

Hermann Kappelhoff  
**Front Lines of Community**

# **Cinepoetics**

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Edited by  
Hermann Kappelhoff and Michael Wedel

## **Volume 1**

Hermann Kappelhoff

# Front Lines of Community



Hollywood Between War and Democracy

Translated by  
Daniel Hendrickson

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## Preface

*The Limits of Community*: This is the title of a famous book written by the philosopher Helmuth Plessner during the twenties of the last century. The book deals with the opposition between democratic societies, based on the difference of opinion, and those forms of government that claim a communal “we,” divested of all dissent. His plea for the calming procedures of the institutionalized processes of democratic forms of government and against the mobilization of nationalist or communist feelings of community was historically confirmed to such a harrowing degree that for a long time the idea of political community seemed to have been completely discredited.

Only toward the end of the last century did the term community surface again, starting from debates in French philosophy, a phenomenon that has held to this day. Although I will not explicitly be thematizing this debate (Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, etc.) here, it does form a frame of reference for the fundamental arguments and perspectives that are developed over the course of this book.

I will, however, explicitly refer to a writer who might initially seem out of context in any discussion within continental European philosophy centered around an understanding of politics and community. In fact, it was a book by an American philosopher that urgently showed me how much the understanding of democracy in American liberalism is marked by an idea of the political that is at core an idea of political community. The electoral success of Donald Trump in 2016 has brought this book an attention that is as belated as it is overwhelming. It is a lecture by Richard Rorty, published in 1998 under the title: *Achieving our Country*. Rorty calls for a return to the liberal idea of American history as a history of a permanent struggle to “improve our country.” In his view, its driving force should neither be sought in general principles of human justice nor in the evolutionism of the free competition of economic, political, or social forces. Rather, the talk of “our country” always already requires deciding for solidarity with a “we” of the political community. The question then, of who can participate in this “we” – socially, politically, culturally, economically – who belongs and who does not, is the driving force behind the permanent struggle over the boundaries of community.

Like Helmuth Plessner – but now portending the opposite – Rorty speaks of an affective bond to the community, a fundamental feeling for the sense of commonality, which, much like the familial bond, is the actual incitement for ‘Achieving our Country.’ And he chooses – which is also what makes it a central reference point for this book – films about platoons, the smallest military unit, as an example to understand how American society seeks to come to an understanding about the sense of commonality.

For me, Rorty's understanding of the sense of commonality was a final building block with which in turn my reading of the Hollywood war film could be worked out. Indeed, my extensive studies on the Hollywood war film – through all its historical and aesthetic changes in media – always came to the same conclusion: The fundamental social conflict around which the films were crystallized as a genre of Hollywood cinema consists in the irresolvable contradictions inherent to the sense of commonality itself. The “we” implicit in “our country” presents itself on the one hand quite literally as an embattled front line, the course of which is as arbitrary as it is unstable; on the other hand, it collapses inward into mutually exclusive claims by competing communities, whose frontline positions are no less warlike than those of transnational conflicts. Among the internal frontline positions, perhaps the most radical is the one between military communitization and the democratic community. At any rate, in my view, war films open up a historical perspective in which the permanent battle over the boundaries of community can be reconstructed as an inner conflict within liberal democracy.

To reach such a goal I am relying on another great representative of American liberalism, namely Stanley Cavell. In particular, I am thinking of his writings about the comedies of remarriage. As is well known, Cavell reads these films as reflections that probe into the conditions under which democratic relations of mutual recognition are possible. And perhaps, with the platoon films – as Rorty calls them – Hollywood has developed a cinematic metaphor that achieves, with regard to the front lines of political communities, what the metaphor of the twice married couple contributes to the paradigm of civil democratic agreement.

The present book therefore deals with the idea of American democracy – but not as an objectively historical object in the history of ideas or of politics, but as an approach to a sense of commonality, as it might confront spectators today in the Hollywood war films of an earlier time period. To me at least, the reconstruction of such a sense of commonality in film analysis seems to open up historical consciousness in the first place, which the films of Frank Capra, John Ford, William Wyler, or Sam Fuller and many others bring into our present day.

