

# James Jones, Terrence Malick, and *The Thin Red Line*

PATRICK PAUL CHRISTLE

*A paper delivered at the Twentieth-Century Literature Conference  
in Louisville, Kentucky on February 22, 2002.*

Terrence Malick's cinematic version of James Jones's The Thin Red Line was released in 1998 and won widespread, although not universal, critical acclaim. For the most part, Malick's film accurately depicts the combat scenes that Jones wrote. At times, it also succeeds in conveying Jones's sense of the horror, absurdity, and madness of modern warfare and the numbing effect all this had on the soldiers doing the fighting. The authenticity of Malick's version is further established, apparently, by his acknowledgment of gratitude to Jones's wife Gloria and Jones's children Kaylie and Jamie in the movie's final credits. Nonetheless, Malick, in his film, has made serious revisions of and additions to Jones's novel. We have come to expect something of this sort when film makers get their hands on literary works, and sometimes the resulting motion pictures manage to remain true to the spirit of the novels that inspired them. Unfortunately, Malick's The Thin Red Line is not one such film. I will argue that his significant alterations of the novel's content make Malick's conception something other than an interpretation of Jones's vision. Instead, the film amounts to a repudiation of Jones's view of the world as meaningless, chaotic, and deterministic.

Before examining Malick's film, we need to consider the novel that James Jones wrote. Jones's The Thin Red Line presents an unrelentingly bleak vision of the world, and when all is said and done, it leaves readers with the impression that the individual is totally insignificant. The Thin Red Line is the only novel of Jones's war quartet that actually deals with combat, and it pulls no punches in its treatment. Reviewers, critics, and scholars have lauded it for its realism. Some, myself included, would place the novel in the domain of literary naturalism because the destinies of Jones's soldiers are determined by chance and by social, economic, psychological, and political forces beyond their control and, often, even beyond their recognition. One who does recognize his situation is the clerk, Corporal Fife. Early in the novel he is observing an aerial attack on the transport ships that had delivered his company, C-for-Charlie, to Guadalcanal. He is smart enough to see that what is at play is a simple "mathematical equation" of cost and effect. That is, how many expensive planes are worth losing to sink an even more expensive ship? He is also smart enough to realize that the men in the machines are unimportant, and that "very idea itself,

and what it implied, struck a cold blade of terror into Fife's essentially defenseless vitals, a terror both of unimportance, his unimportance, and of powerlessness: his powerlessness. He had no control or sayso in any of it" (40). Fife is not the only one intelligent enough to see the truth. Private, ultimately Lieutenant, Bell often muses about the war, and he realizes that industrial production is what wins wars. He also realizes that

*Some men would survive, but no one individual man could survive. It was a discrepancy in methods of counting. The whole thing was too vast, too complicated, too technological for any one individual man to count in it. Only collections of men counted, only communities of men, only numbers of men. (230)*

Indeed, we see at the end of the novel that C-for-Charlie Company is embarking for New Georgia. The Company has survived to fight again—but not with the same faces. It now consists of a boatload of new recruits led by a handful of veterans. Nonetheless, all the historical accounts will speak of C-for-Charlie as one ongoing, continuous entity. Not only does the individual not count, but as Staff Sergeant Storm says, a man is no more than “a tool with its serial number of manufacture stamped right on it” (356). Even nature, in the form of the jungle, knows the insignificance of the individual. Jones describes the jungle thusly—“Almost invisible in the rain, it loomed there, alien, supremely confident, making them aware of it even when they could not see it, a fact of nature like a mountain or an ocean and equally as ominous to the human ego” (52). Furthermore, the company commander, Captain Stein, contemplating his role, concludes,

*It was a horrifying vision: all of them doing the same identical thing, all of them powerless to stop it, all of them devoutly and proudly believing themselves to be free individuals. It expanded to include the scores of nations, the millions of men, doing the same on thousands of hilltops across the world. And it didn't stop there. It went on. It was the concept—concept? the fact; the reality—of the modern State in action. (215)*

