the Japanese prisoner he is going to die, eaten alive by carrion birds, the prisoner repeats over and over that the American too will die one day.⁶⁹

The anticipated mutual incomprehension between the soldiers renders each speech a soliloquy, so Dale's digression into voice-over heightens the horror by attributing cognitive interiority to his inexplicably malicious actions, increasing their apparent gravity⁷⁰ and the audience's intimacy with them. Its content further distorts the line between self and other: "What are you to me? Nothin'."

Despite Dale's answer (a rarity among the film's questions), his erudite rhetorical question resonates beyond its obvious intended meaning of "You are nothing to me" to also subtly connote "How are we separate? How do I distinguish myself from you?" With the latter interpretation, the answer "Nothin'" suggests Dale's fundamental unity with the dying soldier. The contrasting tone (disdaining the corporeal for the philosophical) of Dale's interiority further complicates his perspective by alienating his inner and outer voices⁷¹ (like the Nietzschean apostrophe "Oh, my soul" in Train's final voice-over), further challenging his unity of self.

Dale's later repentance (a departure from James Jones' novel⁷²) includes in voice-over his memory of the Japanese soldier's uncomprehended prediction of his death. An even more hauntingly ventriloquised corpse addresses Witt, its voice (assuming Witt does not speak Japanese)

transgressing even the linguistic alienation which separates Dale and his victim by speaking English in Elias Koteas' familiar, authoritative voice:

Are you righteous? Kind? Does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was, too. Do you imagine your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness? Truth?



Figure 3: Unanswered questions.

Malick's achingly sustained close-up, its only movement in the settling dust, elevates this voice-over narration above all conventions of irony⁷³, exposition⁷⁴, interiority and suturing the gaze. The voice and the gaze are linguistically and vocally detached yet sutured in content and obviously unironic in tone. Character interiority is made uncertain by the incongruous voice, and no new factual information is imparted so we cannot assume expositional or character development purposes. The voice confounds. While the counter-shot, when it eventually occurs, shows a transfixed Witt to be the object of the dead soldier's gaze, the soldier's direct stare into the camera transgresses filmic verisimilitude, addressing these challenges without apparent mediation to the audience⁷⁵. Witt's death, foreshadowed like Dale's by dying and dead enemies, recalls this moment in the uncomprehended Japanese with which Witt is addressed:

It's you who killed my friend in war. But I don't want to kill you. You are already surrounded. Surrender.⁷⁶

As Witt miraculously understood the soldier earlier (perhaps the “friend” alluded to), Chion notes the uncanny assumption that Witt understands his assailants:

What’s striking here is that the soldier who is aiming at Witt does not take account of the likelihood that his enemy might have no understanding of these words spoken without hatred. He speaks to him ‘directly’ and openly – in other words incomprehensibly – and doesn’t even try to make himself understood with gestures. He speaks as to a brother in language.⁷⁷

The parallel encounters of Dale and Witt, unified by off-screen voices, thus reinforce Witt’s musing that:

Maybe all men got one big soul who everybody’s a part of. All faces of the same man.

The subtle grammatical glitch in the word “who” suggests the inadequate pedantry of language expressive of personal division.

Pvt. Bell’s relationship with his wife similarly subverts the distinction between self and other, although he sub-textually resents his loss of individuality. Thus when he asks: “Why should I be afraid to die? I belong to you” a subtle ambiguity emerges; the question almost suggests Bell has already lost himself, therefore losing nothing in his death. His lack of self-possession alienates him even from the fear of death. His wife Marty (Miranda Otto), responsible for the film’s only female voice-overs, seems almost Siren-like in tempting Witt into “dark waters,” with the voice-over: “Come out. Come out where I am.”