The films are a cultural legacy, artifacts of a critical state of emergency. They attest to a struggle over the political self-conception of a nation, one that reflects on its beginnings during the state of emergency of war in order to found itself anew, over and over again. This can be understood quite literally. Indeed, self-reflection – I am borrowing here from a highly idiosyncratic interpreter of American liberalism, namely Hannah Arendt – on self-defined beginnings is the basic form of political action. It refers to acting into an undefined future, by which a political tradition is grounded, without itself being able to rest on any foundation. For this action setting a beginning, modernity developed the idea of revolution. If we follow Hannah Arendt's analysis in *On Revolution*, the American Revolution can in turn be

distinguished from all those that followed it by how this action was carried out. The revolutionary upheaval was not primarily determined by conquering state power in war or civil war. It was carried out much more as a declaration of the claim to freedom by its citizens in order to regulate the possibility of state force. The revolution was carried out as a promise with which the power concentrated in state institutions was bound to a single goal: the pursuit of individuals to secure their happiness.

The circumstance that the state would not be allowed any interests in its own right, which could be defended in world politics, might all too easily seem to be isolationism in advance of the two world wars. Obviously, the American population had to give up something that citizens of other states would not even have been conceded. Namely a sense of commonality that allows the state as such no life of its own, which could least offset the everyday lives of its citizens. At any rate, that is the view of things conveyed through Hollywood war films; they make very palpable how state force ends up in the sharpest contradiction to liberal democracy, when military mobilization encompasses a society in its totality.

The state of emergency that is war reverses the principle of ‘pursuit of happiness’ into its opposite. The focus of all social efforts is no longer the everyday lives of individuals, but the interests of the state, of social institutions. The state now, in the form of military bodies, lays claim to the bodies and lives of individuals.

By examining just this state of exception, this book deals with war only to the degree that war allows the state to demand of its citizens everything meant to be protected, and which provided the reason for the state in the first place, for the formation of a state power in procedures, laws, and institutions. The focus of the book, therefore, is on the fundamental antagonism between forms of military communitization and liberal political society, which Rorty speaks of in *Achieving Our Country*. This antagonism is also the topic of Hollywood war films – it is their actual subject. The focus is on films that become legible as witnesses to this antagonism. They describe the celebration of a society at war as the crisis, the demise, or the renewal of just that political community that marks its beginnings in the American Revolution.

It is these films that first provide us with the possibility of calling the “we” of a political community into question, a community that we tend to take quite deliberately as “our western democracy.” The films open up the internal perspective of experiencing a “we,” which we ourselves can only belong to as spectators – thus remaining utterly excluded from the experiential world of the “we” of the films. Cavell has understood this kind of participation of non-participants as a specific form of how cinematic images produce meaning.

The films are thus not only unfamiliar to us due to their historical distance; in their unfamiliarity they create, for their part, the necessary distance to the self-conception of a political community on which they are founded and to which they refer – a self-conception that we have always already overlooked when we unconditionally

take it to be our own. The sense of commonality as a specific feeling for the social only emerges in the difference to other presents and other cultures. Therein lies the specific potential of the historical consciousness of cinematic images.

This means that films create for me the possibility of a methodological alienation with which political ideas, notions, and conceptions of another present and culture can be dislodged from what was always already known. At any rate, it is in this sense that I am attempting to position them as an instrument of a thinking which sees itself obligated equally to (cultural) history and to theory. This is why I also pursue an eminent methodological interest in this book by attempting to position film analysis and genre theory as cultural-philosophical disciplines.

For all the interest in the theory of the political, in that of liberalism in general and the tradition of American pragmatism in particular, this is why my endeavors are initially and above all concerned with films as concrete witnesses of what we can understand, along with Richard Rorty, as the historical experiment of a liberal, democratic society. The history of such an experiment cannot be narrated as an unbroken arc that links a difficult yesterday with a better tomorrow. Indeed, as little as it can be narrated as the history of a self-consolidated “we.” It is much more the history of a permanent renewal of unredeemed promises, which continually recalibrates the limits of community by incorporating new things and excluding others.

One of the constitutive fictions of any formation of community is the notion that the enemy is threatening from outside. Whole genre genealogies of Hollywood can be brought into the field to work against this fiction. They reveal ever new front lines that lead deep into the interior of the community itself. Seen in this way, it would be possible to establish completely different perspectives to pursue the same cognitive interests. The eradication of the Native Americans, slavery, or the Civil War could then just as easily function as leading topics on which the frontline procedures of community in film history(ies) could be reconstructed, such as the comedy of remarriage or the family melodrama. The genres of Hollywood cinema – and also their successors in the history of media – always describe battles around the changing boundaries of the sense of commonality. Indeed, it has always and in any future been open, that is, embattled and disputed, who or what can lay claim to being an individual that may pursue his happiness.