He hits on the irony of it all—all of them think they are “free individuals.” Yet, clearly, the soldier, representative of the individual in modern industrial society, is at the mercy of both natural and social forces that threaten to overwhelm him. Jones elects Bell to fully state the irony. Bell, considering his comrades, reasons that:

*They thought they were men. They all thought they were real people. They really did. How funny. They thought they made decisions and ran their own lives, and proudly called*

themselves free individual human beings. The truth was they were here, and they were gonna stay here, until the state through some other automaton told them to go someplace else, and then they'd go. But they'd go freely, of their own free choice and will, because they were free individual human beings. Well, well. (267)

Economic and political forces are not all that control the soldiers. Social and psychological factors also come into play. Despite the theories Jones attributes to the Generals, the fear of one's direct superior does not seem to be the primary motivation for any of the men of C-for-Charlie. Rather, the fear of being considered a coward by one's comrades in arms seems to be uppermost in the soldiers' minds. As Jones writes of the First Sergeant, "All Welsh knew was that he was scared shitless, and at the same time was afflicted with a choking gorge of anger that any social coercion existed in the world which could force him to be here" (134). What social coercion? Foremost is the call of simple patriotism and all the peer pressure it generates. All the citizens exert social pressure on one another to do their duty, and to refuse is virtually unthinkable because the self-esteem of the modern individual is so tightly bound to the opinions of others. Moreover, throughout their childhood and adolescence little boys are subject to social conditioning that tells them that being a man means being brave, even fearless in the face of any threatening presence. Being without fear is too much to ask, though, as everyone is afraid in combat in The Thin Red Line, and everyone equally fears being thought a coward by his buddies. Like Welsh, Fife is aware of what is happening to him and the power of the forces arrayed against him. Fife's thoughts are framed by Jones in this way:

Helplessness, that was what he felt; complete helplessness. He was as helpless as if agents of his government had bound him hand and foot and delivered him here and then gone back to wherever it was good agents went. . . . And here he lay, as bound and tied by his own mental processes and social indoctrination as if they were ropes. . . . He was reacting exactly as the smarter minds of his society had anticipated he would react. (191-92)

Fife's "mental processes" are largely related to his concerns about what others think of him. Jones tells us that Fife's thoughts are typical—"somewhere in the back of each mind, like a fingernail picking uncontrollably at a scabby sore, was the small voice saying: but is it worth it? Is it really worth it to die, to be dead, just to prove to everybody that you're not a coward?" (68). Thus, we can discern an indication that Jones believes that resistance to social conditioning and peer pressure is normal but deeply repressed and ultimately futile.

All in all, Jones's The Thin Red Line is relentlessly deterministic and has frequently been recognized as such. I believe Edmond L. Volpe has it exactly right when he concludes that Jones "has presented a frightening twentieth-century view of individual man's insignificance in society and in the universe" (112).

Now we can turn to Malick's film version of The Thin Red Line and examine how it handles Jones's vision. The only character in Malick's motion picture who comes close to voicing the overwhelmingly deterministic view of the world that Jones presents in The Thin Red Line is the one soldier who goes insane, Sergeant McCron, which seems to imply that the deterministic view is the view of a madman. McCron is first shown ranting and with bulging eyes, clearly establishing that the massacre of his platoon has driven him mad. Later, we see him mumbling, "Show me how to see things the way you do. We're dirt. We're just dirt." This indicates his questioning of and his doubts about the meaning of existence. Later, after images of wild dogs scavenging the battlefield, we see him standing up and shouting, "Go ahead, c'mon! Who's deciding who's gonna live? Who's deciding who's gonna die? This is futile. Look at me! I stand right up here and not one bullet, not one shot. Why? How come they all had to die, and I can stand right here? I can stand right up and nothing happens to me!" The answer to his questions, of course, is that the world is deterministic and meaningless, ruled by chance, not intelligence. This aspect of the presentation of McCron, his questioning, does coincide with Jones's depiction of him, although Jones gets the point across through his actions rather than his words. In the novel, after he has lost his platoon, McCron slowly walks back to the rear amid a hail of enemy gunfire, "shoulders hunched, face twisted, wringing his hands, looking more like an old woman at a wake than an infantry combat soldier, neither quickening his pace nor dodging" (239). He arrives safely purely through chance. Jones biographer George Garrett observes that in The Thin Red Line

