
Film-makers expect us to be stupid. Either that, or they are stupid, I can’t work out which. Woody Allen underlines the murder sequence in Match Point with the vengeance duet from Otello, a piece which doesn’t reflect the film’s action, or comment on it at all; and Terrence Malick, in The New World, shows us a Jacobean explorers’ ship nosing into a Virginia estuary to the sound of the opening of Das Rheingold – not just once, but at intervals he brings it back. It’s supposed to be – what? mystical? It adds a mystery to the images only if you don’t know it, and don’t anticipate the three Rhinemaidens swimming about, and poor, frustrated Alberich stealing their gold from the bottom of the river. Later Malick, to accompany immaculately-reconstructed early seventeenth-century settlements and immaculately-researched natives talking immaculately-rehearsed Algonquin, gives us the slow movement of a Mozart piano concerto, music from a hundred and fifty years later. Perhaps he’s that innocent himself.

Given his reputation as an intense, introverted, intellectual, unwilling genius, who makes as few films as possible, it makes you think. Does he really know what he’s doing, or is he just guided – or misguided – by flawed instinct? Is his refusal to give his narrative any rhythm, or to build it up to a climax, a deliberate, planned, eschewal of the way drama has been structured for two thousand five hundred years, a refusal guided by a theory – or is it just perverse and sloppy?

The film is about Pocahontas. We all know that when John Smith was about to be executed, she flung herself over him to ward off the executioners’ blows. But Malick cops out. He barely shows us in advance that she’s there watching what’s going on – doesn’t show her concern for Smith – just cuts to her sudden eruption into the frame, preventing whatever’s intended to happen from happening – no preparation, no explanations, no aftermath, and then it’s over.

“Where would we live?” Smith asks his natural bride. “In the woods? In a treetop? In a hole in the ground?” these are locations in which previous Terrence Malick couples have lived: it’s ironic that here, in the Malick film set at the very dawn of American civilization (he implies it to be the reverse), is where the wilderness option is most hopeless.

Pocahontas died at Gravesend on her way back to Virginia. Malick seems uninterested in her death, which he shoots in a reducing mirror in a shot lasting about five seconds, lest, perhaps, we should get upset.

He encourages his actors to improvise, for immediacy and spontaneity. This would be fine, if they had any way with words. But apart from Christopher Plummer as the expedition leader, they don’t: and because I don’t think Malick’s rehearsed the impros too much, they
mumble – the two male leads, Colin Farrell and Christian Bale, especially. I often couldn’t work out what Farrell had just said. It all adds to our intuition that for Malick, boring old character and plot – plot, which comes from character in action, and always has – is secondary, if it’s important at all. Muttered, monosyllabic voiceovers, striving for maximum effect with as little verbal challenge as possible, are as annoying as they were in *The Thin Red Line*.

What do we get instead of plot and character? We get a powerful sense of culture-clash, between the guilt-ridden Jacobean English, who, immediately on landing, construct a high palisade to ward off the nemesis which (they seem to intuit) will soon come to them, and the Virginian natives, who, in their hideous war-paints and body-decorations, are portrayed as unsentimentally as they are in that still more horrible exploration of the same theme, Bruce Beresford’s *Black Robe*. We get a powerful series of images of wilderness being violated: Emmanuel Lubezki’s photography dips us into the marshes, rolls us over the plains, and pulls us through the woods until we worship the place, and feel that we too will be raped and ruined if we see another white man.

We get an excellent heroine in Q’Orianka Quilcher, whose English lines, confined of necessity to monosyllables, don’t lose from her diffident delivery. She grows impressively in stature as the action moves her up the social scale.

But elsewhere there are irritating glimpses of things imperfectly edited-out. Ben Chaplin, one of the leads in Malick’s previous film *The Thin Red Line* (see below), appears in two shots and is elsewhere absent. Pocahontas’ father seems near the end to be working for the white man, but we don’t know how or why. It’s over-confident. It’s careless and unprofessional. It’s disappointing.

How different is the contemporary, low-budget, unpretentious and devastating *Badlands*, which Malick made thirty-two years previously. Instead of mumbled impro, we get low-key, naturalistic, written dialogue, acted well:

Sheen: Look at all this junk.
Spacek: How’s he doin’?
Sheen: I got him in the stomach.
Spacek: Is he upset?
Sheen: He didn’t say anythin’ to me about it.

*Long pause.*

Sheen: Bunch o’ junk.