In our time, the ambivalence that is part and parcel of any sense of commonality cannot be stressed often enough. Indeed, not only is Rorty’s call to liberal democracy based on the belief in an American sense of commonality. A new racially tinged American nationalism, which was strikingly evident in the recent presidential election, also appeals to the “we” of “our country.” If I have chosen the war film genre as an exemplary object, then it is due to the radicalism with which this profound ambivalence itself becomes the topic here.

Berlin, August 2017

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# ***A Shell-Shocked Face: Prologue***

## **A shell-shocked face**

A famous photo: It shows a soldier, his eyes wide open but vacant. He doesn't seem to be in his right mind, stunned, but not mad, paralyzed, but not dead (see Fig. 1). "Shell-shocked Marine" is the caption, as if the flash from the grenade were just an intensification of photographic lighting technology. Indeed, one could take the caption to refer not only to the face represented there, but also to the form of media used to represent it. At any rate, it seemed to me that the photo got its intensity from the fact that its subject is aligned with the media principle of photography in a quite peculiar way: the time of the face, frozen in the grenade explosion, can be grasped as movement frozen in the moment of a flash of light. Movement here does not mean just any movement in space, but exactly that intensive interplay of micro-facial movements that allow us to perceive the front of a head as a face in the first place.

When this image first caught my eye in a book on the work of Don McCullin, I was in fact interested in the face itself as a form of representation in a wide variety of arts and media. I was searching for examples by which the patterns of facial expression could be described as a specific expressivity of movement that was fundamental to cinematic visuality. That this expressivity was in no way bound to the film image could be seen in the long history of representing faces: from the Faiyum mummy portraits through Christian icons on up to modern painting. And even the conventions of photographic portraiture were aimed at creating the illusion of the movement of facial expression, the living expression of sensation. The intensity with which the photo confronts the spectator as a shell-shocked face is thus very much an effect of its poetic operation.

But this intensity had another very different reference point for me. For an affective quality seemed to be revealed in the shell-shocked face of the photograph, a quality in which I once again recognized a pattern of sensation that I had encountered shortly beforehand in a film. The film was Terrence Malick's *THE THIN RED LINE* (1998). The look in the soldier's eyes in the photo touched the same aesthetic nerve; and it was not just a matter of related subject matter. In the one as in the other example, what I encountered was a kind of "face" that could not be entirely grasped as a subject or a motif, indeed, it could not even be grasped at the level of representation at all.

What became clear in the photo was that faces do not represent any fixable entity; that what is manifest in them is much more a specific type of movement figuration that we directly grasp as a temporal form of affect. The photo shows



**Figure 1:** Shell-shocked US soldier awaiting transportation away from the frontline, Tết offensive, Huế, Vietnam, February 1968, Don McCullin.

a face from which the facial quality has been obliterated at a single blow along with this temporal form, the dynamic play of the movement of densely packed micro-impulses.

For its part, the film *THE THIN RED LINE* presented several examples of exactly this temporal form as it mixed its audiovisual images into ever new movement configurations. At any rate, it seemed clear to me that the film transformed the shell-shocked face into another temporality, that of the film image – the screen itself became a face on which the moment of blinding horror extends infinitely, moment for moment, in a finely graded play of sensation within the time of the spectator's perception.

In McCullin's photo the face is fixed as a transitional moment between living sensation, horror, and the impassivity of insentient rigidity. As if the fear of the person hit by the grenade fire were a kind of paradoxical sensation of one's own death – a real living sensation, but still somehow beyond one's own perception: That's it, my death. In the film, this transition is formed as a fluid metamorphosis in which bodies become separated and singled out in ever new convolutions, soon to merge back once again into the battling troop as individual entities, the landscape, and the enemy lodged within the landscape.<sup>1</sup> It is a continual mutation in which the face of the individual changes into that of the troop, which is in turn lost in the face of the landscape, in order to bring forth new series of individual faces.

The duration of this episode of sensation is monadically encapsulated in the photograph of the shell-shocked face. For the photograph does not capture some singular, isolated moment within this duration; rather, it compacts the preceding and following moments of the affect into layers of facial expression laid on top of one another, and all movement has given way: the blazing fear in the moment of the explosion, the horror of the detonation, with which this fear congeals into the crystalline structure of the shell-shocked face. The movement of congelation itself is the face, which becomes the metamorphosis of figurations of kinesthetic expression as they merge into one another in the film.