there is no such thing as rational cause and effect, except insofar as individual characters, themselves mere fragments, insist on perceiving some kind of order in chaos. In fact, from an individual point of view, there is only accident, pure luck, good or bad. Men and women live by accident and die by accident. Nothing they plan or do really makes any difference at all. (136)

McCron survives by accident. Jones, though, unlike Malick, casts a hint of doubt upon McCron's insanity. He writes, "there was some look not exactly sly about his face but which appeared to say that while what he was telling was the truth, it was not all the truth. . . . McCron had found his own reasonable excuse"

(239-40). Furthermore, since it is McCron's trek to the rear unharmed that demonstrates Jones's view of the world, not anything he says, the words Malick puts in McCron's mouth seem intended to act as counterpoint to Malick's mystical message of a guiding spiritual force imbuing all nature. The inference can be made that it is madness not to recognize the spiritual force guiding the universe. Other aspects of the film are equally at odds with Jones.

The movie Malick has made is replete with images of a natural world that is breathtaking, vigorous, and spiritualized—water shimmers, trees and leaves sparkle and glow, and colorful creatures gambol, swoop, and chatter. This idealization of the natural world, through what Tom Whalen in his critique of the movie has correctly categorized as “ponderous montage sequences” (163), is augmented by scenes involving idyllic South Sea islanders peacefully abiding with nature, their children frolicking in the sea like aquatic sprites. Such depictions of nature and the primitive are often accompanied by a voiceover intoning mystic questions, such as “What's this war in the heart of nature?” “Who are you to live in all these many forms?” and “What keeps us from reaching out and touching the glory?” As we have seen, though, in Jones's novel, nature, when it is mentioned at all, is indifferent, “alien,” and “ominous to the human ego” (52). Furthermore, there are no islanders in Jones's book. They are completely Malick's invention. Likewise, the voiceover is pure Malick and consists of words and sentiments not found in Jones's novel at all.

How did Malick arrive at this vision? I do not know, but one can speculate that perhaps he derived it from a reading of Steven R. Carter's book, James Jones: An American Literary Orientalist Master, in which Carter posits for Jones an interest in the spiritual evolution of the individual that he then traces throughout Jones's corpus. One Malick voiceover, “Maybe all men got one big soul,” can be seen as drawn directly from Carter's argument. Carter's thesis is ingenious and not without merit, but his argument is at its weakest when he tries to demonstrate it in The Thin Red Line. Jones himself wrote to Carter, saying that he had never deliberately structured any of his novels around a particular philosophy and that he had “never been able fully to espouse a religious philosophy that embraces reincarnation and various mystical ESP” (*Letters* 366). Carter aside, Malick's inclusion of a mystical, spiritual theme in his film is not supported by most people's reading of the novel. Whalen sees this, remarking that the movie is an “inexcusable descent into the sentimental” (162) and going on to contend that Malick's “The Thin Red Line is not a war film, but a meditation on the relationship of man to nature” (163).

