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## Dialectical Modes of Nature in Terrence Malick's 'The Thin Red Line'

Tyson Wils

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### Introduction

In Alfred Schmidt's *The Concept of Nature in Marx* it is argued that dialectical materialism introduced a 'completely new understanding of man's [sic] relation to nature (and) went far beyond all the bourgeois theories of nature presented by the Enlightenment'.<sup>1</sup> Essentially this new understanding showed that nature is real but also something that exists in relation to human subjectivity, history, and ideology. Indeed, as Schmidt expresses it, the challenge Marx set for his contemporaries was to dialectically engage with nature as both a product of the human mind as well as an object external to mental abstractions, an object that could be physically changed by human action but which also never ceased to exist beyond human endeavour.

In his analysis of both Schmidt's work and Marxist theory Neil Smith has said that for a dialectical materialist to posit nature as an external thing means to relate as an observer in a particular way to nature.<sup>2</sup> To put this in the language of subject and object, the object – in this case the external thing called nature – is only an external thing because of the way the subject (the observer) knows it as such. This is not to say that nothing exists external to the subject. Rather, that there is always a dialectical interaction between subject and object in which no unmediated, objective immediacy with *a priori* nature is possible. Moreover, this dialectical interaction between subject and object is bound up with broader historical and social activities. These activities not only include the physical effects that changing modes of production and developments in technology have on the natural

environment but also the effects such things have on how people relate to what is posited as objective reality. This is not to deny the fact that nature is characterised by 'non-human forces and processes – gravity, physical pressure, chemical transformation, [and] biological interaction'.<sup>3</sup> The point is to emphasise the fact that nature is conditioned by the interrelationships that human beings have with the physical world, interrelationships that involve peoples' changing theoretical and practical relations with external reality.

What dialectical materialism offers contemporary society is a way to conceptualise how nature exists as something real but also, at the same time, how this real existence is related to processes of subjective mediation and changes in social life. It also provides a framework within which to situate the varied and sometimes contradictory uses and meanings of the term 'nature'. When there are changes in social life nature is altered. What this means is not only that new modes of production and developments in technology affect the form and objective status of nature but also that transformations in social organisation and new structures of knowledge impact upon human relationships with that which they call and experience as nature. To be sure, as Raymond Williams famously noted, some of nature's meanings remain persistent throughout the centuries while others are modified over time or fade altogether.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, when there are significant shifts within society or culture such as that which occurred within Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the realm of philosophy, literature, and art – the heterogeneous movement known as Romanticism – nature is altered, even if older meanings and usages still remain attached to it. As Smith says of nature's contradictory meanings today: 'nature is material and it is spiritual, it is given and made...[it] is order and it is disorder...[it] is the gift of God and it is a product of its own evolution; it is a universal outside history and also the product of history'.<sup>5</sup>

Terrence Malick is a contemporary filmmaker who engages in a complex and dialectical fashion with the question of what nature is. His work is about the relations between the real, the subjective, and the social, as well about how these relations relate to ontological questions concerning what defines and characterises nature (and for that matter what defines and characterises other metaphysical categories like existence). In Malick's cinema nature is something given and real; at the same time it is also bound up with language and experience, with subjective memories and mythic fantasies, and with metaphysical reflections about life, death, and the essence of reality. Moreover, the filmmaker shows that on different levels many of these things are interconnected. For example, he emphasises the fact that human beings have a material dimension to their being which

makes them part of the natural world. At the same time he never loses sight of the fact that nature is also produced and reconfigured through cultural reality and subjective experience.

In order to prove this argument a close analysis of Malick's film *The Thin Red Line* (1998) will be undertaken. It will be demonstrated that nature exists in three different, interrelated modes in the film. By modes here it is meant the particular ways of knowing, experiencing, and/or representing nature that occur in *The Thin Red Line*. The first mode has to do with the characters' embodied, subjective engagements with the world. In this mode the characters' perceptual and tactile presence in landscape elicits different kinds of interior images and reflections within them. The second mode has to do with the function of certain voice-overs in the film which represent a relationship between abstract, linguistic mediation and the natural environment. The third mode has to do with the presentation of nature as pre-human or extra-human. In this mode nature is shown to have an immediate, concrete presence that is unrelated to human subjectivity or to human language. Indeed, in this mode nature is not subject to processes of subjective or linguistic mediation but rather is allowed to speak for itself – at least in the sense that through particular cinematic devices Malick is able to impress upon the spectator the sensation that nature is in a state of indifference vis-à-vis human affairs.