The representation of faces in a wide variety of media – and this was what I learned from this encounter between a photo and a film – makes it possible to study a form of dynamic movement figuration to which we can attribute a number of visual expressive patterns that we experience as affective and

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<sup>1</sup> One might think of Plessner's laughing and crying here, which both represent transitions to a corporeal experience in which the subject experiences itself as a blurry boundary to mere organic life. Cf. Helmuth Plessner, "Zur Hermeneutik nichtsprachlichen Ausdrucks," in *Gesammelte Schriften VII: Ausdruck und menschliche Natur*, Frankfurt am Main 1982, 459–478.

affecting. This is the sense in which Gilles Deleuze speaks of the face as a paradigm of the affection-image.<sup>2</sup> For Deleuze, affects designate the power of bodies mutually to affect one another. They designate the temporal form of the event in which bodies are connected up into new corporal figurations. Affects come into their own as aesthetic sensations in a wide variety of temporal patterns and morphological dynamics of symbolic representations; whether these be the representations of faces in painting, in film, or in photography, or simply figurations of movement that in turn can appear in all variations of visual, sculptural, and performative manners of representation. Affection-images do not refer to feelings or emotions, but function as generic forms that generate and transform feelings, allowing them to circulate between various bodies. Affection-images do not give expression to any subjective sensation of feeling, but link separated, contingent acts of subjectivization in their expressivity: for instance, when the affect befalls a cinema spectator in the form of a photo, which awakens in the spectator a feeling that had been implanted in him or her shortly beforehand as a film, and which connects her or him up to the anonymous masses of those who encounter the face in the photo and the one in the film in a similar manner.

The interest in these aesthetic processes, in which the feeling of the individual joins up with a communitarian feeling, is the first reason that I am concerned with war films here. For I do take the subject matter for significant, inasmuch as the media representation of war is founded in a particular way on aesthetic practices and processes that serve the purpose of forming and deploying feelings of community. My interest thus applies to the circulating affection-images of these representations of war, which are meant to relate the sensations of individual spectators to a communally shared, collective feeling.

When, spurred on by this interest, I turned to the Hollywood war film genre, it quickly became clear that a specific type of affection-image is in fact represented in the shell-shocked face, a type that is obviously of great significance for the genre. At any rate, this type can be traced in ever new variations throughout the genre's films: It is the stunned astonishment of Montgomery Clift in *FROM HERE TO ETERNITY* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953) and the face of the man running berserk in *FULL METAL JACKET* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987). It is the insistent astonishment of Martin Sheen and the coldness of Colonel Kurtz's controlled cruelty in *APOCALYPSE NOW* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). It is the paralyzed face of Tom Hanks in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) and the flashing self-consciousness of Nick in *THE DEER HUNTER* (Michael Cimino, 1978). And

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2 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, London 1986, 87ff.

time and again it is the image of the soldier's suffering, emphatically pointed out and supplied with the mythic signs of sacrifice, as in *THE STEEL HELMET* (Samuel Fuller, 1951), in *PLATOON* (Oliver Stone, 1986) and in *HAMBURGER HILL* (John Irvin, 1987).

## The pathos formula of the war film genre

The focus of these films is not war heroes or heroic deeds; the focus is much more the melodramatic depiction of the suffering individual soldier. The shell-shocked face forms the signature of the Hollywood war genre; it can be read throughout the films as a deeply ambivalent emblem. On the one hand, it is the imago of the sacrifice, in which the horror, the agony of the soldier has been shaped into the subject matter of an evocative and meaningful icon of suffering. On the other hand, it presents a film image that seeks to bear witness to this suffering as nothing other than pure, physical suffering; it is a witness to an annihilated human life, to which no meaning can be attributed any more. On the one hand then, this face becomes a symbol that refers to the mythology of community, which finds its own worth confirmed in the sacrifice of the individual. On the other hand, it points to the sheer immeasurable quantity of photographic and film images that document the victims of violence in the wars and mass murders of the past century.