Finally, Malick's depiction of Private Witt as some sort of mystical seeker and self-sacrificing

hero bears no resemblance to Jones's character of the same name. Jones describes Witt as a man who "was free, white and twenty-one and had never taken no shit off nobody and never would" (267). Private Witt is Jones's counterpart to Prewitt from From Here to Eternity, his new embodiment, so to speak. Yet, as Peter Aichinger argues, "in Witt the human elements have disappeared; he is practically an idiot, neither physically nor morally attractive." Aichinger contends that this signals Jones's repudiation of the romanticism of Prewitt because "Prewitt's individualism becomes Witt's perversity and Prewitt's loyalty to his private code of conduct becomes Witt's 'goddamed, stupid Kentucky code'" (86). Witt is too obtuse to have the insights into his real situation that others such as Fife and Bell have. Indeed, Jones writes, "Witt . . . did think he was a man, and did believe he was a real person. As a matter of fact, the question had never entered his head. . . . he was a free individual as far as he was concerned." (267). Furthermore, Witt's crude humanity is fairly typical. As Jerry H. Bryant points out, the soldiers "get drunk after a battle and, on their hands and knees, bay like wolves at the moon, get into fights with each other, and stagger to the tent of their new company commander to tell him how much they hate him. There is no saintliness here, no brotherhood, no cooperative utopia—only debasement and degradation" (156).

To depict Witt as some noble, self-sacrificing, spiritual seeker plays havoc with Jones's whole novel. The closest any of Jones's characters get to showing some concern for the "other" or to being self-sacrificing is the case of Staff Sergeant Keck, who accidentally pulls the pin out of a grenade which remains stuck in his back pocket. Realizing what he has done, Keck backs up to a nearby dirt hummock so that the explosion of the grenade does not harm anyone but himself (231-32). Malick does get that incident right in the movie, although he has Woody Harrelson as Keck talk too much before he dies. Jones's Keck keeps his eyes closed and is silent, except for one statement, "What a fucking recruit trick to pull" (232). This is consistent with Jones's depiction of war, where men become heroes accidentally, where individuals are forced into heroic action by chance, ambition, or the fear of looking cowardly in the eyes of their peers. Self-sacrifice is the farthest thought from the minds of any of the Jones's soldiers. The self-sacrificing hero is standard war film fare, but it flies in the face of Jones's determinism and his stated intent. In his Paris Review interview with Nelson W. Aldrich, Jr., Jones says, "I don't think that combat has ever been written about truthfully; it has been described in terms of bravery and cowardice. I won't even accept these words as terms of human reference any more. And, anyway, hell, they don't even apply to what, in actual fact, modern warfare has become" (52). It has become an exercise in absurdity, reflecting our chaotic, meaningless, and deterministic world.

In conclusion, let me say that I respect Malick's The Thin Red Line. It does, at times, depict war as the horror and absurdity that Jones hoped to communicate. Its vision, though, is not James Jones's vision—quite the opposite, actually. Frankly, I doubt we will ever see a film that does justice to any of Jones's novelistic conceptions.

### Works Cited

- Aichinger, Peter. The American Soldier in Fiction, 1880-1963: A History of Attitudes Toward Warfare and the Military Establishment. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1975.
- Aldrich, Nelson W., Jr. "The Art of Fiction: James Jones." Paris Review 20 (1959): 34-55.
- Bryant, Jerry H. The Open Decision: The Contemporary American Novel and Its Intellectual Background. New York: Free P, 1970.
- Carter, Steven R. James Jones: An American Literary Orientalist Master. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1998.
- Garrett, George. James Jones. San Diego: Harcourt, 1984.
- Jones, James. The Thin Red Line. New York: Scribner's, 1962.
- . To Reach Eternity: The Letters of James Jones. Ed. George Hendrick. New York: Random House, 1989.
- The Thin Red Line. Dir. Terrence Malick. Phoenix Pictures. 1998.
- Volpe, Edmond L. "James Jones - Norman Mailer." Contemporary American Novelists. Ed. Harry T. Moore. Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1964. 106-19.
- Whalen, Tom. "'Maybe All Men Got One Big Soul': The Hoax within the Metaphysics of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*." Literature/Film Quarterly 27.3 (1999): 162-166.

Copyright © Patrick Paul Christle, 2002

All rights reserved

Posted to the Web on 11 May 2002