What these three modes represent are different ways of showing how nature exists; they also reveal some of the different functions and meanings that nature has. In order to demonstrate this latter contention particular attention will be given to the sequences in *The Thin Red Line* that show a Melanesian community living on one of the coastlines of Guadalcanal Island. This is a habitation which a central character in the film, Private Witt (Jim Caviezel), experiences as a green island paradise. This paradise expresses essential elements that are in two of the modes in the film: subjectivity (expressed in the character's embodied, visionary experiences of nature which transfigure it into a spectacle of immortality) and nature as material thing, as that which is independent of subjective will and desire (expressed in the confrontation with death and disease that the character at one point experiences in his green island paradise). It will also be shown that while Witt's green island paradise is a product of Western, cultural myths about the other at the same time it represents the soldier's attempt to survive his own situation in Charlie Company, the military outfit he serves in. Moreover, the reality of death and disease complicates Witt's vision since it shows that his idealised sanctuary is not immune from the material contingencies of existence. In the words of Russell Manning – who situates

Malick's work in respect to various aspects of dialectical theory, including dialectical materialism – films such as *The Thin Red Line* are embedded in 'contradictions and negations'<sup>6</sup> which show 'that in the moment of light, darkness is waiting to be revealed'.<sup>7</sup> By allowing such a dialectical process to unfold in his films Malick affords his spectators the opportunity to apprehend the layers of meaning that nature has as well as its different uses. In this way he expresses a fundamental aspect of dialectical materialism and its commitment to recognising nature's subjective and objective dimensions.

## Malick and landscape

Nature has a strong presence in all of Malick's films; there is always an emphasis on landscape, even if in each film there are different historical contexts within which landscape can be placed (e.g. the war film genre in *The Thin Red Line*, European romanticism and American myth in *The New World* [2005]). In each of Malick's films to date it is the beautiful, sublime, and/or expressive images of landscape that are visually designed (usually in combination with sound) to convey symbolic meanings and carry emotions and moods central to the narrative. As Ben McCann wrote, '[t]hroughout his films, the environment plays a crucial role in the narrative, governing character emotions and motivations, providing a lyrical canvas for the action and, perhaps most importantly, offering a deeper understanding of the personal stories Malick wants to tell'.<sup>8</sup> These stories are about the mysterious and poetic qualities that reside in nature and the metaphysical meanings these qualities represent. In the words of Robert Silverman 'it is in the visuals [and sounds] of the landscape...that Malick is able to most clearly express his vision of the world as paradise and paradise lost, caught up in darkness and death but open to redemption'.<sup>9</sup>

However, Malick does not only want audiences to contemplate metaphysical meanings – he also wants them to be aesthetically immersed in nature. To this end he facilitates the spectator having highly experiential encounters with the natural surroundings depicted on screen. These experiential encounters happen on two different but intertwined levels. First, there is a focus on the immediate, subjective experiences that characters have with their sensory environments. In these intimate, embodied states of existence characters engage with nature in sensuous, emotional, and poetic ways; sometimes it even seems that Malick is asking his audience to regard nature as possessed of a soul that characters can respond to or

mirror. Nature is also presented as containing an extra-human reality that is indifferent to embodied modes of subjectivity. Through the transfiguring power of cinema there can be a visceral 'there-ness' to the flora and fauna on screen that outstrips any attempts to find human-related motivations and inspirations in nature. As Simon Critchley wrote:

[i]n each of his movies, one has the sense of things simply being looked at, just being what they are – trees, water, birds, dogs, crocodiles, or whatever. Things simply are, and are not moulded to a human purpose.<sup>10</sup>

Whether one is talking about *Badlands* (1973) or *The Tree of Life* (2011) there is a flow of imagery in Malick's films which discloses not only how human subjectivity and more-than-human nature are conjoined – even if in other ways separated – but also how nature is entangled in different aspects of history, culture, and language. In order to demonstrate the above argument a close analysis of *The Thin Red Line* will now be undertaken.

The film is set during the Second World War and centres around the fighting that occurred in 1942 between US and Japanese forces on Guadalcanal, a tropical island in the South-Western Pacific. *The Thin Red Line* is a war film, one which follows the lives of a group of individual soldiers over the period of a couple of weeks. However, it is not a war film that seeks to constantly impress upon the spectator experiences of historical verisimilitude, nor is it a war film that desires to exalt or eulogise America's successes during the Solomon Islands Campaign. Rather, *The Thin Red Line* is comprised of different myths and poetic symbolisms, suspending any certainty in the possibility of knowing 'the truth' about the war. It also invites audiences to follow both the different perspectives the soldiers have on the fighting and the different reflections offered up by a number of the characters on metaphysical matters pertaining to time, death, and nature. In these ways *The Thin Red Line* moves beyond the classic war film to become an existential text that questions what war is at the same time as exploring what it means to be human.

