“SHOW ME HOW TO SEE THINGS THE WAY YOU DO”: EXISTENTIALISM IN FAITH, PHILOSOPHY, AND FILM

by

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Certificate of Approval

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Abstract:

In this cross-disciplinary thesis, I use Paul Tillich's theological concept, "Absolute Faith," and Albert Camus' philosophical notion of "the absurd" to uncover the existential dimensions of the 1998 film *The Thin Red Line,* written and directed by Terrence Malick. The film explores the lives of several soldiers involved in the Battle of Guadalcanal, and I argue that Malick uses the context of World War II as a larger metaphor for the existential conflict that faces human beings. By employing the theology of Tillich and the philosophy of Camus, I investigate the overarching existential themes of Malick's film, and conclude that *The Thin Red Line* provides its audience with a different perspective, and a subsequent vocabulary with which to navigate meaningfully the inherently tragic terms of human existence.

Part 1: The Big Questions on the Silver Screen

Can a movie deal with the big questions? In other words, should film be thought of as pure entertainment, designed to create box office buzz and draw in large crowds, or can film also be considered a repository for the questions that have occupied the most active human minds for centuries?

Existential questions, broadly construed, are centered upon the ways in which an individual can cope with the tragic terms of human existence. This simplistic definition allows for a broad framework in which one can understand the constituents of an existential question, and this is the point I wish to emphasize throughout this paper. I argue that existential questions have a very general quality, and are formatted in many ways, such as systematic philosophies or theologies, as well as in fictional literature and other artistic mediums, such as filmic texts. The crux of this essay will be an examination of the different mediums in which existential questions are posited, and the common themes that arise. I will argue, however, that a well-crafted story has the unique capability to present these types of questions in a common vernacular by putting the audience in touch with characters and life experiences to which they can personally relate.

From the opening moments of the 1998 film *The Thin Red Line*, Terrence Malick, the director of the film, asks the root question of why dichotomies exist in the world, such as life and death, strife and love, and in more explicitly human terms, good and evil. The film is an observation of the Battle of Guadalcanal, a landmark battle in the Pacific campaign of World War II between America and Japan. But the different fragmentary episodes of the film explore the lives and

thoughts of the individual soldiers involved in the conflict. The film is existentially themed because it is a meditation on meaning—what it means to be human, what it means to be faced with the inevitability of death, and what it means to find courage to live life despite the fact that human existence is framed in inherently tragic terms. For this reason—because the film is concerned with how meaning is found or created by the human mind—it can be classified as a repository of existential questions that extend beyond the scope of cinema to the very core of speculation about the meaning of life and the tragic reality of the human condition.

In this project, I will develop an interpretation of *The Thin Red Line*. It will be my objective to illuminate possibilities, and to provide an understanding of the types of questions Malick asks. Malick has provided his audience with a work of art that represents the potential of film to ask the root questions of human existence from a unique standpoint of being able to show the audience a certain view of the world and to allow them to understand, by using a narrative voice, the value of what they are seeing. I will explore Malick's film in this capacity by relating certain themes in the film to the theoretical propositions of the philosopher Albert Camus and the theologian Paul Tillich, and in doing so I will illustrate how Malick's film encourages an ongoing dialogue with lay audiences and scholars alike.

1.1 Defining Existentialism

To classify the work of a theologian or philosopher as "existentialism," or to categorize such a thinker as an "Existentialist" is problematic for a number of reasons, the first of which being that these terms serve as "a general name for a number of thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who made the

concrete individual central to their thought."[1] The prior designation of what is meant by "existentialism" illustrates how broad-based the term actually is, in that analysis of the experience of the "concrete individual" is the only link between a variety of methodological approaches used to ask similar questions. The term "existentialism" labels the large body of theological and philosophical thought concerned with the way in which individuals can successfully navigate a world without inherent meaning, and in doing so construct a semblance of meaning in relation to their personal, subjective experiences. However, I will use the term "existentialism" to refer to the work of Camus, Tillich, and Malick, and the term "Existentialist" to refer to the thinkers themselves. Although grouping thinkers with notably different theses into one broad category could potentially be problematic, I contend that for the purposes of this paper it is necessary, as all three of the Existentialist thinkers I will explore seek a common end of finding meaning in human life.

I argue that existential themes, as they arise in philosophy, theology, and other forms of literature, are concerned with the basic purpose of providing human beings with a schematic with which to confront the world of which they are a part. Rhetorical critic Kenneth Burke suggests that literature can be classified as "equipment for living."[2] In regard to the proverb, a common component of literature, Burke states:

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[1] *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Volume 3, s.v. "Existentialism."
[2] Kenneth Burke. "Literature as Equipment for Living" in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University Press, 1941), 293.

> Proverbs are *strategies* for dealing with *situations*. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them. Another name for strategies might be *attitudes*.[3]

"Proverb," in the context in which Burke uses the term, refers to the short literary sayings that represent truths of a somewhat universal or timeless nature. Burke sees the proverb, contained within certain pieces of literature, as a kind of tool that can be utilized by the individual to confront certain situations. In this sense, the proverb can be seen as the moral of the story—an "*attitude*" proposed by the author of a given work that can be adopted by an individual in order to see the world with a different perspective.

Burke continues by relating the specific example of the proverb to the meaning of a work of art as a functional whole. He states:

> The most highly alembicated and sophisticated work of art, arising in complex civilizations, could be considered as designed to organize and command the army of one's thoughts and images, and to so organize them that one 'imposes upon the enemy the time and place and conditions for fighting preferred by oneself.' One seeks to 'direct the larger movements and operations' in one's campaign of living. One 'maneuvers,' and the maneuvering is an 'art.'[4]

[3] Burke 296-297.
[4] Burke 298.

Burke acknowledges that art is a creative medium, albeit with a highly functional purpose. Much like systematic theological and philosophical treatises, Burke suggests that art, if read critically, can provide an outline of how its reader might "maneuver" through different scenarios in life. He proposes that art contains specific strategies for general situations that human beings encounter, and that the tools contained within a given piece of art can be applied beyond the context in which the artwork was created. By utilizing the "equipment for living" provided within a work of art that names a common essence of human experience, the reader can confront scenarios of their personal experience with the knowledge of those that have experienced similar situations before them.

This is the light in which I will interpret the texts invoked in this paper—Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be*, and Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*. I argue that at a certain level, these texts all address similar human concerns. While it would be entirely false to suggest that all human beings have the exact same experiences, it is justifiable to claim that "existentialism," seen as a broad collection of theological and philosophical literature, is concerned with the common data of subjective human experience, and with the objective of finding the meaning—or individual meanings—of human life. I argue that the existential questions[5] that arise in literature can be classified as "Equipment for Living." By confronting a question concerning a general human

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[5] Existential Questions: those questions that ask, for example, what it means to be human, what it means to be faced with the inevitability of death, and what it means to find courage to live life despite the fact that human existence is framed in inherently tragic terms.

experience, an individual thinker can subsequently provide strategies or attitudes with which the individual can successfully confront certain situations.

"Existentialism," then, can be defined as a broad category of thought dealing with reflection upon human experience. Whether a piece of "Existentialist" thought is forged as a systematic philosophy or as a theological account, the bulk of "Existentialist" thought is developed with regard to episodes of general human experience, while keeping in mind the importance of the individual. In a sense, existentialists provide generalizations or abstractions of individual episodes of experience. Many "Existentialist" authors are concerned with the same fundamental goal: to provide "equipment for living"—new ways of seeing one's existence in relation to the world of which one is a part. The purpose of "existentialism" in this sense is not to dissolve all ambiguity and doubt in the world, but, as I hope to illustrate with a detailed discussion of *The Myth of Sisyphus, The Courage to Be,* and *The Thin Red Line*, to suggest a way to live with uncertainty and to form meaning in spite of apparent meaninglessness. I'm interested in the authors who dedicate their lives not to providing answers, but to opening up new senses of possibility—space for their readers to occupy and in which to discover or construct the meaning of their individual lives.

As has been illustrated by the philosopher/theologian commonly considered to be the forefather of existential thought, SØren Kierkegaard, "existentialism" can take an explicitly religious or theological form—and conversely, as Friedrich Nietzsche exemplifies, systems of thought with explicit existential themes can be completely devoid or even denunciative of God-content. This is why it is important

to locate the similarity between these different types of thought not in their label or categorization, but rather, in the basic reason why these questions are asked.[6] There are significant traces of existential themes in fictional literature as well, stories that engage the same concerns, but that frame the questions in terms of the character's lives and experiences rather than in more abstract theological or philosophical terms. I argue that the three approaches to making sense of human existence outlined in this section—that is, theology, philosophy, and literature—approach the same data of subjective human experience, albeit in different ways, but with the same common objective of providing ways of seeing the meaning of one's life.

1.2 Approaching Existential Cinema

In the prior discussion of terminology, I have claimed that existential questions often arise in the context of philosophy or theology, but that the same sorts of questions arise in fictional literature as well. Existential theology—or at least story lines that deal with explicitly theological questions—can be located, for example, in the work of Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the problem of faith is of central importance to the characters Aloyosha and Ivan Karamazov, two brothers who take different approaches to life given their freedom of choice and their capacity to interpret the world in alternative ways. In the chapter titled *Rebellion*, Ivan provides an account for his lack of faith, citing

[6] Although, as previously established, I will group these thinkers under the heading of "Existentialists" and their work under the heading of "existentialism" for the sake of illustrating the fact that although certain questions are theological and others are philosophical, these thinkers seek the same end of finding meaning in human life.

examples of how human suffering and the problem of evil directly contradict the rational ground for belief in a benevolent God.[7]

Through a detailed exploration of these existential questions, Dostoevsky provides his reader with “equipment for living”—in a sense, the audience is provided a set of tools in the form of the character’s experiences and perspectives. Dostoevsky posits existential questions by framing them in terms of his character’s lives and actions. It is important to distinguish, however, that the way in which the questions are asked in literary prose is very different from the way that a philosopher or theologian might approach the same questions. Systematic philosophies and theologies are often quite technical, rife with esoteric terminology and reliance upon previous philosophical and theological systems with which the reader must be familiar in order to understand their current object of study. Nonetheless, questions and themes of a similar nature arise in fictional literature, although in a unique way that can be differentiated from traditional theological or philosophical accounts. Instead of being presented in more systematic or technical terms, these questions and themes as they arise in fiction are framed in the lives and experiences of the characters involved in the story.