This voice-over, spoken as she beckons him towards the ocean, her lips visibly still, uncannily defies expectation, blurring Marty’s interiority with Bell’s and evoking sub-textual unease – the audience senses this passage *should* be spoken aloud, as it communicates rather than meditates. Instead Marty speaks supernaturally without breath. Earlier, when recounting the

professional disgrace of his demotion to infantry for loving his wife, Bell's sub-textual resentment for his wife emerges. When his interlocutor (Fife in the novel, an unseen voice here) expresses sympathetic anger at the army, Bell's inconclusive response – "I don't blame them..." – invites the suspicion he blames Marty. Bell's dream, the night before the attack on Hill 210, connotes a similarly insidious subtext to his love. Beginning with Bell's POV upwards through the grass (a shot ominously encoded throughout the film as the perspective of dying soldiers encountering the beauty of nature), his dream combines love and subtle unease at the loss of self:

We. We together. One being. Flow together like water. Till I can't tell you from me. I drink you. Now. Now.

The words "One being" suggestively accompany Bell's hand resting on Marty's throat, while a cutaway to a bird in flight (identified as a carrion bird by a rhyming shot immediately before the dream of dogs eating the corpses) anticipates the circling birds Dale observes. Rosadiuk's observation of the analogy between birds and the soul⁷⁸, often appearing in pairs to indicate the divided self, would here also imply the unity of Bell's soul with Marty's. The line "I drink you" accompanies a high-angle shot of Marty in a bath, lending a jarringly literal inflection to Bell's aquatic imagery. Bell's ultimate separation from his wife therefore precipitates the loss of self suggested by his failure to "make an island for himself," as Chion observes:

when Bell has just received the letter from his wife, whose contents we have learned from her voice: he becomes almost speechless with the others. And indeed, we have no further access to his inner voice.⁷⁹

The next voice-over reflection belongs, incongruously, to Witt; obscuring the distinction between he and Bell in its relevance to the latter's situation:

We were a family. How'd it break up and come apart? So that now we're turned against each other. Each standing in the other's light. How did we lose the good that was given us? Let it slip away. Scattered, careless. What's keeping us from reaching out, touching the glory?

Witt's reference to family (alluding to an uncertain group, his platoon, the tribe or humankind) connects his prelapsarian fantasy existence with the Melanesian tribe during his time AWOL in the film's opening scenes with Bell's memories of Marty⁸⁰, while his allusion to light further obscures the already thin line between he and Train. Thus Allan Millett's suggestion that Malick:

unlike Jones, does not pretend to care much about the wartime army's experiences with male bonding and unit cohesion⁸¹

must be qualified to acknowledge that cohesion into "a family" distinguishes C Company, but that Malick's consideration encompasses a broader scope. Witt's allusion to "glory" pointedly subverts the word's rhetorical use in a wartime context; it is precisely the war which keeps Witt from "touching the glory." Ultimately Malick's use of voice-over throughout *The Thin Red Line* to obscure, rather than clarify, the boundaries between self and other establishes poetic collective identity rather than individual subjectivity. Malick therefore defies cinematic convention in the most clichéd of techniques, in a genre given to eulogising individual heroes.⁸²

Bell's association of Marty and himself with water exemplifies Malick's elemental personifications in *The Thin Red Line*, conflating human subjects with their environment as well as with each other. Thus water's baptismal qualities are withheld during the water shortage on the front line, at the height of which Bell's wife, like a mirage, calls him towards water. Similarly, Welsh (Sean Penn) embodies Earth, his voice-over monologue and dialogue (particularly his philosophical discourse with Witt, who embodies fire) perpetually evoke terrene imagery ("You'll never be a real soldier, not in

God's world...In this world, a man, himself, is nothing. And there ain't no world but this one."), while his advice to Witt employs tactile metaphors:

We're living in a world that's blowing itself to Hell as fast as everybody can arrange it. In a situation like that all a man can do is shut his eyes and let nothin' touch him. Look out for himself.⁸³

As Rosadiuk observes, however:

Note the mixed metaphor in this anxious claim: a man has to 'shut his eyes' and yet he also has to 'look out for himself.' This unruly use of metaphor is itself a metaphor for conflict, and signifies 'I am afraid.'⁸⁴