On the one hand a mythical emblem of community, on the other a document of crime, on the one hand a symbol, on the other a witness – the ambivalent image of the soldier's suffering articulates a contradiction that lies quite literally in the foundations of America's political culture. Indeed, the annihilation of individual life violates the central value that founds the goal of political community itself. Today, nearly 70 years after the Second World War, this concerns western culture as a whole – albeit in a less explicitly political sense.

Alternating between a mythical image of sacrifice and an image that attests to the moral violation of the political community's values through this community, the shell-shocked face articulates a deep moral ambiguity in all its variations. It equates moral indignation with devout remembrance, accusation with the pathos of commemorating the fallen who had sacrificed themselves to maintain the political community. This ambiguous pathos in the American war film genre is perfectly exemplified in McCullin's photograph. We can thus see the shell-shocked face as the pathos formula that has generated and structured the genre as such, as a genre.

We should state that pathos formulas are in no way meant as iconographic subjects or motifs, which can then form serial entities that can be traced straight

through the various manifestations of visual culture.<sup>3</sup> Rather, in this case as well, it is a matter of circulating affects; of passions – namely pathos – which get transferred with these forms to a community – whether that be conceived as an audience or as a religious or political community. For Aby Warburg, who coined the term ‘pathos formula,’ certain primal affects function as generic factors that have been expressed in the history of visual culture in countless series of dynamic movement figurations. Even if we do not share this cultural-anthropological reasoning, the term allows us to link aesthetic serialities, for example genres, to the affective economies of forms of cultural community.

From the perspective to be developed here, pathos formula quite generally means a generic principle with which serially recurring expressivities are to be referred back to specific realms of affect in a cultural community. Pathos formulas are connected with the tension-laden affect constellations and constitutional conflicts of the community in each case. Speaking with Deleuze, they can be conceived as a specific type of image, that is, affection-images,<sup>4</sup> which can be developed in serial replication into forms of a communitarian feeling. My understanding of the pathos formula is thus not directed at archetypal forms of affect (primal fears, pain ...), but seeks to understand affects per se as generic forms of collective sensation, which are manifest in series of expressivities.

In the recurrent re-staging of the pathos formula in media we can grasp a reworking of the affective collision, newly applied every time, that confronts us in the ambiguity of the shell-shocked face. If the image of sacrifice in the war film links back to archaic rituals of forming community, the pathos of commemorative mourning and collective memory, the image, being a testament to the crime, simultaneously refers to the violation of the goals that the political community has set for itself; it is directed at the pathos of moral indignation, the rage that is turned against any attempt to endow meaning. The iconography, the dramaturgy of conflict, the narrative of the the genre develop along this collision of affect. This is the sense in which the variations of the pathos formula in the shell-shocked face structure the history and poetics of the Hollywood war film genre.

While I do not wish to be hasty in comparing the media practice of watching films with cultic actions and rituals, I would like to work out one ritual aspect of this practice in the following, an aspect that can help us understand the generic

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<sup>3</sup> This is the sense in which Bronfen and others use the term. Cf. Elisabeth Bronfen, *Specters of War: Hollywood's Engagement with Military Conflict*, New Brunswick 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 1987; see also their *What is Philosophy?*, New York 1994.



function of the pathos formula and its serial ramification in the war film genre. The Hollywood war film, I would hypothesize, is oriented to a form of collectivity that can be understood as an affective basis of the political, as a sense of commonality. Understanding and terminologically defining this sense of commonality in its relation to the sphere of politics is the basic goal of my examination of the Hollywood war film genre.

This requires the prior task of defining the generic function of the pathos formula in order to develop an affect-theoretical understanding of the poetics of genre – instead of the typical understanding of genre as a taxonomy of texts, deducing the genre from their history. The Hollywood war film genre is an exemplary place to work out this affect-theoretical understanding; indeed, within a clearly delimited time period (1940 to 1945) and a quite homogeneous media technological *dispositif* (the cinema of the 1950s) and a fully developed genre system (Hollywood), we can observe how a new genre developed from the propaganda and informational films made by government offices and entertainment films made in Hollywood. Looking at the process of how this genre emerged, it should be possible to study the dynamic of transformations in which the Hollywood genre system reacted to the appearances of crisis in a democracy at war. To the degree that the Hollywood war film can be defined at all by a peculiar kind of pathos, this is closely associated with the affect-economic crises in the structures of political community.