## Subjective embodiment and nature

Nature and landscape are central components in the structure of the film. For example, the various perspectives and reflections that the soldiers have always happen in relation to their embodied experiences of the physical world around them. In other words, the soldiers' thoughts and feelings about

war and about topics like mortality occur in the context of their immediate and sensuous apprehension of external space. As Steven Rybin says, the film not only gives ‘a present-tense thickness to the experience of each of the characters’<sup>11</sup> but also shows that many of the soldiers’ ideas, memories, and emotions emerge out of their sensuous relationship with the lush, tropical landscape.<sup>12</sup> Or as David Davies formulates it, a core aesthetic, thematic, and narrative component of the film is ‘tactile vision’ and ‘embodied agency’.<sup>13</sup> What Davies means is that Malick is able to consistently convey ‘the tactile and visceral qualities of the situations in which the action unfolds’;<sup>14</sup> he does this in order to communicate how the characters react to each other and to their surrounding environment. Davies suggests that it is through the use of mise-en-scène, cinematography, and sound that Malick is able to show how experience, meaning, and emotion emerge in relation to lived existence – to the bodily and the sentient. Davies says that lived existence also involves the way that the external world acts upon individual consciousness and that in films like *The Thin Red Line* this is represented by the inner images and reflections that the world awakens in the soldiers.

For example, whenever Private Bell’s (Ben Chaplain) memories of his wife (Miranda Otto) are shown these ‘are evoked by the landscape of the Guadalcanal itself’.<sup>15</sup> Whether it is in respect to the sounds of the ocean that he hears when he is on the battleship heading toward Guadalcanal Island or the physical terrain he encounters when he is moving through green, tropical foliage, the flashbacks of Bell’s wife occur in the context of his aural and haptic experiences of nature. This perceptual evocation of memory is presented cinematically by Malick in a number of ways. In regard to the physical terrain Bell encounters when he moves through the tropical grass on the slopes of Hill 210, aspects of mise-en-scène and cinematography are used to emphasise particular sensory impressions and tactile qualities. In this physical terrain there are two distinct shots that situate Bell differently in the landscape. In the first the camera is slightly above eye-level and follows Bell from behind as he walks with his knees bent through the grass. The camera keeps him framed in a long-shot and maintains its eye-level angle. This means that as he moves down a slope he gradually starts to disappear beyond the bottom edge of the frame. As a result of the position of the camera and Bell’s movement the space of the frame is opened up to reveal the green, hilly terrain that surrounds him. This terrain is made up of different blends of wild grass that form patterns on a hillside. These varieties of grass are repeatedly fanned by a strong crosswind. In the second shot Bell is shown crawling along the ground. The camera frames him from the front in medium close-up and moves backwards through the waist-high

grass at the same time as he pushes forward. Bell's face is shrouded and at times blocked by various blades of grass which fill the edges of the frame in extreme close-up.

Next, there is a straight cut to the first shot in the memory flashback sequence. This sequence is made up of nine shots showing Bell and his wife in two different, undisclosed locations: inside a room and at the ocean. In the first location there are a series of medium close-ups showing the couple sensuously embracing, as well as a number of other images: two close-ups of the wife's face, a close-up of the couple's hands touching, and a close-up of billowing curtains. The movement of the curtains and the physical contact and expression of the human figures is accentuated through a range of techniques. These techniques include camera position – not only the camera's close proximity to the characters and to the curtains but also the way the camera fluidly moves around and away from the couple in order to enhance their actions – and the lighting and colour scheme, which not only bathes everything in shades of warm brown but also presents bright white highlights attached to the contours of the characters' bodies (particularly the wife's). The last two shots in the flashback show Bell's wife walking into an ocean that is coloured a hyper-real blue. She is looking in the direction of Bell who is following her. The two shots are in slow motion, which helps to emphasise the actions of the characters as well as the movement of the wife's wet dress as it responds to the undulating rhythms of the sea. Next, a cut back to the Guadalcanal landscape. This time the camera is rushing forward along the ground through the grass; during its travels blinding flashes of sunlight appear that penetrate the foliage.

The flashback – and the landscape shots that frame the flashback – foreground affective experience. The shots are constructed so as to focus spectator perception and attention on things like motion and movement (forward motion, backward motion, diagonal movement [the crosswind], and other forms of modulated movement [the actions of the couple]); rhythm (the rhythm of the wind-swept grasses, the rhythm of the billowing curtains, the rhythm of the wife's dress as it reacts to the ocean waves); touch (the touch of the human bodies on screen); and force and pressure (the pressure of the wind against the grass and against the curtains). The mobile camera shots, particularly the ones that travel through the waist-high grass on Hill 210, convey a direct perceptual immediacy; they move the spectator through the Guadalcanal environment and at a close distance to the physical world, heightening the spectator's experience of landscape. What this depiction of sensory information and tactile sensations helps to create is a correspondence between the memory impressions that Bell has of his wife



and his physical presence in the lush, tropical world of Guadalcanal Island. In the words of Davies such sequences demonstrate the state of ‘embodied cognition’<sup>16</sup> and vision that the characters exist in and how the world can touch them in a way that affects them both physically and mentally.<sup>17</sup>