I suggest that film can serve the same purpose of providing “equipment for living” to its audience. Film is different from a written text in that, although the screenplay serves as the blueprint for the construction of the visual enterprise, we

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[7] Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 236-246.

rarely see written words on the screen.[8] Film is a medium in which existential questions can be asked, similar to the way that an author such as Dostoevsky asks questions: that is, by framing them in terms of the character's lives and experiences who are involved in the narrative. Similarly to written literature, film is a medium that approaches existential question in a different way than systematic philosophy or theology. The questions are often much less theoretical, and we as an audience are provided with a humanistic story opposed to a more complex and abstract system of thought.

In *Existentialist Cinema*, William C. Pamerleau states:

> In advocating that film can be a tool for understanding existentialist themes, there are two levels at which filmic insights can be directed: the theoretical, that is, the often technical and abstract way in which we give a description of what the human condition is like, and the personal, that is, the concrete experiences that we live.[9]

This understanding of the two levels at which existentialist themes are present in film is a crucial starting point, but it is vital to recognize that the theoretical interpretations of a filmic text are almost always imposed by the viewer, and are not directly provided by the author of the film. In fact, the theoretical premise for such questions is completely absent from the film, in a technical sense. A theory can at most be designated as a starting point—a "way of seeing" in which the film critic can

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[8] We rarely see the written word in a film, unless of course the film includes subtitles translating a foreign language or designating a location or the time of a specific scene.
[9] William C. Pamerleau. *Existentialist Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 36.

access certain themes present within the lives of the characters involved in the narrative.

As critics, it is vital to recognize that we bring our own propositions to the work—a film does not necessarily contain the explicit theological or philosophical elements prior to our suggestion that *our propositions* can be used to understand certain themes present in the story. In the end, the author of a film leaves the viewer with a certain degree of ambiguity, thus inviting individual interpretations of what the meaning of the film might be. Once an artwork is crafted into its final form, the author loses creative control and the audience assumes a certain degree of freedom to interpret the meaning of a text, within the framework of possibility provided by the author. With our freedom to interpret a filmic text comes our responsibility as critics to outline our position and the critical tools we bring that are independent of the work of art itself.

1.3 Methodological Considerations: Interpreting *The Thin Red Line*

As film critics, we must also recognize that our interpretation of the meaning of a film is only one facet of possible interpretation. Our analysis becomes tenable, however, if we carefully argue it by appealing to evidence contained within the text. An extensive amount of literature has been written about *The Thin Red Line*, and one of the most common errors in the literature is the construction of "meta-readings" of the text. In his essay "Calm—On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," Simon Critchley proposes "Three hermeneutic banana skins" upon which the critic of

Malick's films can potentially slip.[10] Critchley labels the first banana skin the "paradox of privacy," noting the fact that Malick is a highly enigmatic figure who does not provide direct commentary upon his films.[11] Unlike some directors, Malick does not include interview or director commentary in DVD extras, rendering any interpretation of his films largely a subjective interpretation on the part of the critic. This is important to recognize because any reading into Malick's work will necessarily involve certain presuppositions. Prior to any analysis, the critics must acknowledge that they bring their own propositions to the text, independent of what Malick might have intended.

Relating the first banana skin to the second, Critchley notes that Malick has a degree in philosophy from Harvard University. While his films often deal with explicit philosophical and theological themes, Critchley argues that it is important to recognize that because Malick does not provide commentary on his films, it would be our mistake as critics to suggest that *The Thin Red Line* is only a philosophical commentary. Critchley accurately notes that there is no explicit meaning of the films outlined by Malick himself, and thus for the reader of his film to read through the film to some kind of meta-philosophical premise would be to misread the text based upon our knowledge that Malick has an explicit interest in philosophy.[12]

The third and most important banana skin, Critchley suggests, is the latent danger of reading through the text. Critchley states:

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[10] Simon Critchley. "Calm—On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line"* in David Davies, ed. *The Thin Red Line* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 16-17.
[11] Critchley 16.
[12] Critchley 17.

> To read from cinematic language to some philosophical metalanguage is both to miss what is specific to the medium of film and usually to engage in some sort of cod-philosophy deliberately designed to intimidate the uninitiated. [. . .] Any philosophical reading of film has to be a reading *of* film, of what Heidegger would call *der Sache selbst*, the thing itself. A philosophical reading of film should not be concerned with ideas about the thing, but with the thing itself, the cinematic *Sache*.[13]

Critchley's guidelines are of utmost importance to my project. Because I will be employing the philosophy of Camus and the theology of Tillich to in order to create a framework to better understand certain themes in Malick's film, it is important to recognize that my conclusions about the film are, to a certain degree, independent of the film itself.

For example, Camus' notion of "the absurd" probably never explicitly occurred to Malick in creating the film, and Tillich's notion of "Absolute Faith" was surely not the primary grounding for his creation of the character Captain Staros. It becomes clear upon viewing the film that Malick is interested in philosophical and theological questions, but I concur with Critchley in that it is the critic's responsibility to recognize that meta-readings of the text have the potential to misrepresent the film itself. Keeping this in mind, I will use the philosophy of Camus and the theology of Tillich only as a starting point to analyze certain characters and

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[13] Critchley 17.

overlying themes in the film, thus situating Malick's text in a larger theoretical discussion.

One of the great injustices committed against Malick's film is the suggestion that it revolves around a single character. Most commonly, critics have suggested that the narrative revolves around Private Witt, played by Jim Caviezel. Many scholars have stretched "the thing itself" to accommodate this presupposition, and in doing so these scholars provide an extremely narrow interpretation of Malick's film. To begin, the structure of the film is unique and must be outlined. In a sense, the plot is episodic—Malick creates independent episodes of interaction (that make sense in terms of the larger narrative, but can stand alone as singular questions about the meaning of existence), and he ties these episodes to the larger narratives by using the unifying thread of voiceover, which pose larger, more general philosophical/theological questions in the disembodied voices of select characters.

Rather than following one central protagonist through the story, Malick exposes us to a variety of experiences and perspectives. Many authors have attributed the most general voiceovers to Private Witt, labeling them "The Witt Voiceovers." These voiceovers, however, establish the basic existential questions of all the characters that are not exclusive to Witt's personal journey. In "Vision, Touch and Embodiment in *The Thin Red Line*," David Davies states:

> Many of the other voiceovers play a more ambiguous role, starting with the opening line of the film: 'What's this war in the heart of nature?' This is usually attributed to Witt, as are most of the other voiceovers that do not obviously play the 'character-thickening' roles

> just noted. But some voiceovers are difficult to attribute because the cues that serve us well in other cases lead here to conflicting attributions. For example, the thematically significant voiceover comparing two ways in which we might see a dying bird seems to belong to Witt, given its content, but is visually accompanied by shots of Welsh walking through the camp dousing fires and is delivered in a voice that doesn't seem to match any of the other voiceovers. Some critics have nonetheless attempted attributions based on the traditional idea that the voiceover belongs to the character that we are (mostly) looking at, leading to some bizarre attributions that make no sense given the rest of the movie. [. . .] Others have inferred that these voiceovers are not attributable to any particular character. It seems clear, however, that at least the majority of them are attributable to Witt. We may term these voiceovers, which are almost entirely interrogative in form and ask fundamental questions about the nature of evil and its presence in the world, 'Witt voiceovers.'[14]

Davies accurately notes that these voiceovers are interrogative in form, and that they pose the fundamental existential questions that serve as the foundation for the interactions between the characters throughout the film. The problem, however, lies in the fact that Davies assumes that the voiceovers can be attributed to Witt, but provides no evidence to support his claim. Davies slips on the third of Critchley's

[14] David Davies. "Vision, Touch, and Embodiment in *The Thin Red Line"* in David Davies, ed. *The Thin Red Line* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 58-59.

three banana skins by resorting to his own presuppositions as evidence, and subsequently he fails to support his claim by analyzing "the thing itself."

The voiceovers to which Davies refers are attributable to Private Train, a minor character throughout most of the film, but possibly the most significant character due to the fact that his voiceovers serve as the bookends that frame the majority of the interactions of the characters. I make this claim based upon watching the film with subtitles, which I have come to believe accurately label the character to whom the voiceover belongs.[15] While in my first several viewings I thought that the voiceovers belonged to Witt, the evidence provided by the subtitles paired with matching the voice to Train's distinct southern-drawl have convinced me that the "Witt voiceovers" actually belong to Train.

This differentiation is crucial considering the fact that it is the grounding for my analysis. I argue that Malick's film does not follow the journey of a single protagonist. Many of the scholars who write about *The Thin Red Line* attribute the main voiceovers to Private Witt, and this creates a reading that he is both the narrator and central protagonist of the story.[16] I argue that *The Thin Red Line* is a mosaic of the lives of many characters, and a meditation on how the different characters make sense of the incomprehensibility of war and human suffering. Malick's film is different from traditional Hollywood fare—it is not a standard

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[15] The DVD subtitles accurately label Private Train's voiceovers in certain scenes (Scenes 1, 5, 19, 24, and 25) but mislabel some of his other voiceovers (as for example, "Witt" in Scenes 20 and 22). I hold strong to the position that the disembodied voice in question does belong to Private Train, however, which is important to my claim that their theological quality is specific to his character, and do not represent Witt and his vision of the world. Although Malick did not design the subtitles on the DVD, the initial clue provided by watching the film with subtitles has greatly influenced my reading.
[16] Witt, however, only has two voiceovers, appearing in Scene 1 and Scene 6.

narrative that progresses from Premise A to Conflict B to Resolution C. Instead, Malick poses existential questions in filmic terminology, and examines particular situations in light of these philosophical and theological considerations. The progression of the film is not linear, and the resolution of the conflict is substantially ambiguous.

Train's voiceovers have both philosophical and theological characteristics, and serve as the common ground or base concern for all the characters in the film. This is an important distinction, I argue, because Train's voiceovers serve as the framework in which the critic can understand the rest of the interactions throughout the film. Private Witt's journey then, which is most commonly placed in the foreground, is only one of the many internal wars of individuals caught in the conflict. As Davies' accurately suggests, Train's voiceovers serve the important function of "raising the question of Being."[17] However, these voiceovers create the general framework for understanding the experience of a number of the individuals involved in the same conflict, in light of the overarching question of Being.