The pathos formula of the shell-shocked face corresponds to a crisis in the forms of political community, which are obviously manifest in western culture after the excesses of state violence in the genocides and wars of the twentieth century. The stark contradiction between the meaningful death of the sacrifice *for* and the meaningless death of the individual *due to* the political community is an irresolvable, affect-laden conflict for any society that does not call on any higher authority than that of the ordinary life of numerous individuals in its political action. Consequently, the Hollywood war film does not develop as a heroic genre, but as a melodramatic one. This speaks to the formation of an aesthetic pleasure – the delight in sentimentality – that is not initially granted any political dignity at all. But the question of the relation between the feeling of the communal, the sense of commonality, and that of politics, is closely linked to the question of how the various modalities of aesthetic pleasure contribute to this sense of commonality.

The example of the war film genre makes it obvious that the media practices and symbolic forms by which a society secures its political coherence are marked by just those modalities of experience that are usually attributed to the genres of art and entertainment culture. At any rate, the strategies of *mise-en-scène* and the poetic concepts of Hollywood's war film genre are always related

to the network of “affective connectors”<sup>5</sup> in a culture that pursues an emphatic idea of political community – irrespective of whether the individual films seek to confirm, mobilize, criticize, reject, or renew these affective collectivizations in their pathos. Because this never happens as pure reflection, but is always conveyed through an enjoyment of becoming-affected, I speak of the poetics of affect in the Hollywood war film. In the following, I would thus like to attempt to work out the ritual aspect as an exemplary poetics of the media practice of cinema, in which a given society refers to itself as a political community.<sup>6</sup>

I would first like to turn to the recent history of Hollywood genres to clarify these reflections, sketching out the essential features of the poetics of a few war films. They are films that were screened for a worldwide audience at the end of the last century but that developed a highly specific social perspective based on the American nation as a political community. I would like to consider these films in the light of some ideas that Richard Rorty was developing at the same time. In his lecture from 1998, the American philosopher developed concepts about the political community of the nation that – in analogy to the films discussed – mark that brief historical moment in which the political ideal of the United States of America seemed once again to be gaining that culturally binding force that it had lost since the Vietnam War – only to land very quickly in a difficult crisis<sup>7</sup> once again.

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5 Cf. Albrecht Koschorke, *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr: Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 1999, 15.

6 Cf. Joseph Vogl, “Einleitung,” in his edited volume *Gemeinschaften: Positionen zu einer Philosophie des Politischen*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, 7–27.

7 Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-century America*, Cambridge 1998.

# 1 Repair Work on the Sense of Commonality

## 1.1 A Snapshot of History: Three War Films at the Turn of the Century

Since the mid-seventies, the Hollywood war film has almost been synonymous with films about the Vietnam War. Only at the turn of the new millennium did large-scale Hollywood productions emerge that once again looked back to the Second World War: *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) tells of the first days of the invasion in Normandy; Terrence Malick's *THE THIN RED LINE*, also from 1998, and John Woo's *WINDTALKERS* from 2002 refer back to different stages of the war in the Pacific. If the Vietnam films had been about what was probably the greatest moral crisis of the United States in the last century, the Second World War, as a historical topos of the nation, stands for the exact opposite. In this war, the USA not only became the undisputed military-economic leader of the western world, it also took on – despite Hiroshima and Nagasaki – moral-political leadership.

This suggested the idea that this turn to the Second World War was politically motivated. At the end of the twentieth century it became necessary once again – as was popularly believed – to bolster the moral prestige that the United States had achieved in the greatest moral and human catastrophe of a century familiar with catastrophes. At any rate, these films, which were made before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the quickly ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, instigated a new discussion about the media representation of war and its cultural and political function. In a certain sense, we can say that this discussion continues to this day. It is animated by ever new media forms of warfare, in which the various wars take shape.

On the one hand, the interest in images of war is an immediate effect of the way contemporary wars appear in the media. On the other, and precisely in light of the turn of the millennium, it became clear that even the greatest crimes and catastrophes of humanity – the Holocaust, the World Wars, the atom bomb – fade as memories when the eyewitnesses begin to die. War films, and the discussion of war films, are thus closely linked, particularly in Europe, to a discussion about collective memory and cultural remembrance.