Similarly, juxtaposing this passage with Welsh's later voice-over assertion – "Only one thing a man can do. Find something that's his. Make an island for himself" – exposes the contradiction that although Welsh advocates adopting the impenetrable hardness of an island, he also suggests the intangible "let nothing touch him." Witt, too, associates Welsh with the Earth, asking "Why do you always make yourself like a rock?" during their final encounter. Welsh's interior monologue satirises military rhetoric as the film progresses. The aptly named Captain Bosche's (George Clooney) military rhetoric echoes General Quintard's (John Travolta) equally vapid discourse earlier in the film. Each speaker is interrupted by disgruntled, antiphonal voice-overs, from Welsh and Lieutenant Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) respectively, (in each case, the ranking officer is cast as a "star" cameo), suggesting Welsh's gradual decline towards Tall's disregard for humanity. Malick's drowning out of military rhetoric and geographical exposition, in each case, additionally undermines the conventional role of voice-over narration in conveying information inaccessible to the visual frame; here voice-over specifically obscures the official, historicising perspective (and earns the ire of historically and textually pedantic critics, including many mainstream war film enthusiasts⁸⁵). Welsh's "island", in addition to its metaphorical import, also alludes to the meaningless land of

Guadalcanal, reduced in Welsh's cynicism to "property. The whole fuckin' thing's about property." Finally, Witt embodies fire (wind, typically reflecting a divine force for change in Malick's films, curiously lacks a human embodiment in the film, possibly accounting for the empty birdcage Witt encounters as the film gravitates towards nihilism). The audience sees him striking matches in the brig, both he and Welsh refer to his "spark", and his death, away from C Company, is prefigured by the visual enactment of his earlier image: "Everybody lookin' for salvation by himself. Each like a coal, thrown from the fire."

The night before Witt's death, Welsh stares down at the sleeping Witt, and when he looks up, a coal is seen in close-up, away from the fire, being stamped out. In the next shot, the following morning, C Company is seen crossing a river, walking on boulders, each soldier, as Welsh anticipates, "making an island for himself". Witt's death is also elegantly prefigured in the visual symmetry of his earlier flashback to his mother's death (a flashback singularly asynchronous with its initiating voice-over, as observed by Rosadiuk⁸⁶, subverting the conventional relationship between voice-over and flashback), with his final exchange with Welsh. In the former scene, a birdcage, windows and a maternal figure are highlighted, the scene culminating in the surreal revelation that the flashback has no ceiling, as the transition to the sky of the present has occurred.



Figure 4: the death of Witt's mother "With the same...calm."

In the latter scene, the birdcage is conspicuously empty and the “maternal figure” is Welsh, however the windows remain prominent and as Witt surveys the house, the roof is found to be literally open, completing the parallel. Witt again occupies the extreme foreground.



Figure 5: Witt's last day. "I still see a spark in you." Welsh, typically, covers his eyes.

The conflation of Bell, Welsh and Witt with elemental forces, enacted in each case through the interaction of voice-over with visual symbolism, contrasts the traditional role of voice-over in crystallising the human subject, instead becoming a conduit for Malick's pantheistic personification⁸⁷ of the landscape.

Malick's use of meditative, interrogative present tense rather than more conventional past tense narration lends urgency to the film's Edenic themes, distinguishing *The Thin Red Line* from the awkward emotional and moral distance evoked by *Badlands*. Thus, for example, Witt's "How did we lose the good that was given us?" evokes a nostalgic past while chiefly emphasising the mystified alienation experienced in the dystopian present. Train's final voice-over

Darkness and light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind?
The features of the same face?

evokes the formation of a collective self in dichotomies, suggesting nostalgia for the simplicity of humanity's infancy. Geoff Eley's ⁸⁸

identification of the nostalgic tone emerging in relation to post-Vietnam portrayals of World War II (a myth of “the good war” to balance the “bad war” of Vietnam), together with the already nostalgic tone of the voice-over in the wartime journalism the modern films imitate, evokes a model of the nostalgic war film myopically fixated upon the past, however Malick’s evocation of a timeless present retains its humanistic urgency.

Malick’s choric use of collective voice-over in *The Thin Red Line* to urge forward rather than recount the past, to obscure subjectivity rather than crystallise it, to explore individual morality rather than wartime rhetoric and to obscure rather than clarify historical detail, represents a singularly complex achievement in subversive film-making, and a vast advance over the densely finite, stoical perspective of *Badlands*.