Finally, it is important to note that there is not one true reading of Malick's film, nor one true answer to the types of questions he asks. The very structure of the film opens a world of possibility, where the combination of which elements or interactions in the film are most important to the viewer, in relation to the viewer's personal perceptions, constitutes a subsequent reading or analysis. As an illustration of where some scholars have suggested that an answer to these existential questions is possible, Ron Mottram states:

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[17] Davies 59.

> Welsh's final question, as he crouches over Witt's makeshift grave, 'Where's your spark now?' is answered in that final narration: 'Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.' Is Malick asking us to look through Witt's eyes, to discover all things shining, despite what our senses and experience of the world tell us? The answer to this question and to the greater question of whether the grand redemption that Witt is seeking is actually possible, especially in light of the great evils of the twentieth century, lie beyond the scope of Malick's film.[18]

Mottram insightfully notes that Malick seems to be asking the audience to look out through the eyes of certain characters, "despite what our senses and experience of the world tell us." As I have suggested, Malick proposes alternative ways of seeing—"equipment for living" to which his audience may or may not have not been previously exposed. However, it is absolutely crucial to establish the point that the majority of the voiceovers do not belong to Witt, and that Malick does not provide an answer, because the notion of a singular, objective answer is *entirely* inappropriate to the kind of question that Malick asks.

I do not think that Malick, or any thinker who asks existential questions, attempts to provide answers—only alternative ways of seeing the world. The very structure of the film suggests that there is no singular answer—or that the singular answer, in regard to the philosophical or religious questions, can only be found by

[18] Ron Mottram. "All Things Shining: The Struggle for Wholeness, Redemption, and Transcendence in the Films of Terrence Malick" in Hannah Patterson, ed. *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 22.

an individual human being. Malick seems to ask us to look out through the character's eyes, but only because doing so allows us to see the world in a different way. Mottram suggests that the film raises certain questions in a thought provoking and intelligent way.[19] I argue that it is at this point that Malick leaves our side. As I've previously stated, a distinct resolution of the conflict is absent and viewers are left to form their own conclusions concerning the meaning of *The Thin Red Line* within the framework of possibility provided by Malick.

In this project, I will use philosophy and theology as starting points from which to give a theoretical context to certain ideas presented within the film, while keeping in mind that the experiences of the characters and the reoccurring themes in the film are not directly related to the ideas I put forth as critic. Keeping in mind the three hermeneutic banana skins outlined by Simon Critchley, I will use the solutions to existential questions offered in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Courage to Be* in order to provide a theoretical framework to which I will compare the experiences of certain characters in *The Thin Red Line*. I will carry my analysis no further than suggesting that in understanding other ways of seeing, such as those provided by Camus and Tillich, we as critics might better understand Malick's own unique vision.

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[19] Ibid.

Part 2: The War in the Heart of Nature

While the majority of the scenes in *The Thin Red Line* take place during the Battle of Guadalcanal, I believe that Malick uses the setting of the war primarily as a metaphor for the existential conflict with which human beings are faced—that is, the conflict present in the aforementioned dichotomies of good and evil, strife and love, and life and death. The war is representative of what takes place during the existential journey in the heart of every person as they create or locate meaning in their own lives: we humans, given the freedom of choice (and the subsequent responsibility that accompanies freedom of choice), must choose the battles in which we will engage. Malick's choice of framing his existential questions in the context of World War II has more than a historical significance, because these basic human questions transcend that specific conflict.

Perhaps more than other types of philosophical or theological questions, existential questions are highly personal and individualistic. In a sense, each person fights their own inner-war in order establish a viable understanding of their authentic-self. The elusive answer to the meaning of life, if capable of being found at all, must be found on an individual basis—a person must find his or her authentic-self in way appropriate to who they are and how they understand the workings of life. This is the basic phenomenon explored by Malick in the film. It is the story of soldiers attempting to find themselves—their true, authentic characters—amidst the chaos of warfare and massive human suffering. The context of the war, then, presents an interesting foundation upon which Malick frames his questions. Malick tells a story about the "Good War" in a broader sense, but in entering the inner-war

of individual men searching for who they are and why they are, Malick reveals a common conflict that exists in the hearts and souls of all human beings: that is, the conflict of attempting to find meaning and truth in the world.

As I have previously established, some of the most profound voiceovers belong to Private Train, a character who, aside from his voiceovers, has a small role throughout the rest of the film. Train's voiceovers provide the grounding for Malick's more specific examination of the lives of several characters. The questions asked by Train are basic, and of a more general quality than some of the individual, specific questions pertaining to the experience of other characters throughout the film. Only in first examining Train's questions (which, I argue, Malick intentionally places in their respective locations to frame specific interactions between other characters) can we gain access to the insights Malick has about different ways in which we human beings might confront the tragic, existential conflict with which we are faced—the war inherent in the heart of nature.

Chapter 1: The Train Voiceovers

The Train voiceovers are the thread that connects what would otherwise be a fragmented and inaccessible narrative. The film is constructed around the Battle of Guadalcanal, but Malick examines individual episodes involving characters, which are not necessarily related to the advancement of the plot as a whole. For example, unlike *The Thin Red Line,* Steven Spielberg's 1998 World War II film, *Saving Private Ryan,* begins with a conflict: a small group of soldiers embark upon a quest to relieve a stranded paratrooper of his duty due to the fact that three of his brothers have died in combat.[20] The film deals with a highly tangible and accessible plot. *Saving Private Ryan* is composed of individual scenes that are pieced together to form the whole picture, but each of the individual scenes relates almost directly to the scenes before and after it, and to the progression of a linear narrative. Malick's film functions differently in that the individual episodes concerning specific characters have the potential to stand alone, and I argue that these episodes are brought into a somewhat coherent collection of thoughts and experiences due to the function served by Train's voiceovers.

In Scene 1, the title card appears over a black screen, with the sounds of a jungle underlying the image. The camera fades in on another image of an alligator sliding into a swamp, accompanied by the ominous "Deep Note" similar to the THX audio logo. As the "Deep Note" crescendos and then subsides, the camera opens once more on a shot of sunlight filtering through the leaves of a jungle canopy. The

[20] *Saving Private Ryan*, DVD. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Universal City, CA: Amblin Entertainment, 1998.

audience is presented with an abstract philosophical question, voiced by Private Train, as the camera continues to survey the harsh but overwhelmingly beautiful environment of the jungle: "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?"[21]

The film proceeds from this foundational question, but not in the style of a traditional filmic narrative. Structurally, the film then progresses to an examination of Private Witt's experience as an AWOL soldier in Melanesia, and after he is apprehended by the American military, the film cuts to the deployment of American soldiers onto the island of Guadalcanal. Continuing to follow the soldiers into the uncertain fate with which they are faced, we are bombarded with more breathtaking imagery of nature, and Train's continuing investigation of the force underlying life itself. In Scene 5, in voiceover, Train continues:

> Who are you who live in all these many forms? Your death that captures all—you too are the source of all that's gonna' be born. Your glory, mercy, peace, truth. You give calm a spirit. Understanding. Courage. The contented heart.[22]

I argue that this voiceover, and the rest of the voiceovers by Train which I will continue examining throughout this section, can only be understood in light of their part as a collective whole. In other words, this prior section is directly related to the first question voiced by Train that begins the film. He initially presents the notion of

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[21] "Melanesia (Main Titles)." *The Thin Red Line,* DVD. Directed by Terrence Malick. Century City, CA: Fox 2000 Pictures, 1998.
[22] Malick, "Guadalcanal."

a war in the heart of nature, and the possibility that two powers might exist in the world, vying for authority and thus creating the battle underlying the existence of all things. Advancing this notion, however, Train adds the new thought that some kind of singular creative force might be at work in many forms—a god-like entity acting as the life and death-giving source of all living things.

The film then cuts away completely from these general questions for a number of scenes. We are presented with the Battle of Guadalcanal itself, and the tremendous costs of human life that ensue. The struggles between Private Witt and Sergeant Welsh, and Captain Staros and Colonel Tall, which I will investigate more thoroughly in later sections, develop throughout this portion of the film. Malick moves from a focus on the general, abstract questions voiced by Private Train to a specific examination of the implications of those questions, acted out in the lives of the soldiers involved directly in a literal manifestation of a "war in the heart of nature."

In Scene 19, the American military force raids a Japanese camp and one of the more viscerally disturbing scenes of the film unfolds.[23] We see first hand how war brings out the more animalistic and primitive aspects of human nature with quick successive shots of hand-to-hand combat, and the awful destruction of human life and dignity that follows. We are also provided with a perspective of the humanity of both military forces. I argue that Malick strategically creates a chaotic scene in which it is difficult to differentiate between the Japanese and American combatants. Malick forces us to focus on the indecipherable blur of killing and death. Both

[23] Malick, "The Mop-Up."

military forces are presented as equally at fault in the midst of the chaos. They continue fighting although their participation in the conflict only perpetuates madness and suffering. As the action ceases, the camera pans around to the costs of the battle, and Train's ongoing voiceover continues:

> This great evil. Where's it come from? How did it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from? Who's doin' this? Who's killin' us? Robbin' us of life and light? Mockin' us with the sight of what we might have 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?[24]

In the section of voiceover previous to this excerpt, Train presents the idea of one creative force living in many different forms. Now, after having been exposed directly to the bedlam of warfare, Train faces us with a question about the origin of evil that gives rise to conflict. Although the question is not answered in this voiceover, Train's first voiceover at the beginning of the film presupposes the existence of two forces inherent to nature vying for superiority. Malick seems to suggest, then, that human beings are caught in the midst of this natural war. But he questions this involvement in asking, "Does our ruin benefit the earth?" Although war seems to be inherent to the natural world, Malick asks through Train's voice whether or not human beings must suffer at one another's hands in order for the more beautiful manifestations of life—the growing grass or the shining sun—to exist also.

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[24] Malick, "The Mop-Up."