There are many other examples of the relationship between subjective embodiment and nature in *The Thin Red Line*. Near the start of the film there are two separate sequences showing Private Witt and another soldier living AWOL in a Melanesian community. What is depicted is an exotic, green island paradise, a sensuously-textured world within which the ‘natives’ go about their daily lives – swimming in the clear blue ocean, collecting marine molluscs, cutting open coconuts, and undertaking other ‘tranquil’ activities. At the same time the ‘natives’ also playfully interact with the soldiers. In this paradise the two characters feel part of a community that is living in harmony with nature. For Witt in particular this green island paradise represents ‘immortality’ or, as he also describes it, ‘another world’. Witt is a spiritual character who throughout the film remains committed to a transcendent vision of existence. The green island paradise becomes a component in his quest to see if individual souls are all part of, in his words, ‘one big soul’.

There is a scene immediately following the soldiers successful, bloody takeover of a Japanese military camp where Witt is seen sitting down along the edge of a pond. On the diegetic soundtrack there are ambient pond noises such as the sound of splashing water, wind, rustling leaves, and insects. Witt pours water over his head and then down the large, green leaf of an arrowhead plant. There is a cut to a low-angle shot of the pond which shows reflections in the water and a ripple moving across the pond’s surface. Gradually mixed into the soundtrack at this point is the Islander music heard near the start of the film and the sound of rushing water reminiscent of the crashing waves heard in the green island paradise sequences; then a cut to a long shot of one of the ‘natives’ perched on a rock adjacent to a large waterfall. What follows is a shot of Witt standing at the base of the waterfall happily being drenched in the cascading water; then a series of images showing Melanesian ‘natives’ at the seashore living their Arcadian-like existence. The combination of the movement and sound of water at the pond triggers Witt’s memories of the green island paradise – or, it triggers imagined scenes of such a paradise, since the Melanesian community also functions as part of the character’s search for transcendence. It is in relation to an embodied experience of serene nature that Witt’s spiritual vision of ‘another world’ is evoked. Hence, Witt’s stated search for transcendence is

complicated because it has an immanent dimension to it, leading to the question of what it means to speak of transcendence in his case.<sup>18</sup>

## Linguistic mediation and nature

*The Thin Red Line* does not only intimately connect the embodied, subjective experiences of individual characters with the surrounding world; it also relates human language on a more general, abstract level to the external environment. To take but one example, in the opening section there are a series of images showing a tropical rain forest accompanied by a voice-over that says:

[w]hat is this war at the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself; the land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power but two?

It sounds like it is Witt who is either thinking or speaking these words, however there is no visual information to confirm it is his voice (and according to Amy Coplan the voice was in fact produced by somebody other than the actor Jim Caviezel).<sup>19</sup> Some commentators have suggested that the spectator is encouraged to infer that the voice does belong to Witt because he is the character who has most of the voice-overs that pertain to such metaphysical questions about nature and existence. Additionally, there are other moments in the film where it is made clear that the voice-over can be attributed to Witt even when he is not present or when he is dead; hence, it has been suggested that whenever inner monologues occur that are not fixed to an individual character on screen the spectator is invited to infer that the source is Witt.<sup>20</sup> While such arguments may be correct it is also true that in moments such as the one described above the voice has no clear relation to any subjective engagement that a character is having in a particular space. In the words of Michel Chion the 'inner voice does not turn the scene into one observed through that character's subjectivity, enabling us to see "through their eyes".<sup>21</sup> That is to say the voice is not anchored to any character action taking place within the frame; it is not tied to a character's location in a specific space or to their visual, perceptual, or tactile engagement with a particular environment. Rather, it is a voice that is enclosed in linguistic mediation. The voice has sonic qualities such as vocal timbre, weight, and tempo; it has a distinct accent – a southern drawl – and is light sounding rather than deep and full-bodied. The voice

also pauses after each question is asked, which helps to slow down the pace of the opening sequence and create a meditative effect. What is being communicated is not purely abstract information void of any expressive qualities which might engage the spectator's emotions and sensibilities. Nonetheless, the voice is not part of the kind of subjective embodiment evident in the examples discussed earlier.

The same voice is heard again later in the film:

[w]ho are you who live in all these many forms? Your death that captures all. You too are the source of all that is gonna be born. Your glory, mercy, peace, truth. You give a calm spirit, understanding, courage, a contented heart.