Conclusion

Holly’s voice-over narration in *Badlands* subverts traditional associations of narrative agency with empowerment, as the narrative progression is largely driven by Kit despite being told by Holly. Holly’s account evokes a fairytale paradise incongruous with the horrors depicted visually, her deadpan delivery equally inconsistent with moments of visual aesthetic splendour. Her voice-over finely balances irony with ardour as *Badlands* uses voice-over to both construct and undermine a temporary Edenic state. Holly’s voice-over effects a haunting self-effacement in her eclectically clichéd attempt to describe Kit; she reads events through received mythology and thus ambiguously reflects her literary roots. *Badlands’* acousmètre thus creates constant tension between voice and image.

The Thin Red Line’s polyphonic ⁸⁹ narrator makes the film a transcendental, pantheistic manifesto of unanswered questions, blurring the lines between self, other and world, as well as present and future amidst the destructive transience of war. Its blend of narrative modes and relentless lack of definitive answers subverts the conventionally clarifying role of

narrative voice-over. Vocal complexity naturally reflects a maturity beyond the director's more minimal early work, though the theme of lost paradise remains intensely prevalent. *The Thin Red Line* blurs self, other and world; and interior and exterior speech. It extensively considers linguistic alienation, including the Anglophone audience in this by keeping the Japanese dialogue generally untranslated, and emphasising the power of the word.

Malick's use of voice-over is thus generally so thoroughly subversive as to establish a distinctly affective "anti-voice-over" woven through his work, often parallel to an anti-narrative vein in his foregrounding of aesthetics over plot. Subjectivity and filmic artifice are frequently on display, the audience implicated as a relevant subjectivity through metatextual moments of direct address, interacting with the subjectivities of the films (despite several levels of alienation). Malick's suturing of the gaze reveals his virtuosity, pushing the limits of both montage and spoken word and their metaphorical interactions.

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¹ Charlotte Crofts, "From the 'Hegemony of the Eye' to the 'Hierarchy of Perception': The Reconfiguration of Sound and Image in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*," *Journal of Media Practice*, 2:1, 20.

² Crofts, 20.

³ James Monaco, "Badlands", *Take One*, 4:1 (Sept/Oct 1972), 32.

⁴ Crofts, 21.

⁵ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, Trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6

⁶ But not "credibility" in Mary Ann Doane's terms, which comes from the verifiable unity of synchronous dialogue. This authority stems from "radical otherness with respect to the diegesis." Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, Philip Rosen ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 337, 341.

⁷ Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: voice over narration in American fiction film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 45.

⁸ Doane, 336.

⁹ Teresa de Lauretis, "Strategies of Coherence: The Poetics of Film Narrative" in *Reading Narrative*, James Phelan ed. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1989), 186.

¹⁰ de Lauretis, 194.

¹¹ de Lauretis, 188.

¹² Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 101.

¹³ Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 2.

¹⁴ Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 13.

¹⁵ Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 22.

¹⁶ Terrence Malick, *Badlands* (Warner Bros Pictures, 1973).

¹⁷ Terrence Malick, *The Thin Red Line* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1998).

¹⁸ Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*, (Mercury Productions Inc., 1941).

¹⁹ Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho*, (Shamley Productions, 1960).

²⁰ This feature is best articulated in Crofts, 20; Jacob Leigh, "Unanswered questions: Vision and Experience in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*", *Cineaction* 62 (2003), 2 and Bernardo Feldman Nebenzahl, *The narrative power of sound: Symbolism, emotion and meaning conveyed through the interplay of sight and sound in Terrence Malick's Days of Heaven* (Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2000).

²¹ The intervening twenty years constitute Malick's legendary withdrawal from public life and cessation of creative output.

²² Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 4.

²³ "And God help you if you use voice-over in your work, my friends. God help you. That's flaccid, sloppy writing. Any idiot can write a voice-over narration to explain the thoughts of the character." – Spike Jonze, *Adaptation* (Beverly Detroit, 2002).

²⁴ Dziga Vertov, "We: Variant of a Manifesto," *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Annette Michelson ed. Trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985).

²⁵ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 21.

²⁶ "We tend to locate the unknowable voice in an unknown realm, a realm therefore of (Lacanian) desire." – Joan Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in *Film Noir*", in *Shades of noir: a reader*, Joan Copjec ed. (London, New York: Verso, 1993), 187.

