

The Thin Red Line-1998: A philosophical discourse set against the one of the bloodiest battles of World War Two

The novel by James Jones has already been put to the screen in a 1964 version. That film followed a more or less traditional war story, loosely based upon the novel. I have yet to see it and will, at some time in the future, post my assessment.

In the meantime, this version from Terrence Malick does not disappoint his fans, but it's a war film that has, in a very real sense, a very active role: it engages the viewer in a philosophical discourse about the Big Questions in life. So, if you're looking for an all-action movie, then this is not for you – although the action that is portrayed is probably the best you'll see for a long time to come.

On the other hand, if you've often wondered about the finitude of existence, the thought of your own death, the relationship between enemies in combat and our intimate symbiosis with nature, then you'll be well rewarded. Visually, the film is stunning with some of the most sublimely tranquil scenes of natural splendor ever put on film, and in keeping with Malick's prior masterpiece, *Days of Heaven* (1978), it brings the viewer to confront what it truly means to be human. Dialogue is sparse, for the most part, but Malick makes great use of voice-overs – the private thoughts of various characters as they lay bare their fears and doubts when they come face-to-face with the imminence of their own death.

The history concerns the invasion of Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, in 1942 – a very important step by American forces to push back the Japanese empire. The personal story, however, concerns three individuals: Capt. Staros, a good man thrown into war who wants to make sure that he protects his men at all costs, even to the point of defying a valid order from Col. Tall; Private Bell, whose only way to hold on to his sanity is to keep the thoughts of his wife alive in his mind, as much as he can; and Private Witt, the rebel, who often goes AWOL, but who is the bravest of the brave and the only one who can and does transcend the nihilism and dehumanizing gore of war.

With an Academy Award winning musical score that will haunt you, set against the natural splendour of a pristine paradise that is totally indifferent to the savagery and cruelty that is played out, this is a film that you won't forget. The final battle scene is arguably the finest on film: using hand-held cameras to force the viewer into the battle, running with the combatants of both sides as they maim, shoot, kill and murder each other, the sense of being part of the slaughter is almost too much. But you watch it, as you must, to try to understand what it means to be in a war.

War is not a pleasant topic, but this is a film that should be seen. Highly recommended.

Rating: 9

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