These words are combined with a sequence of images showing various lands on Guadalcanal Island and also some of the different inhabitants who occupy this terrain. The sequence begins with a low-angle shot of sunlight beams streaming through a canopy of green ferns; it then cuts to a close-up image of two brightly-coloured parrots; in the third shot of the sequence there is an image of a platoon cautiously making its way through a forest of bamboo plants. While the spectator may infer that the voice is Witt's the source of the inner monologue is not visualised on screen – at least not in the sense that the voice is fixed to a specific character within the space of the frame who is relating to the world around them through embodiment. Rather, the voice-over functions to relate human language on a more general, abstract level to what is occurring.

For Davies these kinds of voice-overs function to frame 'the human actions presented – actions that are always those of embodied agents whose embodied actions are permeated by language and conceptual awareness'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, for Davies, such voice-overs are a key element in Malick's overall exploration of embodied experience; an exploration that aesthetically, thematically, and narratively takes place through the way characters react to each other and to the world around them. Undoubtedly the inner monologues being discussed here are an element in the film's total design. Nonetheless, they have a quality that separates them from the kinds of subjective, embodied experiences discussed earlier. As Chion has suggested, they 'do not mingle with the surrounding air'<sup>23</sup> in the sense they are not mixed in with any perceptual perspectives occurring in the spaces shown on screen. They rather function as a series of fragmented questions and declarations that emerge from the inner world of thought and language and not from any sentient existence present within the frame.

At the same time these inner voices are combined with different natural environments; in the case of the second sequence discussed above, with a species of animal (parrots) and with the soldiers as a group. Therefore, while these voices are dislocated from diegetic space they nonetheless speak to a multitude of natural locations and to a variety of things, both human and animal. In this way Malick is able to present what Chion describes as a 'free... atemporal commentary',<sup>24</sup> a commentary that is composed of linguistic registers of philosophical and poetic expression. This commentary does not derive from or have its basis in the actions on screen; it is rather positioned outside of what is happening. Nonetheless, it still conveys thoughts that can be related to what is occurring in the Guadalcanal landscape, even if these thoughts sometimes relate to what is being shown in terms of poetic symbolism rather than single or exact meaning.

## The green island paradise

Films such as *The Thin Red Line* show some of the different ways human beings interrelate with nature. Nature can exist in relation to processes of subjective embodiment in which individual's sensuously engage with and are touched by the world in a manner that elicits from them internal memory images or visions of paradise (however real or imagined the basis of these visions are). This represents the first mode in which nature can be experienced and represented. Alternatively, nature can exist in relation to linguistic abstractions that are not tied to any embodied, subjective engagement that a character is having in a particular space. This is the second mode that nature can be placed in, a mode that shows how thoughts that stem from the world of language can offer interpretations of different natural terrains, animals, and human beings. These thoughts exist in their own state of purity – in the sense that they remain contained within linguistic mediation – yet at the same time are woven across different images, always moving on from one space to the next; these thoughts are interrogative, reflective, and poetic – and sometimes naïve and only semi-coherent – but nonetheless speak to nature from an enclosed, inner world of language. What these two modes demonstrate is not only some of the different ways that human beings can be involved with nature but also the various ways human beings can know and experience nature.

A good example that illustrates this multifaceted reality of nature is Witt's green island paradise. As discussed earlier this paradise is a component in Witt's spiritual quest to see if individual souls are all part of, in his

words, 'one big soul'. This paradise is evoked by Witt through his subjective, embodied experiences of nature. It is on account of the way the material properties of nature arouse particular visions and memories in Witt that his paradise and the 'immortality' it represents is evoked. Arguably, however, the film also shows that there are other things that this paradise can be associated with. For example, it is not hard to suggest that it is a colonial fantasy to represent the Melanesian people and coastline as part of a green island paradise. Presented as an exotic and 'tranquil' sanctuary the Islander community is romanticised in a way that renders it natural, innocent, and in a state of 'original communal harmony'.<sup>25</sup> In this sense the Melanesian people exist as noble savages in an Edenic pastoral setting. Yet as Rybin has suggested, this is Witt's 'myth and not the film's'.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it is a 'mythical idealization of the Melanesians' that 'emerges from a resistance to the narrative the army would seek to impose on [Witt's] experience'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, it is possible to say that the green island paradise is an invented utopia that Witt uses to distance himself from the inhuman brutality and seeming futility that being in Charlie Company entails.

One example that can be cited in support of this claim occurs after Witt is captured and returned to the battleship. In one of the lower decks he is disciplined by Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn), a character that Critchley describes as essentially being a materialist and a moral nihilist.<sup>28</sup> At one point Welsh says to him that there is only one world – a world within which each individual is essentially worth nothing. Witt counters this proposition by suggesting that there is 'another world', clearly referring to the idyllic setting he went AWOL in. Therefore, while the Melanesian landscape functions as a space onto which Western myths about the other can be mapped these myths are also sources of individual salvation; this salvation not only has to do with finding a way to survive the dehumanisation of war but also to imagine the possibility of 'another world' beyond this one, a world where each individual soul is part of a greater soul. Even if this latter function is still considered politically problematic because it is a white male who uses the Melanesian community as a vehicle to explore his own existential issues, the film never lets go of the fact that there is a subjective dimension to how the Melanesians are being represented.