²⁷ Charles Starkweather, on whom Kit is based, killed a wealthy man and his deaf-mute maid, but Kit lets them live, unconsciously alluding to the real case by noting "He's just lucky he's not dead too."

²⁸ "The cinema maintains a strangely symmetrical relation between the acousmètre's bodiless voice and the mute character. In both cases, as I have said, the character who has a body but no voice, or a voice but no body, is taken as more or less all-seeing, all-knowing, often even all powerful." – Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 100. The maid in *Badlands* has no narrative authority, but her accusing stare constitutes an isolated moral judgment in an often absurd or nihilistic film.

²⁹ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 6.

³⁰ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006).

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- ³¹ Malick's reported involvement in an adaptation of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* suggests a continuing focus on American mythology. – "Terrence Malick" in *IMDB*. [Accessed 9/09/07]. Available from <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000517/>
- ³² In Silverman's terms, "suturing over the wound of castration with narrative" – Kaja Silverman, "Suture [Excerpts]", in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, Philip Rosen ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 221.
- ³³ Dolar, 22.
- ³⁴ James Morrison, Review of *The Thin Red Line*, *Film Quarterly*. 53.1 (Autumn 1999), 37.
- ³⁵ Cages recur in *Badlands* in frequent shots of the chicken cage as the bounty hunters attack, evoking claustrophobia. Kit throws away a birdcage and kicks open the chicken cage after killing the bounty hunters. The film's opening shots, "caging" Holly in her bed-frame, mirror the opening shots of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, (Tatira-Hiller Productions, 1968), as noted by Adam Duncan Harris, *Identity and asphalt: The search for celebrity in Bonnie and Clyde and Badlands*. M.A. Thesis (University of Wyoming, 1995), 23.
- ³⁶ Anne Latto, "Innocents Abroad: The Young Female Voice in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*," in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: poetic visions of America*. Hannah Patterson ed. (London, New York: Wallflower, 2003) 91.
- ³⁷ Harris, 13.
- ³⁸ Defined by Kozloff as "another presence that supplements the nominal narrator's vision, knowledge and story-telling powers." – Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible storytellers: voice-over narration in American fiction film* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1988) 44.
- ³⁹ Harris, 15.
- ⁴⁰ Beverly Walker, "Malick on *Badlands*", *Sight and Sound* 44:2 (Spring 1975) 82.
- ⁴¹ Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 116.
- ⁴² John Orr, "Terrence Malick and Arthur Penn: The Western Re-Myth", in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: poetic visions of America* Hannah Patterson ed. (London, New York: Wallflower, 2003) 61. Tarantino's tribute to the soundtrack and voice-over of *Badlands*, by contrast, foregoes this dichotomy in favour of "true romance." – Quentin Tarantino, *True Romance* (August Entertainment, 1993).
- ⁴³ Walker, 82.
- ⁴⁴ Hannah Patterson, "Two Characters in Search of a Direction: Motivation and the Construction of Identity in *Badlands*", *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: poetic visions of America*, Hannah Patterson ed. (London, New York: Wallflower, 2003) 25.
- ⁴⁵ J.P. Telotte, "Badlands and the Souvenir Drive," *Western Humanities Review*, 40:2, (Summer 1986), 102.
- ⁴⁶ George Stevens, *Giant* (Warner Bros Pictures, 1956)
- ⁴⁷ Patterson, 28.
- ⁴⁸ "Although monologues are accepted on stage as a convention, expectations of realism make them more problematic in film." – Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1990) 70.
- ⁴⁹ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006) 61.
- ⁵⁰ Dogs also represent the authority of the unseen voice, as in Dolar's illuminating example of the iconic "His Master's Voice" logo. – Dolar, 72.
- ⁵¹ Vera Dika, *Recycled culture in contemporary art and film: the uses of nostalgia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 56.
- ⁵² Dika, 61.
- ⁵³ Dika, 58-59.
- ⁵⁴ "Holly's naive, personalised and overly narrativised reading of the images and events in general helps foreground the film's self-conscious and critical 'quotation' of a series of conventions and archetypes" – Adrian Danks, "Death Comes as an End: Temporality, Domesticity and Photography in Terrence Malick's *Badlands*", *Senses of Cinema*, (1998. [Accessed 9/09/07]). Available from <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/8/badlands.html>
- ⁵⁵ "Cinematic storytelling is one of the youngest, most technologically dependent, and most expensive modes of narration; oral storytelling, the most ancient, fundamental, and widely accessible. In films with voice-over narration the older form has been superimposed on top of the newer." – Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 1.
- ⁵⁶ Kozloff notes the particular debt to Hemingway for the sparse dialogue in early talkies – Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, 4.
- ⁵⁷ Latto, 92.