The next two sections of voiceover from Train are difficult to place. In Scene 20, after the leaders of Charlie Company announce that the soldiers will have a week long reprieve from active duty, we are shown images of the members of the company celebrating in the military encampment. Train makes a statement as we are presented with the montage: “Hours like months, days like years. Walked into the golden age. Stood on the shores of a new world.”[25] Although I am less certain about the function of this claim, it seems to reflect the notion of “the American Century,” or the prosperity that was believed would accompany American people in this time. At a more general level, however, Train presents us with the idea that there was a golden age of possibility, reinforced by the imagery he presents of a new world, in which warfare would not plague the human race.

Train follows this claim with another that gives it a bit more context in Scene 22, by referring directly to war: “Can’t nothing make you forget it. Each time you start from scratch. War don’t ennoble men. Turns ‘em into dogs. Poisons the soul.”[26] Throughout this section, the camera shows images of two of the members of Charlie Company who, in the time they are given to rest from the burden of war, fight one another as other soldiers cheer them on. War, in this sense, is framed as something that is completely consuming, reducing men to the status of wild dogs. Train’s claim that war “Poisons the soul” comes with an image of Private Charlie Dale, who, shown after the battle during Scene 19, collects the teeth of dead Japanese soldiers with a

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[25] Malick, “Nature’s Cruel.”
[26] Malick, “The Airfield.”

pair of pliers.[27] During the end of this section of voiceover, he is shown sitting shirtless as rain pours down, holding the sack of teeth in his hands. Direct visual evidence is given as to how war poisons a person's soul, and what that experience costs.

In Scene 24, the film follows Private Witt as he walks around Guadalcanal. We are shown a setting that is reminiscent of the other world Witt saw in Melanesia, although the native people in the would-be paradise of Guadalcanal shy away from Witt because they are confronted with the tragic conditions of war. As Witt walks around a village, Train states:

> We were a family. Had to 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?[28]

Malick returns to the notion of a war in the heart of the nature, but at this point he brings up the question of human freedom and responsibility. The native people of Guadalcanal, the Japanese, and the Americans depicted in the film are all faced with the same terms of existence, and the costs of engaging in warfare are depicted in this collection of images. Although Guadalcanal has the potential to be the same kind of paradise Witt found in Melanesia, the effects of human beings loosing the inherent goodness that was given to them is illustrated throughout this sequence.

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[27] Malick, "The Mop-Up."
[28] Malick, "The Village."

The characters in the film who are caught in the conflict approach it in a number of ways—for example, Private Dale's approach, prior to his breakdown, seems to be to embrace the evils of war and to let it consume him and dictate his actions. In Scene 25, Train's voiceover continues, and he comments directly on the way different human beings can see their relation to the inevitable realities of life and death:

> One man looks at a dyin' bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain, that death's got the final word. It's laughin' at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory. Feels somethin' smilin' through it.[29]

Malick returns to the notion of human freedom and responsibility—namely, the ability to see the nature of the world and one's relation to it in unique and personal ways. Although the war in the heart of nature is an inherent aspect of life, participation in this reality can arise in many forms. Malick, through Train's words, seems to suggest that an individual can see the subjects of life and death in a positive light, and although the evil of war exists in the heart of nature, the war can be responded to in a variety of different ways.

No outstanding conflict is resolved in *The Thin Red Line*. The entire film is dedicated to answering the aforementioned questions by investigating episodes of human experience dealing with the subject of a "war in the heart of nature." Although the Battle of Guadalcanal is eventually won by the American military, we as an audience are left with more ambiguity, as to the individual conflicts of the

[29] Malick, "The Copra Plantation."

characters, than we began.[30] *The Thin Red Line* ends with Train's final voiceover, lain over successive images of the soldiers aboard an LST departing from Guadalcanal:

> Where is it that we were together? Who were you that I lived with, walked with? The brother. The friend. Darkness and light, strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind, the features of the same face? Oh, my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining.[31]

The ambiguous resolution is where the power of Malick's film lies—by framing the specific "ways of seeing" of a number of characters in terms of the more abstract statements made by Private Train, the audience gains access to a collection of "equipment for living" with which they might deal with common, existential questions. The film is not designed in order to resolve a conflict and alleviate the anxieties of its audience—instead, we are presented with questions that induce conflict, and only in finding the courage to face such questions, as audience members, is any kind of resolution feasible.

Train's voiceovers function as the thread that weaves together the disparate conflicts of characters involved in the same campaign. We do not discover very much information about Train beyond what is revealed in his voiceovers. In fact, Train is depicted as an uneducated and fearful young soldier in the scenes in which

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[30] Private Witt dies, for instance, and the audience can only judge the redemptive and sacrificial quality of his death on an individual basis. Similarly, Captain Staros is relieved of his command, and the effectiveness of his decision to forgo Colonel Tall's direct order to send his men in a frontal assault is not commented on directly by Malick. In fact, doubt about the effectiveness of the decision is articulated by Captain Staros. The attitudes adopted by these characters, in regard to the existential questions with which they are occupied, are not designated specifically as the "right attitudes" or the "correct responses."

[31] Malick, "Outbound."

we encounter him face-to-face. However, Train's questions and affirmations, presented in voiceover, stand as the general, existential concern of nearly all the characters in the film. The other soldiers live out the implications of Train's questions. Train then, is invested in the business of asking the question "Why?"; in this specific instance, "Why does this scale of human suffering and anguish exist? Why would a creative power present such a tragic scenario?" Although Malick offers different ways of seeing ourselves in relation to the questions we ask, we never get his definitive conclusion about the meaning of life. The audience is left to continue the journey of truth seeking on their own, with the help of the equipment provided by Malick.

In the following sections, I will investigate the different ways in which two pairs of characters in the film live out the implications of Train's questions.

Chapter 2: Witt and Welsh—The Conflict of Finding Meaning in "The Absurd"

As mentioned in the section critiquing the literature written about *The Thin Red Line,* many scholars see Private Witt, played by Jim Caviezel, as the protagonist of the story. I do not disagree that Witt plays a central role in the film; however, as I have established, I think it is important to recognize that there is no one central character in the film, just as there is no singular message or truth that Malick is attempting to convey. Witt is a soldier involved in the same conflict as many other soldiers, and while his personal journey plays an important part in the overall structure of the film, I think it is important to recognize that Witt's experience of the war is not the film's central focus.

That being said, Witt's internal conflict has an integral role in establishing some of the larger themes of the film. After the opening sequence, in which Private Train's voiceover presents the question about a "war in the heart of nature," the film cuts to Witt living in paradise amongst Melanesian natives. Witt is seen swimming with the natives, learning their customs, and providing philosophical thoughts about the conflict between what he has seen (but what we haven't yet seen in the film—that is, death and suffering), and the beauty in which he is currently immersed. In conversation with another AWOL soldier, Witt states:

> I remember my mother when she was dyin', looked all shrunk up and gray. I asked her if she was afraid. She just shook her head. I was afraid to touch the death I seen in her. I couldn't find nothin' beautiful

> or uplifting about her goin' back to God. I heard of people talk about immortality, but I ain't seen it.[32]

The film then cuts away from Witt's face, and accompanied by a gentle musical score, we move to a long shot of Witt sitting on the beach, looking out over the ocean. In voiceover, he states:

> I wondered how it'd be when I died, what it'd be like to know that this breath now was the last one you was ever gonna' draw. I just hope I can meet it the same way she did, with the same . . . calm. 'Cause that's where it's hidden - the immortality I hadn't seen.[33]

Private Witt seeks immortality in *The Thin Red Line*. The sense of calm to which he refers—in the way his mother met her death, and the calm of the Melanesian paradise in which he is immersed—is the essence of immortality he seeks throughout the entire film. The conflict, however, arises in the fact that the calm and immortality that Witt seeks is contradicted by the suffering and chaos inherent to his duty as a soldier in a massive war. Witt attempts to find the meaning that he believes to exist in a universe, which, according to his wartime experience, seems to be indifferent to human suffering. His quest for immortality essentially constitutes a quest to resituate his experience of the war in order to develop a different perspective and gain the capability to look past the surface of death and suffering to some semblance of beauty and meaning lying underneath. This, I argue, is the essence of calm and subsequent immortality sought by Witt. His quest

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[32] Malick, "Melanesia (Main Titles)."
[33] Ibid.

involves his attempt to adjust his perspective in the chaotic context of his life so as to experience it in a different and more meaningful way.

In an early exchange between Private Witt and Sgt. Welsh, played by Sean Penn, Malick exposes the audience to the primary conflict between the two characters. The conflict essentially lies in the question of whether or not an individual man can make a difference in the world by finding meaning within the inherent absurdity of the universe. After Witt has been discovered in Melanesia, and brought to the U.S. Patrol Boat, he and Welsh converse about Witt's appointed punishment as a stretcher bearer. Witt claims that he is "twice the man [Welsh] is," to which Welsh responds:

> WELSH: In this world, a man himself, is nothing. And there ain't no world but this one.
>
> WITT: You're wrong there, Top. I've seen another world. Sometimes I think it was just my imagination.[34]

In relation to the idea of "another world" that Witt presents to Welsh, I believe Albert Camus' notion of "the absurd" can help us to understand the conflict between these two men. Throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus implies that despite the absurdity and indifference of the universe of which human beings are a part, life is worth living. The absurd can be defined as "the ridiculous character of [the habit of living], the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering."[35]

Essentially, the absurd amounts to the divide between the meaning which many human beings believe to be an inherent component of the universe, and the

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[34] Malick, "The Brig."
[35] Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 6.

fact that this belief in inherent meaning (in Goodness, in God, or in some other form of transcendent Truth) is contradicted at almost every turn—for, as previously stated, the human condition is framed in the inherently tragic terms of finitude, inevitable suffering, and loss. Camus outlines three possible solutions to the problem of the absurd: suicide, faith (what he calls "philosophical suicide"), and living contentedly amidst absurdity—that is, accepting the tragic terms of human existence and creating meaning within this tragic context. Camus' main focus is whether or not the absurd dictates death—if human beings can live with the "absence of any profound reason for living" and amidst "the uselessness of suffering."