The film also complicates Witt's green island paradise by showing how it can be touched by death and physical disease. At one point near the end of the film Witt returns to the Melanesian community. However, he is now not welcome; instead the Solomon Islanders keep their distance from him. At first it is not entirely clear why but then the film shows a sequence of images beginning with shots of the Islanders fighting and grieving, a child

with white sores over his body, and then a shrine of human skulls and bones. Witt's inner thoughts are heard via voice-over:

[w]e were a family. How'd it break up and come apart, so now we're turned against each other, each standing in the others light? How'd we lose the good that was given us?

While Witt's comments can be taken ambiguously (is he referring to his own relationship to the 'natives' or to the members relationships with each other, or to both of these things?) what is highlighted in this scene is the fact that the green island paradise has permeable boundaries that leave it exposed and vulnerable to mortality and various forms of conflict; not only conflict between community members but also conflict between community and nature. While this revelation does not necessarily shake Witt's fundamental belief in the possibility of 'another world' – evident in the fact that in a later conversation with Sergeant Welsh he holds out hope that Welsh will overcome his nihilistic view that there is only one world within which individuals ultimately exist as meaningless entities – it does complicate what role the green island paradise plays in expressing or symbolising this other world. Two things antithetical to Witt's transcendental vision of immortality and unity – mortality and disunity – are shown to be able to penetrate his mythic, idealised sanctuary.

## The external world of nature

The concepts of death and disharmony also relate to some of the other perspectives that characters have on the metaphysics of nature and reality. These concepts can be contextualised in terms of Lieutenant Colonel Tall's (Nick Nolte) suggestion that because nature is inherently cruel the taking away of life is not only an inevitable part of war but of existence more generally. Tall says this during the sequence when he relieves Captain James Staros (Elias Koteas) of his command for being too soft. In response to Staros' question 'have you ever had anyone die in your arms sir?', Tall says:

[L]ook at this jungle. Look at those vines, the way they twine around the trees, swallowing everything. Nature's cruel, Staros.

Tall makes a metaphysical observation about nature that illustrates his position on war and on reality more broadly. This assertion is self-serving

because it rationalises Tall's stance of victory at all costs, a stance motivated by his personal ambition. Also, this stance can be tied into the intimate connection between nature and death as well as nature's indifference to human suffering which the film illustrates in various images.

These images represent the third mode that *The Thin Red Line* presents nature in. In this mode the spectator is invited to encounter nature in a way that does not involve any kind of character perspective or linguistic mediation. In this state nature does not touch any of the characters in a way that facilitates those characters experiencing inner images or reflections and nature does not have any thoughts applied to it that stem from the enclosed, abstract world of language. Rather, through the transfiguring power of cinema, Malick is able to give an objective reality to nature. In this third mode the impression can be made upon the spectator that nature exists in its own right, external to the characters' embodied states of subjectivity and external to the general abstractions that can be articulated by the human voice. In other words nature is presented as being detached from the inner worlds of the characters and from the inner world of thought and language. What the spectator is confronted with is images of nature that show it in its immediate, material 'there-ness'.

Not long after the first extensive battle sequence in the film which shows US soldiers being massacred on the green, tropical hills of Guadalcanal Island, there is an image showing two dogs feasting on human carcasses. In addition to being reminded of how (from the perspective of another animal) human beings are just meat and a source of food, the spectator is also shown an image that treats the animal's actions as visual facts that are not directly tied to the drama. There are a number of reasons why this effect is produced, including the following. There is no indication that the shot represents the subjective perspective of any of the characters. In terms of editing there are no eye-line matches or other kinds of optical interchanges created between the characters and the dogs; hence, there is no gaze that creates a sense of spatial continuity, spatial direction, or dramatic vision. Moreover, there is no movement of human figures within the frame itself to indicate that any characters are in the immediate vicinity. Furthermore, the shot has no obvious connection to the narrative and may even be viewed as interrupting the flow of the story. One of the main reasons for this is because even though the shot can be contextualised in terms of the Battle of Guadalcanal and to the fighting that has been shown it does not relate in any clear way to the narrative progression. That is to say, it is not integrated into the underlying causes and effects that are propelling the linear narrative in the film along. This linear narrative has to do with



the taking of Hill 210. In other words, the dogs do not represent a narrative centre of interest. Rather, the focus of the camera's attention is on the actions of the dogs in a specific location. As Rybin says, the camera in films like *The Thin Red Line* can be 'characterised...as exploratory, developing an interest in character but equally, and at times more, eager to explore space and cut across time in ways that are not always directly tethered to an interest in the characters'<sup>29</sup> – or, it can be added, to an interest in building patterns of narrative development.