- ⁵⁸ "The flatness of the landscape matches the flatness of Kit and Holly's delivery and the generally deadpan tone; the film is an offbeat ode to a particular kind of American emptiness and moral emptiness." – Robert Silberman, "Terrence Malick, Landscape and 'This War at the Heart of Nature'", in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: poetic visions of America*, Hannah Patterson, ed. (London, New York: Wallflower, 2003), 161.
- ⁵⁹ William Johnson, Review of *Badlands*, *Film Quarterly*. 27:3 (Spring 1974), 43.
- ⁶⁰ Michel Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, trans. Trista Selous, (London: BFI Publications, 2004), 53.
- ⁶¹ For an exhaustive account of the use of voice-over in wartime propaganda see David Fuller, *A historical analysis of voice-over aesthetics in American war propaganda*, (Dominguez Hills CA: California State University), 2004.
- ⁶² Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, 21.
- ⁶³ I am deeply indebted to Adam Rosadiuk's thorough transcription of the instances of voice-over in *The Thin Red Line* for drawing attention to the distinct voice of Pvt. Train, who speaks aloud only on the ships to and from Guadalcanal, at the narrative fringe, and whose frequent voice-over narration is often critically attributed to the diegetically more central Pvt. Witt. See Adam Rosadiuk, *Film and philosophic experience: Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line*. M.A. thesis, (Concordia University, Canada, 2006), 191.
- ⁶⁴ Leigh, "Unanswered questions", 2. Bersani similarly notes the musical inflection of the vocal questions, but considers the musical to supplant the philosophical, where I argue both are at work – Leo Bersani, *Forms of being: cinema, aesthetics, subjectivity* (London: BFI, 2004), 138.
- ⁶⁵ Achieved using a specialised Akela crane, typically used for spectacular high-angle shots but positioned low for *The Thin Red Line* to mimic an impossibly smooth steadicam through the grass – Stephen Pizello, "The War within," *American Cinematographer* 80:2 (February 1999), 42.
- ⁶⁶ Cohen suggests the divine implications of Malick's usual cinematography, heightening the impact of its withdrawal in this scene: "We seem to see these [soldiers'] lives from the slippery viewpoint of God, the afterlife or those already dead. Cathedral-like shots of tree top canopies, sunlight shafting through from the literal heavens beyond, are one thing-the film abounds in those-but there is a God-like, disembodied presence in even the most down-to-earth moments." – Hubert Cohen, "The Genesis of *Days of Heaven*", *Cinema Journal* 42:4 (Summer 2003), 46-47.
- ⁶⁷ Morrison, 37.
- ⁶⁸ For a discussion of Malick's use of POV to equate subjectivity with threat (of diffusion of self in the violent physical sense) in the context of conflict, see Bill Schaffer, "The Shape of Fear: Thoughts after *The Thin Red Line*", (*Senses of Cinema*, 2000. [Accessed 9/09/07]). Available from <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/8/thinredline.html>
- ⁶⁹ Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, 60.
- ⁷⁰ Malick's use of voice-over is thus not morally hierarchical, as Chion notes: "Not everyone in *The Thin Red Line* has the right to an inner voice, but these voices do not make those who have access to them heroes set above the others." – Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, 54.
- ⁷¹ "Malick often creates the feeling of a continuum between the voice that speaks aloud and the meditative inner voice, while at other moments, the one is clearly distinct from the other and can even be superimposed on it, like a stranger." – Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, 57-58.
- ⁷² For a very close analysis of Malick's adaptation, which incorporates Jones' previous novel *From Here to Eternity*, see Jimmie E. Cain Jr, "Writing in his musical key: Terrence Malick's vision of *The Thin Red Line*", *Film Criticism* 25:1 (Fall 2000), 2-24.
- ⁷³ Unlike Pvt. Joker's laconic, intensely ironic voice-over ventriloquising the dead in Kubrick's contribution to the war film genre, *Full Metal Jacket*: "The dead know only one thing. It is better to be alive." – Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*, (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1987). Morrison, 35 discusses Malick's "renunciation of irony" in *The Thin Red Line*'s voice-over, while Whalen laments it, comparing the earnestness of *The Thin Red Line* unfavorably with Malick's on-screen persona in *Badlands* who "leaves a message" which Kit deposits, unread, in a deep vase. – Tom Whalen, "Maybe all men got one big soul: The hoax within the metaphysics of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," *Literature/Film Quarterly*. 3:27 (1999) 163.
- ⁷⁴ "Places and names remain unidentified in both dialogue and voice-over." – Bradford Vivian, "The Question of the Cinema," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. 19:3 (2005). (New Series), 257.
- ⁷⁵ The sense of direct interrogative address to the audience results in a critical tendency towards "personal reactions" to the film, as noted by Rosadiuk, 7.
- ⁷⁶ Translated by Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, 61.
- ⁷⁷ Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, 61.
- ⁷⁸ Rosadiuk, 88.
- ⁷⁹ Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, 56.