Correspondingly, the discussion about the war film – in part a result of the films I have just named – primarily circled around the question of the media and practices of collective memory. Hollywood's politics of memory was especially discussed in relation to *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*. Already with *SCHINDLER'S LIST* (1993) Spielberg had presented a film that inserted the historical testament

of the Holocaust as a melodramatic staging of genre cinema into the popular historical image of Hollywood. *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* also presents itself as a telling rearrangement of historical facts and visual documents. But the question was not primarily about historical knowledge or cultural forms of memory; in fact, Spielberg's history films were discussed as examples of a post-classical blockbuster cinema, which – under the sign of the end of history – put aesthetic experience in place of historical consciousness.<sup>1</sup> But it does not seem very sensible to me to oppose history in this way with spectacularly staged acts of remembrance. An image of history also remains linked to the poetic processes of its production and presentation, even if it is subject to the operations of scholarship.

In fact, *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, *WINDTALKERS*, and *THE THIN RED LINE* each engage with media factors and poetic processes in highly specific ways, which is the basis of the historical image of the Second World War; an image of history that is quite overwhelmingly determined by photographic and film documents. So, not only in their subject matter, but also in their arrangement of dramatic conflict, the films revert to the stereotypes and visual standards that had been used to shape the classical Hollywood war film over three decades. At any rate, what these films have in common – and do not share, for instance, with productions such as *PEARL HARBOR* (Michael Bay 2001) or *WE WERE SOLDIERS* (Randall Wallace, 2002) – is that rather than referring to historical positionings they refer to pictures and documents, which themselves belong to a past time. *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, for instance, ostensibly borrows from the screen epic *THE LONGEST DAY* (Ken Annakin/Andrew Marton/Bernhard Wicki/Darryl F. Zanuck) from 1962; but above all the film refers to countless film documents that were created during the landing of the allied forces at Normandy.

In no way do I understand this recourse to the previous visual documents as any self-sufficient postmodern poetics of pastiche; the films are much more concerned with the audiovisual images as the circulating testaments of a historical catastrophe that is fading in the memory of the living generation. I would like to discuss how this is presented in detail by means of three film-analytical sketches.

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1 Drehli Robnik brought the results of this discussion into his work on the combat film. He convincingly demonstrated how Spielberg re-stages the European campaign in the simulated remembrance acts of blockbuster movies as an act of rescuing Jews. (It hurts! – Where? – Don't know! – Good, here you have a spectacle, that shows you the source of your pain.) Cf. Drehli Robnik, *Kino, Krieg, Gedächtnis: Affekt-Ästhetik, Nachträglichkeit und Geschichtspolitik im deutschen und amerikanischen Gegenwartskino*, unpublished dissertation: Amsterdam 2007, <http://dare.uva.nl/document/50897> (August 17, 2013). On the relation between historical evidence and aesthetic experience, cf. also: Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, London 1999, 188ff.

I begin with Spielberg's *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* before turning to John Woo's *WIND-TALKERS* and finally to Terrence Malick's *THE THIN RED LINE*.

### **SAVING PRIVATE RYAN: the sentimental scene of commemorating war**

One family, three generations ... parents, children, grandchildren. A field of graves, endless, unrestricted by any horizon. The montage forms an impression that is already implied by the architecture of the military cemetery. Gravestone after gravestone is lined up in diagonal rows; each of them can be singled out and enumerated in itself, but seeing them all together like this, they all add up to an image of the literal innumerability of the dead. The white monuments are as homogenous as the uniforms of soldiers, the only difference being that between the Christian cross and the Jewish Star of David.

A close-up shows the face of the veteran (see Figure 2). This introduces a flashback, which begins with the event testified to by the innumerable stony witnesses in the graveyard: the great loss of life at Omaha Beach. The sound design, the sound of the landing boat, already pulls the spectators into the visual space, even before the ramps are opened and the infantrymen at the front of the boat are relinquished to enemy fire.

With no establishing action, the theme of the next 20 minutes starts with a bang. The first rows of soldiers die as a living shield, making it possible for those following to advance, step by step, row by row, onto the beach peppered with mines and fencing. The troops push onto the land, while the individual soldiers, tattered and shot to pieces, head toward the prize made possible by this movement.

Within its first twenty minutes, *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* draws on all the registers of audiovisual rhetoric that the cinema has developed for battle scenes to put this monstrosity on the screen. A montage of dissociated spatial and sound perspectives opens up a space of chaotic perception; the camera moves between diffusely attributable shots, just above or below the water, like a swimmer – or a drowning person; sometimes obstructed by the water spraying up; sometimes the smeared spurts of blood make the lens itself visible. What we see gets detached from any attributable perspective, becomes distant, viewed as through a glass pane. Even the level of sound is composed out of an impression of multiple perspectives, moving between the muteness of the soldiers falling into the water and the deafening noise of the explosions.