This shot is a static one that frames the dogs for approximately 25 seconds. While this has the effect of keeping the spectator at a fixed distance from the events on screen the duration of the shot also allows them to become aware of the passing of cinematic time. This is because the camera records an event that is not forwarding the narrative action and is not immediately related to any of the character's perceptual or psychological perspectives. For such reasons the impression can be created that what is occurring within the frame has no other reality or meaning apart from being an action that is taking place in front of the camera. In other words, rather than have nature set out as a narrative spectacle for the eye the spectator is confronted with an image of nature as cinematic spectacle; a spectacle that, in the words of Critchely, impresses upon the spectator 'the sense of things simply being looked at, just being what they are'.<sup>30</sup>

The shot does indirectly tie into the narrative: it can be related to Tall's thoughts about the cruelty of nature (although the spectator will need to infer this across particular images by making a connection between shots that are not linked in any clear causal way). However, the sensation the spectator can have at the particular moment they view the dogs feasting is that the actions on screen have their own self-contained reality; the impression is that the events being viewed are non-narrativised. What is also absent is the voice-overs analysed earlier – the atemporal inner monologues dislocated from diegetic space. In other words, there is no presence of language at the moment the camera shows the dogs devouring human remains; this means there is no attempt to allow the abstractions of philosophy or poetry to try to interpret what is happening on screen. The camera presents a world that is momentarily freed of human intentions and purposes, allowing nature to speak for itself through the medium of cinema. Rather than interacting with or investigating the world it is showing the camera assumes a position outside of the action, allowing the spectator to watch things unfold from a fixed and distant perspective. At the same time this permits the spectator to apprehend nature as it exists in its own state of 'being-ness' in front of the camera. Put another way, nature



is externalised in a way that facilitates the spectator experiencing it as an empirical fact of existence.

A number of other shots in the film have the same kind of effect. At one stage during the first battle sequence there is an image of an injured baby bird crawling slowly along the ground. Certainly this shot may evoke an emotional reaction in the spectator; it might also suggest to them a symbolic meaning to do with the taking of innocent life during war, although such meaning is not consistently developed throughout the course of the film and is therefore only one of several ways of thinking about war that the film suggests. For many of the same reasons discussed earlier, such as the fact the shot is not motivated diegetically and that the image is constructed in a way that allows the action on screen to exist as a cinematic spectacle and experiential event, it also stands apart from the main event occurring in the narrative. Such images reveal nature to simply exist as it is. This is not to suggest that Malick is assuming that it is possible to perceive a thing-in-itself prior to any technological or perceptual mediation; rather, that Malick is able to use formal and aesthetic techniques to transfigure the objects and entities of the world so that they disclose themselves in their 'thing-ness'.

## Conclusion: The three modes of nature

As demonstrated in this article *The Thin Red Line* presents nature in three different modes, or what can be thought of as different ways of knowing, experiencing, and/or representing nature. The film shows that human beings encounter nature in terms of memories and transcendent visions, philosophical and poetic ideas, and cultural myths. *The Thin Red Line* also presents nature as the given, existing world that is beyond or outside the domain of human agency and language. To put this in the terms outlined by Neil Smith – who in the context of dialectical theory examines the history of the interrelationships that human beings have had with the physical world – *The Thin Red Line* reveals the complex and sometimes contradictory meanings that nature still has in today's society. In the film nature is material; it is represented as a self-contained thing that exists external to subjective experience, human language, and human drama; it is also presented as spiritual, evident in Witt's transcendent vision – his green island paradise. The film also shows how nature can be bound up with subjective memories as illustrated by the memory-impressions that Bell has of his wife which are evoked in relation to his encounter with landscape. However, the film also arguably demonstrates how cultural

myth can affect a person's relationship with the natural world. For example, on one level Witt's green island paradise is symptomatic of his colonial gaze. This gaze transforms the Melanesian community and their beachside habitat into a myth of origin fantasy. Such cultural myths are about the role that social history plays in shaping individual experiences of external reality, indicating how nature is appropriated in relation to both individual and social factors.