⁸⁰ Both “Edens” are culturally ambiguous, however, as Robert Eberwein observes: “Malick’s use of natives to portray lost innocence is certainly politically problematic and not at all innocent; similarly, his use of femininity as memory – trace of a joy lost in the ravages of war – the intercut shots of a woman, especially of her breasts, that posit her as an essential purity outside the fall into war/culture – seems awkwardly out of time” – Robert Eberwein, *The War Film*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 58.

⁸¹ Allan R. Millett, Review of *The Thin Red Line*. *The Journal of American History*, 86:3. *The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History: A Special Issue* (December 1999), 1430.

⁸² “*The Thin Red Line* shares with *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* an interest in isolating a mythic quality in overdetermined historical markers such as the two world wars or 1950s suburbia, in turning away from common modes of representing American cultural history.” – Martin Flanagan, “‘Everything a Lie’: The Critical and Commercial Reception of Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*”, in *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: poetic visions of America*. Hannah Patterson ed. (London, New York: Wallflower, 2003), 135.

⁸³ Cain notes the conflation of Jones’ *The Thin Red Line* and *From Here to Eternity* (this scene being lifted verbatim from the latter) in constructing Malick’s Welsh and Witt.

⁸⁴ Rosadiuk, 103.

⁸⁵ Jones’ novel, however, explicitly sanctions variant, ahistorical readings in its final lines: “One day one of their number would write a book about all this, but none of them would believe it, because none of them would remember it that way.” – James Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (London: Collins, 1963), 445.

⁸⁶ “Where is the death Witt saw in her? This is rare in cinema to have a scene that we have been so prepped to search carefully, to experience the feeling that we are searching these images just as the character is. As such, we are acutely aware of our distance, the conditions of film watching, our sense of genre, our sense of narrative, our sense of what we are prepared to accept from this encounter: all are in the way” – Rosadiuk, 86.

⁸⁷ Eberwein, 59 foregrounds the personified landscape rather than the “elemental” human subjects: “there is little possibility of reading the natural images of *The Thin Red Line* naturally; they come to us as voiced, as authored.” I argue rather that Malick’s human subjects *are* to be read “naturally”. Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, 12 articulates this dilemma as a problem of “which is figure and which is background?”

⁸⁸ Geoff Eley, “Finding the People’s War: Film, British Collective Memory and World War II”, *The American Historical Review*. 106:3 (June 2001), 818-838.

⁸⁹ In Bruns’ terms polyphony, whether in music or narration, “is the visualization or arrangement of multiple voices of equal importance,” distinct from harmony as each polyphonic line is satisfying in itself. John Bruns, “The Polyphonic Film,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. 6:2 (August 2008), 189.