Camus continues by describing two states of consciousness: one, in which the human being is essentially unconscious of the artificiality of his or her created systems of meaning, and one in which, having attained consciousness of the fact that certain aspects of life are inherently devoid of meaning, the human mind experiences existential anxiety:

> It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins'—this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of the mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens

> consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery.[36]

Private Witt engages in the process of asking the question "why" throughout *The Thin Red Line*. After his awakening to a new sense of possibility amongst the Melanesian natives, the processes of his mechanical habits of life as a soldier end, and subsequently as Camus suggests, his consciousness is awakened. As a soldier fighting in a war that, at a more abstract level, is considered to be a "Good War," Witt feels the conflict between the beauty and calm he has discovered in Melanesia and his personal experience of pain and human suffering in the war. This is the absurd relationship that Witt has with the world. Witt attempts, throughout the entire film, to reconcile what he fears might have been "just [his] imagination" about the beauty of another world with the ugliness of war and human suffering. Witt seeks clarity amidst the chaos of the war.

Private Witt can thus be classified as what Camus calls the "absurd man" because of his quest to find meaning, despite the constant stream of meaningless experience with which he is faced. In regard to such a predicament, Camus writes that:

> This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that

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[36] Camus 12-13.

> links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together.[37]

Taking Camus' statement that the "world itself is not reasonable," and comparing it to "the wild longing for clarity" that echoes in all of Witt's words and actions proves Witt's absurd reasoning. The non-absurd man, it seems, would stop at the point of confrontation with the irrational. Once discovered by such a man, the irrational would be accepted as simple irrationality that negates any possible semblance of meaning, leading to an atheistic or even nihilistic state of mind. But Witt, as previously suggested, possesses "the wild longing for clarity" described by Camus. And in this case, as Camus suggests, the absurd is as dependent upon Witt's approach to the world as it is on the absurd character of the world itself. After he has been assigned to be a stretcher bearer, we see Witt walking around the encampment aiding his fellow soldiers, and pondering the meaning of his actions and his place in the conflict. In Scene 6, Witt states in voiceover:

> Maybe all men got one big soul, who everybody's a part of. All faces of the same man. One big self. Everyone lookin' for salvation by himself—each like a coal, thrown from the fire.[38]

The absurdity of death and suffering completely surrounds Witt. But Witt takes on the role of the absurd man because he attempts to discover meaning in the irrationality of war. In this specific scene, he describes a soul that he believes all men may share. Witt outlines, in this small piece of dialogue, what drives his quest

[37] Camus 21.
[38] Malick, "Witt With the Wounded."

throughout the film: the belief that despite the absurd and tragic character of human existence, human beings must depend upon one another in order to find "salvation." Not only does this illustrate something unique to Witt's character—that is, his compassion for his fellow human beings—but it is also illustrative of his absurd perspective that meaning can be found in chaos. The absurdity of Witt's perspective binds him to the world—instead of turning away from the death, the suffering, and the apathy of certain of his comrades, he engages in the human conflict and attempts to "see a spark" of goodness. Witt seeks clarity amidst the foggy irrationality of a war torn world, and for this reason, his approach to life can be accurately classified as absurd.

Witt's antagonist in the film, Sergeant Welsh, embodies the non-absurd perspective on the conflict. Instead of acting as the absurd man and attempting to find the spark of goodness in the chaos of the war, he sees the war as completely meaningless and strives to detach himself from the conflict.[39] In Scene 15, Welsh lectures Witt on a grassy hill on Guadalcanal:

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[39] In Scene 11, after a medic is killed attempting to administer morphine to a dying soldier, Welsh drops his gear and runs to the scene through enemy fire. He gives the dying soldier several syrettes of morphine and then runs back behind the embankment where some of the members of Charlie Company lay in hiding. Captain Staros tells Welsh that he saw the whole event through his binoculars, and also says that he will recommend Welsh for the Silver Star, to which Welsh responds: "Captain, if you say one more thing to thank me I'm gonna' knock you right in the teeth. You mention me in your fuckin' orders, and I'll resign my rating so fast and leave you here to run this busted-up outfit by yourself. You understand? Property! The whole fuckin' thing's about property." It seems as though Welsh committed the act out of compassion for another human life, which is what initially impressed Staros. But because such a self-sacrificial act would be incongruous with his belief that the war is just "a burnin' house where nobody can be saved," Welsh attests that he gave the soldier morphine only to take care of the Army's property. Although Welsh exhibits compassion, he strives to maintain his non-absurd approach of seeing his acts as solely mechanical, devoid of any inherent meaning.

> I feel sorry for you kid. [. . .] This army's gonna' kill you. If you were smart you'd take care of yourself—there's nothing you can do for anybody else. Just runnin' into a burnin' house where nobody can be saved. *(at this point, the musical score rises—an instrumental rendition of a song performed by a Melanesian choir during the end credits)* What difference you think you can make, one single man in all this madness? If you die, it's gonna' be for nothin'. There's not some other world where everything's gonna' be o.k. There's just this one. Just this rock.[40]

Welsh seems to simultaneously detest and admire the absurdity of Witt's approach to the war, and at numerous points throughout the film, he attempts to bring Witt's attention to his absurd reasoning. In Welsh's mind, the war is composed of nothing but madness and the most a man can do is look out for himself and try to make it out alive. Witt, however, accepts the absurdity of the war and attempts to locate the sense of calm he found in Melanesia within the new, despairing context.

But the most interesting aspect of the interaction between these two characters comes in Witt's affirmation, after he is discovered in the Melanesian paradise and is reassigned to a disciplinary unit in the military, that he has "seen another world."[41] This affirmation dominates the rest of their interactions throughout the film because it is interpreted by Welsh to mean that Witt believes he has seen some world with a transcendent quality. Witt has experienced the

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[40] Malick, "Welsh and Witt."
[41] Malick, "The Brig."

"definitive awakening" outlined by Camus, and he sees a world within the world—he has developed a new way of seeing meaning in a conflict that appears to be completely devoid of meaningful content. In this regard, and as I hope to illustrate with several more examples from the film, Witt has discovered the calm and immortality he longs for by seeing a different world. He is enabled to see something lying underneath the chaos and suffering that the soldiers experience during the battle of Guadalcanal by confronting his weariness and initiating his impulse of consciousness. Witt overcomes "the acts of the mechanical life" of a soldier by looking for meaning within the context of war and seeing his actions as a part of this quest.

It is important to note that Witt and Welsh are antagonists—two men who approach the conflict of World War II in opposite ways. In the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus outlines the significance of the ancient Greek Myth of Sisyphus, and then frames his philosophical position in terms of the myth. It is my contention that Witt is the character most similar to Sisyphus in Malick's film—due to his transgressions against the U.S. Army, he is condemned to what I will classify as the futile task of participating in a disciplinary outfit as a stretcher bearer, which was one of the most dangerous jobs in World War II.[42] The absurdity of his approach to

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[42] Witt's task as a stretcher-bearer is futile in the sense that the boulder never reaches a firm resting place atop the mountain. In other words, a stretcher-bearer's duty to transport wounded and dying soldiers is never complete in a war. In the few scenes in which we see Private Witt carrying out his duty as a stretcher-bearer, he embraces the task empathetically, and even seems to find some quality of meaning within it (For example, as he tends to the wounded in the camp in Scene 6, he provides the aforementioned voiceover, illustrating his search for meaning within a seemingly futile context). Witt's awareness of and engagement in the futility of being a stretcher-bearer is "The lucidity that was to constitute his torture [that] at the same time crowns his victory." Witt consciously engages the task and in his connection with the soldiers whom he cares for, he sees "something shining through."

life arises in the context of his role as a soldier—despite the fact that the assignment is seen as punishment, Witt finds meaning in it.

Camus begins the last part of the essay with a description of Sisyphus' task:

> The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.[43]

As Witt's superior, Welsh functions a sort of god, and he sees the punishment he prescribes to Witt as "futile and hopeless labor." Witt is forced to return to what he originally saw as the "futile and hopeless labor" of fighting in the war—what caused him to desert the cause for the Melanesian paradise seen at the beginning of the film.

Camus continues his description of the myth:

> As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments

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The punishment Welsh administers to Witt is contradicted by Witt wholeheartedly embracing the task.
[43] Camus 119.

> toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.[44]

If one sees Witt's punishment in the same light—that is, as Welsh sees it—we as an audience might jump to the conclusion that the punishment of being re-enlisted in the war is indeed a futile task. Witt affirms, on receiving his assignment as a stretcher-bearer from Welsh, that he can "take anything [Welsh dishes] out."[45] The assignment is initially presented as Witt's attempt to prove himself as an authentic and resilient man—as an audience, certain of us have surely imagined that Witt will spend the rest of the film attempting to struggle against what the gods of the military have consigned him to do. Camus makes an interesting note, however, by stating that the conflict is only truly tragic if the hero of the conflict is conscious of his fate. He states:

> If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The

[44] Camus 120-121.
[45] Malick, "The Brig."

> lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.[46]

Camus makes an interesting point that the consciousness of the hero would be inherently tragic, due to the fact that an awareness of the futility of one's fate would inspire the hopelessness of ever succeeding. Yet Camus indicates that consciousness of this futility, or at least an awareness of what one has been assigned to do, has a liberating quality as well. The strength of this assertion lies in the fact that Sisyphus' is simultaneously "powerless and rebellious." Like Sisyphus, Witt is conscious of his powerlessness over the fact that he must participate in the war, yet his rebellion of seeing through the suffering inherent to war to some kind of beauty lying underneath creates a victorious consciousness of his struggle. Witt's conscious perspective of his place in the war creates a meaningful way in which he encounters despair.

The best example of Witt's consciousness comes in Scene 25, with a close-up shot depicting Witt as he looks around the camp of Charlie Company. We see images of the faces of soldiers and a close-up shot of two Melanesian natives holding hands. The camera then cuts back to Witt and we see tears in his eyes, illustrating the empathy and compassion he has for his fellow human beings. In a different shot of the same scene, Witt approaches a deserted house where Sgt. Welsh is seated. A dialogue between the two men commences:

> WELSH: Hey, Witt. Who you making trouble for today?
>
> WITT: What do you mean?

[46] Camus 121.