Instead of dramatic incidents in which the director doesn’t seem interested and out of which he cheats us, we get dramatic incidents which are well-paced and which are given time to breathe – so much time, sometimes, that it’s shocking. Instead of lots of characters of whose background we don’t know enough, we get two characters about whose background we only know a little, but a little’s sufficient, and in any case a little’s all there is. And instead of one of the most famous operatic preludes there are, misused, we get the intriguing but
little-known-at-the-time percussion piece by Carl Orff, upon which *Badlands* conferred immortality.

We’d been told that evil was banal, but this degree of banality still shocks in George Bush’s 2006. Violence and murder are on the rampage, and even the victims are so disassociated from it, so unsurprised by it, they don’t feel it necessary to protest. The authorities, when they catch up, only feel strongly about it to throw Sheen’s sun-hat out of the car. They’re far more preoccupied with his resemblance to James Dean. The flat plains of North Dakota – the Badlands – are a metaphor for the film’s central fact: this is a country with no morality, no values, not so much as without redeeming features, as without any features. As the body-count goes up, Spacek’s moral sense gets roused, but ever so slowly: and when she finally defines what she’s done as a mistake, she can only express it (in her voice-over memoir) via further banality, and a split infinitive: “I made up my mind to never again tag around with the hell-bent type”.

There are surreal touches. As bounty hunters close in, there’s a shot of the camouflaged cover of a pit (“a hole in the ground”); the cover rises, and Martin Sheen’s head comes up into frame out of the pit, full of inert determination, like the determination of a boa-constrictor: where shall we see such a shot again?

Thelma and Louise, also on the run but without the same opprobrium, get more suntanned, tatty and dusty (and more attractive), the further they get. (*Thelma* … shares with *Badlands* a preoccupation with cars disappearing horizonwards in clouds of dust). But Martin Sheen retains his pristine close shave no matter how far he gets, and Sissy Spacek seems to have a different, immaculate 1950s teenage turnout for every sequence. It may be poor continuity: it’s more likely to be a way of saying that no matter how many people Sheen kills, with Spacek watching him blandly, it doesn’t shake their moronic self-images.

“Music composed and conducted by Ennio Morricone” say the credits of *Days of Heaven*, as we listen to Saint-Saëns’ *Carnival of the Animals*; and yet again we wonder how Malick’s status as an intellectual director was gained.
The movie takes the *Badlands* approach to narrative and loosens it a notch or two. The landscape is mesmerically beautiful, which no-one ever said about North Dakota; the characters low-key; now and again a scrap of dialogue floats up out of the ocean of sunsets and sunrises, of back-breaking toil before wheat-strewn horizons, and advances the story a short stage.

“They don’t need yer – they kin always git somebody else” is the ethic ruling everyone’s lives, and the tale – about poor farm-worker Brooke Adams’ attempt (encouraged by lover Richard Gere), to make rich but terminally ill farmer Sam Shepard to reverse the principle, and need her – is, once it gets going, as inexorable as that of *Badlands*. Gere and Adams pretend to be brother and sister, and set about infiltrating the life of inexperienced Shepard: the plot is the same as that of Losey’s *The Servant* (1963), minus all the kinky stuff there is in *The Servant* between Bogarde and James Fox. Gere and Shepard almost become buddies on a grouse-hunt, but that’s all. The acting, as in *Badlands* (not in *The Servant*), is understated, the emotions implied rather than shown – like in Buster Keaton. People rarely freak out in Terrence Malick movies. The writer-director doesn’t show too much of their characters anyway – he’s too cool to get involved, or to want us involved. Gere, who reacts to the emotional mess he’s in with the same angry disgust with which he reacts to steel-furnaces in Chicago and combine harvesters in Texas, is the one of whose viewpoint we see the most.

It all starts to go doubly wrong when Gere gets jealous of Adams’ burgeoning love for Shepard, just at the time that Shepard gets suspicious of the over-familiarity between Adams and Gere. They’re stuck. No-one can now win, particularly when Shepard’s angst is doubled by a locust-swarm in his growing wheatfields, which can be countered only by setting the fields alight. In the midst of this impressively-filmed sequence, Shepard, threatened emotionally and economically, just about freaks out, and attacks Gere. Convinced now he’s been betrayed, he attacks Gere again the following day, and Gere stabs him with the screwdriver with which he was mending his motorbike.

The banality of it contrasts with the beauty of the sunrise behind it.

The lovers (plus Gere’s kid sister, whose prattling narration contrasts with the serious tale, just as Sissy Spacek’s does in *Badlands*), are at last cornered in a rustic retreat they’ve created, “In the woods – in a treetop”, again as in *Badlands*: but, where Martin Sheen shoots his way out, Gere is himself shot.

Determined to avoid conventional closure (as he will be in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*), Malick takes the story beyond its own ending, and shows the kid sister escaping from the boarding-school in which Adams has placed her. Credits.