*The Thin Red Line* additionally reveals that there are interconnections between the different ways that human beings can be involved with nature. For example, the landscape evokes memories, interpretations, and visions in relation to the soldiers' embodied, visceral experiences of the surrounding world. Therefore, even when a metaphysical speculation or transcendent vision is evoked this happens in relation to the soldiers existing as physical beings sensuously engaged with the natural environment (which, as pointed out earlier, complicates Witt's transcendentalism). Insofar as the soldiers exist as material beings it can be argued that they relate to the immediate, concrete presence which nature is presented as having at various moments in the film. In other words even though the spectator can experience the objects of nature disclosing themselves in their 'thing-ness' independent of any of the characters' subjective perspectives, on another level this immanent, physical reality of nature correlates with the soldiers' embodied relationships with the Guadalcanal landscape. This material reality that the soldiers have and which makes them a part of nature is a reality that is also expressed through the way death is configured in the film. Lieutenant Colonel Tall frames his interpretation of war and reality more broadly by seeing in nature an inherent cruelty and propensity for death; Witt's green island paradise is penetrated by death and physical disease – things which are antithetical to his spiritual vision of 'immortality'; finally, there are images such as the one of the dogs feasting on human corpses or of the baby bird with a broken wing struggling to move, images of death and physical injury which are also images of nature existing in its own self-contained reality.

Such interconnections serve as another example of how Malick expresses a fundamental aspect of dialectical materialism in his work. Dialectical materialism provides modern society a way to conceptualise the different and ambiguous uses of the term nature. As Williams noted, 'nature is perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language'.<sup>31</sup> It is a word that over the centuries has carried various and sometimes opposing meanings. For example, a dominant way that nature is conceived of in the modern age is as something which is material and external – the physical world

of matter and of biological life. Such a world is not only thought to exist independently of and outside human consciousness but also in a state of indifference, even hostility, to human affairs. One of the main reasons for this is because it obeys fundamental laws that cannot be broken or transcended by human will or desire. Yet insofar as human beings are deemed to exist as natural entities not only are they part of the physical world they are also an example of something that is material. As Smith puts it, this then leads to the problem of trying to work out to what degree 'the human species' is simply 'one among many in the totality of nature'.<sup>32</sup> In its exploration of how human beings know, experience, and relate to nature *The Thin Red Line* provides a dialectical mediation on such issues dealing with the material and the human.

What Malick is able to do is provide a fluidic, existential reflection on nature and on the different relationships that human beings have with nature. In the words of Rybin, *The Thin Red Line* has a 'poetically intersubjective form [which] develops interlocking patterns across different encounters with landscape, even when the myths characters are shown to project onto the landscape are shown to be ultimately incompatible'.<sup>33</sup> Here Malick achieves something he aspires to in other films such as *The New World*. For in this latter film, as Robert Sinnerbrink has put it, the filmmaker 'attempts to present an "impossible" experience fusing mythic history, intensively subjective reflection, and a metaphysical perspective in which nature itself speaks'.<sup>34</sup> In striving to present such an 'impossible' fusion the filmmaker is able to lend layers of subjective mental and emotional life to the natural world at the same time as giving this world an empirical texture that cuts through the allure of animism. In this way Malick is able to engage the question of what nature is in a complex, dialectical fashion.

## Notes

1. Schmidt 1971, pp. 78-79. By 'the bourgeois theories of nature presented by the Enlightenment', Schmidt means the radical changes introduced into the field of knowledge in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the work of philosopher-scientists such as Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and John Locke – work that represents the beginning of modern science.
2. Smith 1984.
3. Ibid., p. 47.
4. Williams 1983.
5. Smith 1984, pp. 1-2.
6. Manning 2011, p. 174.
7. Ibid., p. 178.
8. McCann 2007, p. 77.

9. Silverman 2007, p. 175.
10. Critchley 2002.
11. Rybin 2012, p. 106.
12. Ibid., p. 122.
13. Davies 2009, p. 50.
14. Ibid., p. 56.
15. Rybin 2012, p. 126.
16. Davies 2009, p. 62.
17. Ibid., p. 60.
18. It could be, for example, that one speaks of transcendence in the sense that Witt transcends how the material, physical world normally appears to consciousness, but does not entirely transcend the world itself. In some senses this is what Rybin (2012) means when he says that 'Malick's style suggests not another world beyond this one but rather other possible worlds within this one' (p. 113). For an overview of the transcendentalist as opposed to the non-transcendentalist readings of Witt's vision see Davies 2009.
19. Coplan 2009.
20. For a summary of the different ways voiceovers such as Witt's have been analysed in the critical literature see Davies 2009.
21. Chion 2004, p. 55.
22. Davies 2009, p. 60.
23. Chion 2004, p. 55.
24. Ibid., p. 56.
25. Silverman 2007, p. 174.
26. Rybin 2012, p. 123.
27. Ibid., p. 124.
28. Critchley 2002.
29. Rybin 2012, p. 111.
30. Critchley 2002.
31. Williams 1983, p. 219.
32. Smith 1984, p. 2.
33. Rybin 2012, p. 125.
34. Sinnerbrink 2011, pp. 180-181.

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