> WELSH: Well isn't that what you like to do, turn left when they say go right? Why are you such a troublemaker, Witt?
>
> WITT: You care about me, don't you, Sergeant? I always felt like you did. Why do you always make yourself out like a rock? One day I can come up and talk to you, by the next day, it's like we never even met. (*The next lines are spoken as he looks around the house. Additionally, the instrumental rendition of the song performed by the Melanesian choir during the end credits reemerges here)* Lonely house now. You ever get lonely?
>
> WELSH: Only around people.
>
> WITT: *(repeating Welsh's reply)* "Only around people."
>
> WELSH: You still believin' in the beautiful light, are ya? How do you do that? You're a magician to me.
>
> WITT: I still see a spark in you.[47]

In stating that "The lucidity that was to constitute [Sisyphus'] torture at the same time crown his victory," Camus suggests that being aware of his "wretched condition" allows a certain sense of freedom to think and exist in spite of the tragic quality of his life. In other words, although Sisyphus has been assigned to carry out a meaningless task, he still possesses the freedom to seek truth inside the confines of his existence. In the context of *The Thin Red Line*, Witt is faced with a similar predicament. He is forced to participate in a war with a cause with which he does not personally identify—similarly to Sisyphus, Witt, in a certain sense, is forced to roll a boulder up a mountain, only to watch it fall down the other side. But like Sisyphus, the time between the falling of the boulder and walking back down to retrieve it, only to begin the task again, belongs to Witt.

Throughout the film, we are shown images of Witt empathizing with wounded soldiers and contemplating his belief that "Maybe all men got one big

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[47] Malick, "The Copra Plantation."

soul."[48] We follow Witt as he observes the beauty of flora and fauna of Guadalcanal that exists despite the destructive effect of the war. Witt proves that a person's "wretched condition" of existence, then, is only as wretched as they allow it to be. As proven by his actions and dialogue throughout the film, Witt changes his perspective so as to find "the spark" amidst the chaos and futility of human suffering, and subsequently he discovers his capability to see "a different world." To Welsh, Witt seems to be a "magician" because although he is conscious of the futility of war, he finds meaning within it. Although Witt's approach to life is inherently absurd—that is, "the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in [his] heart"—it is also inherently victorious.

Camus concludes the essay in stating:

> Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.[49]

The meaning of the task, Camus suggests, lies in Sisyphus' self-affirmation by participating in the task despite its inherent futility. The task belongs to him—he becomes present in the atoms of the boulder and the myriad worlds contained within the simple task of pushing a boulder up a mountain. By claiming the task as

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[48] Malick, "Witt With the Wounded."
[49] Camus 123.

his own, and pushing the boulder up the mountain as an affirmation of his authentic existence, Sisyphus fills his heart with meaning. The meaning discovered by Witt in the context of *The Thin Red Line* becomes manifest in a similar way—by claiming the task of fighting in the war, yet existing in that tragic context as an authentic individual, Witt finds happiness in spite of despair.

In Scene 28, one of the final scenes of the film, Charlie Company comes under attack from the Japanese.[50] Witt has volunteered, at this point, to be in a search party to find where the Japanese are and where Charlie Company's communication line is being cut. He chooses to sacrifice himself for the men of Charlie Company by acting as a decoy. The camera follows Witt running from Japanese soldiers, and after a short chase scene, he runs into a clearing and the Japanese surround him. The Japanese speak to Witt as a look of realization crosses his face that this is the moment in which he most find the immortality he has sought throughout the entire film by meeting his death with a sense of calm. He slowly and half-heartedly raises his gun and is killed by the Japanese. As the musical rendition of the song by the Melanesian choir rises once more, the camera cuts to a succession of images: sunlight filtering through a canopy of leaves, Witt swimming with the Melanesian children, and a giant tree with vines twining down its massive trunk. In this moment of the film, Malick grants us access to the way Witt has come to see the world—seeing, amidst absurdity and chaos, another world in which beauty has the final word.

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[50] Malick, "Decoy."

As he stands over Witt's makeshift grave later in the scene, Welsh asks: "Where's your spark now?"[51] This is illustrative of the misunderstanding that Welsh has of Witt, namely, that Witt saw meaning in absurd things, even in death. Immortality for Witt—"the spark"—did not lie in some transcendent world, but in seeing the absurd universe of which he was a part with a different perspective. Immortality lied in the calm with which he was able to meet both his death and the absurdity that was an inherent component of his life.

According to Camus' model, there are numerous ways in which a person can exist meaningfully, creating their own systems of meaning in spite of the inherent meaninglessness of the universe. Witt finds meaning in his communion with the beauty of the world. Conversely, his antagonist Welsh believes he is incapable of finding meaning inside the war. His solution is to protect himself on what he describes as "an island." In Scene 29, After Witt's death, Welsh describes "the lack" he feels:

> Everything a lie. Everything you hear, everything you see. So much to spew out. They just keep coming, one after another. You're in a box. A moving box. They want you dead . . . or in their lie. Only one thing a man can do. Find something that's his—make an island for himself. If I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack. A glance from your eyes and my life will be yours.[52]

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Malick, "Welsh Reflects."

The implication here seems to be that Welsh seeks an experience with God, which would allow him to abandon his belief that the universe lacks inherent meaning. Witt proves, however, that the absurd man can find meaning without specifically appealing to faith in God. He experiences the beauty that transcends the chaos and suffering of the world, and is lucid because, despite his experience of the absurdity of war, he continues pushing the boulder up the mountain. Witt seeks, within the framework of war, a way of seeing through it. This constitutes his lucidity, and building upon my claim that the more theological voiceovers belong to Private Train, there is really no evidence pointing to the fact that Witt is explicitly religious. His approach to the world is spiritual, but his actions, as the Sisyphean character in the film, prove that one can exist meaningfully in the world without God. Welsh, although never admitting to it in his interactions with Witt, longs for the clarity that Witt has found. Welsh is, at the end of the film, plagued by the existential anxiety to which Witt found the solution of calmness and acceptance.

This conflict corresponds to the existential character of Malick's film as a whole. Witt and Welsh posit two alternative ways of seeing one's place in the world—one being the approach of embracing the absurd, carried out by the Sisyphean character condemned to rolling a boulder ceaselessly up a mountain slope, and the other a man who attempts to turn away from the irrationality of the world, only to be left with a longing for clarity.

Chapter 3: Staros' Act of Courage as an Example of "Absolute Faith"

The conflict between the characters Captain Staros (Elias Koteas) and Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) opens another important dimension of existential thought—that is, the problem of doubt, faced by the individual, in his or her search for a coherent semblance of meaning in the world. This episode also has an explicitly religious or spiritual quality, as Captain Staros seeks guidance from God in order to lead Charlie Company through the perils of the war. What is unique to his religiosity, however, is that it is framed as a kind of attitude, as distinct from a doctrinal or dogmatic system of beliefs.

Staros' religiosity can best be characterized as an attitude because through it he seeks a certain orientation toward his role as a military officer. He prays to God for the courage to refuse the direct order he is given by Colonel Tall to send his men in a frontal attack against the Japanese entrenched in the hills of Guadalcanal, in spite of his duty as a military officer and his doubt that his refusal to obey the order will make a difference in the grand scheme of the war. In order to illuminate important points of this conflict, since it contains an explicitly religious existential quality and also pertains to the subject of courage, I will employ the schematic provided by the Christian existentialist theologian Paul Tillich in *The Courage to Be*.

Captain Staros can be easily mistaken as a coward. Malick seems to intentionally frame Staros' compassion for his men as both an act of courage and as an act, in the words of Colonel Tall, "to avoid a goddamn fight."[53] The conflict

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[53] For example, in Scene 13 when Colonel Tall comes to inspect the line, Captain Staros huddles sheepishly behind the embankment. Conversely, in the prior scene, his refusal of Colonel Tall's order

between following his duty as a military officer and refusing the order from Colonel Tall arises due to the responsibility Captain Staros feels for the lives of the soldiers in his company, whom he refers to at one point as his "sons."[54] A dichotomy is set up between Captain Staros and Colonel Tall. Captain Staros is a religious, sensitive man who seeks to preserve the lives of the soldiers in his company. Colonel Tall, Staros' opposite, is presented as the rugged war hawk, driven by his mission to be noticed as an effective military leader, despite the fact that winning the battle of Guadalcanal in order to do so will cost human lives. In Scene 3, however, Malick provides biographical information about Colonel Tall, articulated in voiceover as he walks around the troop transport, which reveals that Tall follows his duty as a military man although it is inconsistent with who he actually is. Tall states:

> Worked my ass off. Brown-nosed the generals. Degraded myself, for them and my family, my home. All they sacrificed for me. Poured out like water on the ground. All I might have given for love's sake. Too late. Dying—slow as a tree.[55]

Although Colonel Tall is conscious of the fact that his duty to follow orders from his military superiors is inconsistent with who he actually is, he fails to find the courage to act according to the promptings of his heart. In Tall's own words, it is "Too late." Captain Staros also faces the dilemma of being required to fulfill the role of a military officer. But the subject of courage arises in the fact that Staros feels a

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to send his men in a frontal attack is interspersed with shots of him looking around at the young soldiers in his company. In this segment, his refusal of the order is framed as a sacrificial, courageous act done to save the lives of the young soldiers in his company.

[54] Malick, "Staros Leaves."

[55] Malick, "The Closer to Caesar…"

stronger duty to refuse a direct order from his military superior in order to secure the safety of his men, as he values their lives more than the overall objective of winning the pivotal battle against the Japanese. In order to resolve this existential dilemma, which he is incapable of doing on his own, he seeks courage from God. Tillich's discussion of "the God beyond the God of theism" in *The Courage to Be* is useful to understanding the type of courage Staros seeks and the God to whom Staros subsequently appeals.

Staros exhibits what is described by Paul Tillich as "Absolute Faith." Tillich begins by situating the concept of courage as something that is exhibited when an individual is confronted by the inevitable reality of human finitude. He states that "Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of nonbeing."[56] Courage, in Tillich's vocabulary, is a kind of "self-affirmation," where the individual person confronts his or her anxiety of death by establishing himself or herself as an authentic individual. There is an explicit existential character to Tillich's theology because it deals with the business of creating or finding meaning, and subsequently establishing the legitimacy or authenticity of one's life. However, the character of Tillich's theology is drastically different than the character of Camus' existential philosophy because Tillich's theology is constructed upon the foundation of faith in a transcendent reality.