It’s good to see Robert J. Wilke, one of Frank Miller’s men in *High Noon*, in the sympathetic role of Sam Shepard’s farm manager.

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1: Pre-CGI, They did the locust-swarm by dropping a load of peanut shells from a helicopter and filming it backwards.
The Thin Red Line starts before its story begins, and ends long after it’s stopped (Malick wants us to understand that Life Goes On). The story itself is a tale of Guadalcanal in 1943, and the way in which, despite its own internal strife, indiscipline, incompetence, arrogance, terror, and cowardice, an infantry battalion takes a heavily-fortified Japanese position, and starts to turn the tide of WWII. At one point, when a lawyer-officer at the front (Elias Koteas), disobeys an order from the ambitious commander at the rear (Nick Nolte), and refuses to attack an impossible position with severely reduced forces, it promises to become a WWII Paths of Glory: the banality of it all is, however, conveyed well when, upon Nolte arriving at the front, Koteas asserts that the situation has changed in the last five minutes, and that the position is assailable after all.

The actual attack – which succeeds – is unfortunately the best bit of the movie. Though almost shitting themselves with terror, the seven-man platoon which Nolte sends in (the small complement is hard to take), loses only one soldier, but wipes out every Jap dugout. It’s John Wayne with a bit of psychological realism. Lots of exhausting Steadicam tracking shots give us stitches as bad as those of the G.I.s, and the dirt-filled grenade explosions, with bodies erupting out of them, convince you they’re real.

The attack on the hill is followed by a horrible section in which the victors overrun the enemy camp, and maltreat and gloat over their Japanese prisoners (an unrealistic number surrender, which no Japanese soldier would ever do). The sequence balances the previous one: there, the G.I.s are apprehensive and brutal, here they’re triumphant and brutal.

But outside of this central section, the film’s a mess. Malick deliberately avoids narrative rhythm, as he will in his next film. In the opening sequence, Jim Caviezel and another soldier whom we never see again go AWOL, and turn native with the Solomon Islanders, like Fletcher Christian. This section doesn’t relate to anything else – Malick may be making a statement about paradise getting lost.

There are problems with the casting: Nolte does not convince as a pompous, ambition-driven, incompetent colonel, and John Travolta convinces still less as Nolte’s military superior. Travolta hasn’t found his part at all, and Nolte, though he understands his part, can’t bluster convincingly. He knows what he has to do but can’t do it. His gorilla looks and gravelly growl are too solid, too full of integrity. Three actors – Jim (“Jesus”) Caviezel, Ben Chaplin, and Elias Koteas – are fine actors, but look so alike that it takes some time to work out which is which (in the cinema it was impossible: watching the DVD I had to pause and consult Google).

This was Malick’s first film after twenty years’ absence, and, like Henry IV when contrasted with Richard II, absence and mystery had lent him charisma: everybody wanted to work for him. Thus Sean Penn, John Cusack, Woody Harrelson and Adrien Brody all have small parts. John Savage turns up, twenty years after The Deerhunter, and does nothing. Smothering the supporting roles with actors who are normally leading men overbalances it all, and gives their faces a weight which their roles can’t justify.

Instead of one innocent young female voiceover, as in the two previous films, nearly all the main male characters do bits of voiceover: but instead of ironic, girlish prattle which shows that the owner of the voice has no understanding of what’s going on, Malick writes empty and foolish lines, which are supposed to be challenging and deep, but which are in fact
boring: “This great evil – where’d it come from? How’d it steal into the world?” and so on. You soon wish the voiceover would leave you alone so you could concentrate on the visuals. You resent being nudged, and by a pretentious moron. “Love – where does it come from? Who lit this flame in us?” asks Chaplin (I think it’s him), during one interminable interlude in which he dreams of his wife – the only soldier depicted as having one. She finally leaves him for an Air Force captain.  

The film meanders to its end. Caviezel (or is it Chaplin?) is killed, while Chaplin (or is it Caviezel? no, it’s Sean Penn) mourns over his grave. To prove what I said above about Malick casting on the same principle that Kenneth Branagh cast his terrible *Hamlet* movie, George Clooney turns up, as the new windbag C.O. (we never know what happened to Nick Nolte). Clooney is visibly embarrassed by his miscasting, which is as serious as that of Nolte.

By this time we are longing for some dirt-filled grenade explosions to drown out the dialogue. Or Lee Marvin to rise from the grave and give it all some credibility and commonsense interest. Or a story you could follow.

Or Sam Fuller to be called in to help with the editing.

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2: She’s played by Miranda Otto, later in *Lord of the Rings*. 