As previously mentioned, Camus describes faith as "philosophical suicide." Tillich carefully outlines what he means when he uses the term "faith," however, and thus illustrates that his theology is more closely related to Camus' philosophy than

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[56] Paul Tillich. *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2000), 155.

the reader might initially think.[57] Tillich prefaces his discussion by stating: "The concept of faith has lost its genuine meaning and has received the connotation of 'belief in something unbelievable'."[58] This is the main objection that Camus seems to have had to the concept of faith—namely, that it involves a kind of "leap" into nothingness, instead of reliance upon the tangible evidence of the absurdity of the universe, as exhibited within the concrete episodes of human experience. Tillich's concept of faith, however, is much different than "belief in something unbelievable." He states:

> Faith is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself. The courage to be is an expression of faith and what 'faith' means must be understood through the courage to be. We have defined courage as the self-affirmation of being in spite of non-being. The power of this self-affirmation is the power of being which is effective in every act of courage. Faith is the experience of this power.[59]

In Tillich's terminology, faith can be described as the experience of the power of being. Tillich states that "The courage to be is an expression of faith and what 'faith' means must be understood through the courage to be." The courage to be, then, is a manifestation or expression of faith. Faith is the experience of the power of courage, or the self-affirmation of being in spite of non-being.

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[57] Philosophy and theology, more often than not, are separated on the basis of their respective correspondence to reason and faith. It is my contention, however, that both existential philosophy and existential theology seek the same fundamental end—that is, the creation or location of meaning, and the subsequent establishment of legitimacy or authenticity of a human life.
[58] Tillich 172.
[59] Ibid.

Courage and faith, according to Tillich's theology, are part and parcel of one another. Courage, is an expression of faith—that is, "being grasped by the power of Being"—and subsequently, courage is an act of confronting the existential anxiety of being in a chaotic world by "affirming" oneself in spite of death. Tillich states that the power that fuels this courage—the capability of self-affirmation—is "the power of being," and that faith is the experience of "the power of being." It is crucial to acknowledge the vital interrelationship between Tillich's understanding of faith and courage.

Tillich furthers his discussion of faith:

> Faith is not a theoretical affirmation of something uncertain, it is the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience. Faith is not an opinion but a state. It is the state of being grasped by the power of being which transcends everything that is and in which everything that is participates.[60]

This is the point at which Tillich allows us to depart from our traditional understanding of the concept of faith. Opposed to a traditional theistic conception of God, where God is imagined as a personal and consciously active force in the world, Tillich's understanding of God, or "being-itself," is characterized as "the power of being which transcends everything that is and in which everything that is participates."

A traditional theoretical understanding of faith could potentially be a systematic argument for "belief in something unbelievable"; however, Tillich states

[60] Tillich 172-173.

that “Faith is not a theoretical affirmation of something uncertain,” but instead, that faith is “the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience.” This is important: faith, in Tillich’s theology, involves acceptance. Faith is also experiential—Tillich’s understanding of faith posits that it is a less cognitive phenomenon than traditional understandings of the concept of faith have suggested.

Faith, then, should not be imagined as something cognitive or as some kind of systematic or intellectual concept allowing for the “belief in something unbelievable.” Instead, faith should be understood as an attitude with which the individual experiences the state of “being grasped by the power of being which transcends everything that is and in which everything that is participates.”[61] Faith is not the attempt to comprehend something that transcends ordinary experience but rather, it is the acceptance and participation in this reality.

In Scene 7, Colonel Tall explains to the leaders of Charlie Company the strategy that will be employed in the Battle for Guadalcanal. He states that they will attack Hill 210, a key to the Japanese position, by frontal assault. Staros voices his concern that “[They] can’t do that” due to the latent danger of the strategy, and Tall retorts by explaining that there is no way to outflank Hill 210 and that it has to be taken frontally.[62] Despite the ominous quality of the mission, Staros accepts his position as a man who is in charge of the lives of the soldiers in his company, although it is a heavy burden to bear. In his acceptance, he also seeks faith to carry out the mission courageously.

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[61] Tillich 173.
[62] Malick, “Hill 210.”

In several successive images, Staros is depicted alone, surveying the island. The film then focuses in on an image of Staros alone by candlelight weeping, with his hands clasped in prayer. He asks: "Are you here? *(the candle flame flickers in a close-up shot)* Let me not betray you. Let me not betray my men. In you I place my trust."[63] This scene reveals Staros' acceptance of the situation in that his language affirms that he will lead the men into battle. It also reveals his attempt to find courage within the context of his duty as the captain of Charlie Company by appealing to his faith in "something transcending ordinary experience." Faith, in Staros case, involves the acceptance and participation in the reality of war, and his subsequent placement of his trust in something transcending what he might normally experience.

Tillich's concept of faith is preceded by what he refers to as an experience of the anxiety of meaninglessness. This is another link between Camus and Tillich, because both authors deal with the prevalent existential theme of the problem of meaning, and the doubt that any kind of meaning exists in the universe. Tillich asks:

> Can faith resist meaninglessness? Is there a kind of faith which can exist together with doubt and meaninglessness? [. . .] How is the courage to be possible if all the ways to create it are barred by the experience of their ultimate insufficiency? If life is as meaningless as death, if guilt is as questionable as perfection, if being is no more meaningful than nonbeing, on what can one base the courage to be?[64]

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Tillich 174-175.

This is the same problem that is posed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*—that is, how an individual can find the courage to exist authentically and meaningfully if authenticity and meaning are inherently absent from the universe of which human beings are a part. Tillich's presentation of dichotomies—life and death, guilt and perfection, being and nonbeing—illustrates the common question that all existentialist thinkers face about how the individual can live meaningfully and courageously if the universe is devoid of inherent meaning.

Tillich suggests again that acceptance is a necessary prerequisite to embarking upon the journey to find an answer to such a question. He states:

> He who is in the grip of doubt and meaninglessness cannot liberate himself from this grip; but he asks for an answer which is valid within and not outside the situation of his despair. [. . .] The acceptance of despair is in itself faith and on the boundary line of the courage to be.[65]

Again, Tillich presents faith as an attitude of "existential acceptance." The individual must search for an answer to the fundamental question of existential thought within the context from which their existential anxiety arises, furthering Tillich's point that the whole issue "faith" has to do with existence and experience rather than some "theoretical affirmation of something uncertain."

After establishing these preliminary points, Tillich introduces the concept of "Absolute Faith," which he suggests is a solution to the questions surrounding the courage to be. Tillich begins by stating:

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[65] Tillich 175.

> The courage to take meaninglessness into itself presupposes a relation to the ground of being which we have called "absolute faith." It is without a *special* content, yet it is not without content. The content of absolute faith is the "God above God." Absolute faith and its consequence, the courage that takes the radical doubt, the doubt about God, into itself, transcends the theistic idea of God."[66]

In order to understand the relevancy of this discussion, one must understand Tillich's concept of God, what he refers to as "being itself." Tillich states that the content of faith involves the "God beyond the God of theism":

> Absolute faith, or the state of being grasped by the God beyond God, is not a state which appears beside other states of the mind. It never is something separated and definite, an event which could be isolated and described. It is always a movement in, with, and under other states of the mind. It is the situation on the boundary of man's possibilities. It *is* this boundary. Therefore it is both the courage of despair and the courage in and above every courage. It is not a place where one can live, it is without the safety of words and concepts, it is without a name, a church, a cult, a theology. But it is moving in the depth of all of them. It is the power of being, in which they participate and of which they are fragmentary expressions.[67]

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[66] Tillich 182.
[67] Tillich 188-189.

For Tillich, faith is a way of being in the world—but something of such complete and comprehensive nature that it cannot be "isolated and described" as a singular affirmation, belief, or episode of human experience. "Absolute faith" is "the power of being"—it is the state of being grasped by the God beyond the God of theism, and is also the substance in which all forms of courage are contained.

Staros exhibits "Absolute Faith" in refusing the order from Colonel Tall to send his men in a frontal attack on Hill 210. He also appeals to the God beyond the God of theism in his prayer—in this way, his faith becomes a state of being rather than a theoretical affirmation of belief in something unbelievable. The courage Staros finds by appealing to God is tangible—it allows him to take a stand as an authentic and compassionate individual. After a long sequence depicting the human costs of the battle, the film focuses in on an argument between Colonel Tall and Captain Staros in the heat of the battle in Scene 12, which progresses as follows:

> TALL: What's the matter with you, Staros? Those men should be reinforced immediately! What are they doing? I can see 'em through my glasses. They're lying behind that ledge! They should be up and out, cleaning out those machine guns! Over!
>
> STAROS: I don't think you understand what's going on, sir. We've had . . . heavy casualties. We had a man . . . His gut got shot out on the slope, sir. Created quite an upset.
>
> TALL: Fine, fine. Now, what about those reinforcements? Over.
>
> STAROS: I have . . . two squads to . . . First Platoon I can send up, sir. Over.
>
> TALL: What the hell do you mean, two squads!? Goddamn you, Staros! When I say reinforcements, goddamn it, I mean it! You commit everybody you have there and do it now! Your first platoon, too. I can see 'em lying on their fat asses doing nothing. Get a man to 'em right now with orders to attack, and move 'em by the flank to the ridge. Then get the Second Platoon over to the hill! Have 'em press the center. Go straight up that goddamn hill! Attack them right now! Jesus,

> Staros! Do I have to give you a ten-cent lesson on infantry tactics while your men are getting their asses shot off?
>
> STAROS: Colonel, I don't think you fully understand what is going on here. My company alone cannot take that position, sir. The Japs are too well dug in. They've got too much fire power. Colonel, there's a bunker up there. We can't see it, and it's . . . it's chewing my men to pieces, sir. I request permission for patrol reconnaissance around to the right of Hill 210. I believe the entire position, sir, can be outflanked with a maneuver there in force.
>
> TALL: No, goddamn it, no! There'll be no flanking move. Listen, Staros. You're not going to take your men around into the jungle to avoid a goddamn fight! Do you hear me, Staros? I want you to attack right now with every man at your disposal! Now, attack, Staros! That's a direct order!
>
> *The music that accompanied Staros' prayer reemerges at this point. The dialogue ceases for several seconds and the camera holds on Staros' face, revealing the difficulty and doubt he faces in making his subsequent decision.*
>
> STAROS: Sir, I must tell you that I refuse to obey your order. [. . .] I again request permission for patrol reconnaissance around to the right in force. The time, sir, is 13:21 hours, 25 seconds. I've got two witnesses here listening to what I have said. I request that you do the same. Over.
>
> TALL: Staros, don't you pull this guardhouse lawyer bullshit with me! Now, I know you're a goddamn lawyer! This is not the court of law! This is a war! It's a goddamn battle! Now, I want that frontal attack! I repeat my order! Over!
>
> STAROS: Colonel, I refuse to take my men up there in a frontal attack. It's suicide, sir. I've lived with these men for two and a half years and I will not order them all to their deaths. Over.[68]

After Staros refuses the order, Tall agrees to inspect the line, while affirming that he has not rescinded his order. Staros puts down the receiver and runs over to a young soldier, who then dies in his arms.

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[68] Malick, "Refusing an Order."

As revealed in this example, “Absolute Faith” can best be understood as the affirmation of one’s courage, in spite of meaninglessness and human finitude, by accepting the context of one’s existential anxiety and existing within that context both authentically and individualistically. Staros accepts the conditions of his place in the war, but refuses the direct order of Colonel Tall, thus asserting himself as an authentic individual who values the lives of his men more than his status as a military officer. Tillich states that “The acceptance of despair is in itself faith.”[69] Faith, then, can be most adequately understood as an attitude the individual adopts to confront the problem of meaninglessness, and also the subsequent experience of the world that ensues. Accepting despair is an aspect of faith because despair itself is an aspect of being, and faith is an experience of the power of “being-itself.” By first accepting the context of his despair, Staros gains the capability to confront the problem of meaninglessness. He then experiences self-affirmative faith by appealing to the God beyond the God of theism.

In the void of meaninglessness that is the universe of which human beings are a part, Tillich implies that there is a solution, founded upon the simple concept of affirmation, which embodies both “Absolute Faith” and “The Courage to Be.” The “Yes,” uttered in spite of the lack of a concrete reason supporting one’s affirmation has, as Tillich states, the capability to “conquer the nonbeing in fate and death.”[70] Similarly, such an affirmation provides the individual with “The courage to be in spite of the experience of an infinite gap between what [they] are and what [they]

[69] Tillich 175.
[70] Tillich 189.

ought to be."[71] Acceptance, in spite of uncertainty and ambiguity, is the key—acceptance of oneself, as oneself, as one lives and acts in relation to the ground of being itself.

Tillich's theology is useful in analyzing *The Thin Red Line*, because I argue that Captain Staros is a Tillichian theist. In other words, in order to find the courage to be a commanding officer in World War II, but to act in an authentic way, Staros appeals to the "God beyond the God of theism" as his source of courage. In the context of his role as a military officer, Staros' faith and subsequent courage end with Colonel Tall relieving him of his command. After Tall inspects the line following his and Staros' exchange, the situation has changed and Tall takes command, ordering the frontal attack anyway. Another exchange between the two characters ensues later in the film in Scene 20:

> TALL: Staros, I'm relieving you of your command. Lieutenant Band will take over for you. I've already told him. It's a hard thing to do—difficult decision to make. I don't think you're tough enough. You're too soft. You're just too softhearted. You're not tough-fibered enough. Anyway, it's my decision to make. I've already made it.
>
> STAROS: I don't like to see my men get killed, sir. Have you ever had anyone die in your arms, sir? Have you?
>
> TALL: I don't see any reason to make a scandal out of this. I don't want it in the records of the battalion where I commanded and there's no reason for you to have it on your records. This has nothing to do with cowardice or inefficiency. Look at this jungle. Look at those vines, the way they twine around the trees, swallowing everything. Nature's cruel, Staros.[72]

Although the context giving rise to Staros' despair is the indifference of nature to human suffering, he exhibits "Absolute Faith" and the courage to be as

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[71] Ibid.
[72] Malick, "Nature's Cruel."

himself in his refusal to contribute to the needless suffering of the soldiers under his command. Staros' refusal of the direct order is interpreted by Colonel Tall as a lack of toughness, but Staros' response illustrates that the refusal of the order was founded solely on compassion for his fellow human beings. In his prayer, Staros asks for the courage to not betray God and to not betray his men. His refusal of Colonel Tall's direct order illustrates his "Absolute Faith" in that he accepts the context of his despair—that is, his role as a military officer—and acts in an authentic way by placing his compassion for the soldiers in his company above the authority of Colonel Tall.

Tillich finishes the book by stating:

> The courage to take the anxiety of meaninglessness upon oneself is the boundary line up to which the courage to be can go. Beyond it is mere non-being. Within it all forms of courage are re-established in the power of the God above the God of theism. *The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.*[73]

The courage to be, supported by "Absolute Faith," which involves the acceptance of one's condition as a finite human being, can go no farther than the boundary of "the anxiety of meaninglessness." The courage to be, Tillich suggests, is founded upon this fundamental acceptance of one's anxiety, and one's plea for guidance to "the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt." Doubt is the crux of this whole dilemma, and the answer to the existential question which Tillich

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[73] Tillich 190.

initially posits—"If life is as meaningless as death, if guilt is as questionable as perfection, if being is no more meaningful than nonbeing, on what can one base the courage to be?"—is realized when the individual transcends their doubt by adopting the courage to be, supported by the way of being classified by Tillich as "Absolute Faith."

A final scene involving Captain Staros reveals that although he has taken the anxiety of meaningless upon himself and sacrificed his position as a military officer for the lives of his men, he is still faced with doubt. His faith does not provide absolute certainty that the decision he has made is right, but he acted upon his courage nonetheless. A dialogue takes place in Scene 21 between Staros' and several of the young soldiers of Charlie Company before he departs from Guadalcanal:

> STAROS: I would've come by and paid you guys a visit, but uh, just felt like being alone, you know?
>
> PVT. DOLL: We wanted to thank you, sir. For asking to make that flanking move. For watching out for us. Keeping us together. We're all sorry to see you go. We feel like you got a rotten deal.
>
> STAROS: Well, I'm not sure that you're right. The tough part is not knowing if you're doing any good. That's the hard part. But it doesn't matter, I don't care. I'm glad to be going. I'm glad.
>
> PVT. DOLL: There's still time. We could file a complaint.
>
> STAROS: For what? What good would that do? Anyway, I want to go. Leave it alone, let it lay.
>
> *(Captain Staros speaks a phrase in Greek)*
>
> PVT. DOLL: What does that mean, sir?
>
> STAROS: It means "You've been like my sons."
>
> *(The film cuts away from Staros and the soldiers, to men boarding an aircraft. Staros speaks in voiceover as the plane leaves Guadalcanal.)*

> STAROS: You are my sons. My dear sons. You'll live inside me now. I'll carry you wherever I go.[74]

From this exchange, it is clear that Staros still doubts whether his decision made a difference. Evidently, from Private Doll's response, it made a difference to the soldiers to whom he speaks. Regardless of these considerations, however, Staros appealed to the God beyond the God of theism as the source of his courage. He transcended the doubt he had about his decision to take a stand for the well-being of the soldiers in his company by adopting "Absolute Faith"—his attitude or way of being in the world. In this sense, Staros took the anxiety of meaninglessness on himself by accepting the context of his despair, and acting authentically within this context. Staros' experience of the power of being allowed him to accept despair and act in spite of it, as an authentic individual driven by the courage to be as himself and to save the lives of his men with a self-sacrificial act.

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[74] Malick, "Staros Leaves."

Conclusion: Changing Our Perspective

The biggest difficulty in writing about film is attempting to recreate what can only be experienced first hand. Providing a line of dialogue in a paper such as this scratches only the outermost layer of the function that line of dialogue serves in its actual context. The inflection provided by the actor, the position of the camera as the line is delivered, and any music underlying the delivery of a given line changes the way we as audience members respond when we see a film. Thus, for me to recreate the experience of *The Thin Red Line* within these pages is an impossible task. As a critic, I can only encourage readers to go out and see it for themselves.

That being said, I think that we as critics can provide insights into how a film can be understood by analyzing specific interactions within the film in light of external theoretical positions. Although Malick is undoubtedly well read, his film is probably not a direct commentary on Camus' notion of "the absurd" or Tillich's notion of "Absolute Faith." But the philosophy of Camus and the theology of Tillich are useful lenses through which we can analyze the larger themes of Malick's film, because all three authors focus on existential questions and all of their works contain explicit existential themes. In a similar way, we can better understand the ideas of thinkers such as Camus and Tillich by analyzing how the implications of their ideas are played out in the experiences of characters involved in a story such as *The Thin Red Line.* All three authors have the common objective, I argue, of providing audiences with a constructive way of seeing their relation to the world of which they are a part, and a way of finding meaning in the despair that is an aspect of human existence.

In Scene 13 of *The Thin Red Line*, Sergeant McCron, who plays only a small role in the film, walks across the smoldering battlefield, driven to insanity by the war. In the throes of his madness, and softly under his breath, he states: "Show me how to see things the way you do."[75] We are never shown the source to whom McCron appeals—perhaps he speaks to God, or maybe he asks some other source of authority for this small favor. Regardless of these considerations, I believe that McCron's plea is representative of what all the Existentialists mentioned in this paper have to offer—that is, a different way of seeing. As previously mentioned, these thinkers provide "equipment for living" in the form of theoretical positions or the experiences of characters in a story so that audiences might become capable of seeing the meaning of their own lives in new ways.

In the end of all these works, we are not presented with a silver bullet that illuminates a singular truth, subsequently dissolving all of the ambiguity and doubt present in our lives. In fact, I conclude that the notion of a singular answer or objective truth is an entirely irrelevant notion in the realm of existential thought. We are, however, granted access to these unique visions of the world, and in this we gain familiarity with "equipment for living" to aid our own ability to encounter life in a meaningful way. Perhaps, given these examples, the very process of truth seeking can come to be understood as an authentic, fulfilling, and infinitely meaningful end in itself.

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[75] Malick, "Tall Visits the Line."

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