Finally, the audio perspective opens up to the emptiness of a muffled echo chamber; the effect is like the self-perception of the inner sounds of our body, like what we hear when we hold our ears closed. In fact, this echo chamber, shut



**Figure 2:** The face (SAVING PRIVATE RYAN).

off to the outside, is the first perspective clearly attributed to an individual body. The turmoil of the battle becomes a horror film; mute cries, thudding inaudible shots, soundless grenade explosions, bodies torn to pieces. We see the protagonist's face: a shell-shocked face.

As a whole, the staging of the scene is aimed at producing the largest possible discrepancy between the perspective of a living individual, enclosed and disorientated in the events of the battle, and the cinematographic description of that battle. The paralyzed face joins these two perspectives to each other.

Enclosed within the thunder of shots, then in the quietness of this foreign body, a peculiar form of subjective perspective unfolds for the spectator; he senses himself to be physically quite near, and at the same time he is kept at an absolute distance – as the counterpart to the traumatized face. The camera simulates the fragmented view of overextended perception, while nonetheless maintaining the position of the sovereign spectator.<sup>2</sup> What the troops manage to achieve only through great suffering and sacrifice is possible for him without any effort whatsoever. Seeing and hearing the whole time, the spectator criss-crosses through the spatial simulation of the chaotic perceptual consciousness of a body dazzled and numbed by horror and pain; he finds a first narrative foothold when he sees the face of the star, Tom Hanks, associated with the muffled echo chamber, which surrounds him in the movie seat (much like the interior view of the shell-shocked face). A dialogue is initiated; first still without sound, then comes the first exchange of words. Little by little a figuration of plot is formed from the scenario of horror: “How can we crack that bunker up there?” When the soldiers overtake the beach, scale the bluffs, and take the bunker, the spectator finds himself in the action space of a clear reality, once again securely in the space of classical narrative cinema.

The transition into the mode of narration is marked by a precise cusp. Only at the moment when it becomes possible to catch a glimpse of the enemy by means of a mirror does the narrative perspective become stable.<sup>3</sup> The journey into the interior of the country, the landscape of Normandy, the reconnaissance patrol with the special mission, the decisive battle, all of this takes place in the mirror of the classical Hollywood war film and of the audiovisual documents of the Second World War, which circulate in the media.

We understand the flashback as a movement of memory, described not only in the fiction of the character, but also on the real level of the film spectator.

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2 Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel view the post-classical war film as a new body genre. Cf. Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel, “The Hollow Heart of Hollywood: Apocalypse Now and the New Sound Space” in *Conrad on Film*, ed. Gene M. Moore, Cambridge 1997, 151–175. Cf. also: Hermann Kappelhoff, “Shell shocked face: Einige Überlegungen zur rituellen Funktion des US-amerikanischen Kriegsfilms,” in *Verklärte Körper*, ed. Nicola Suthor, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Munich 2006, 69–89.

For an analysis of Spielberg’s film in terms of character psychology or plot logic, cf. Albert Auster, “‘Saving Private Ryan’ and American Triumphalism,” in *The War Film*, ed. Robert Eberwein, New Brunswick/London 2005, 205–213; Jeanine Basinger, “Combat Redux,” in *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, ed. Jeanine Basinger, New York 2003, 253–262.

3 Cf. Drehli Robnik, “Körper-Erfahrung und Film-Phänomenologie,” in *Moderne Film Theorie*, ed. Jürgen Felix, Mainz 2002, 246–280.



What for the character is a passage through a trauma, behind which the space of memory opens up, functions for the spectator as a mirror reversal of the sequence of action in the classical war film. There, the agony of the soldiers, the shell-shocked face, is the *last* image; here it is placed at the beginning. In the spatial simulation of the chaos of a catastrophe that overstrains every individual consciousness, the presentation of this face forms the *first* crystallization on which an episodic action can gradually become anchored, the germ of a narrative, of a genre tale.

The same reversal also takes place on the level of the dramatic conflict. While the opening sequence offers up all possible means of cinematic representation in order to allow the unbearable act of violence to be grasped by the senses, an act which consists of literally employing the life and limb of the individual as the medium of the onward motion of the troops, the film's plot reverses this order. It is not the individual who dies for the intangible community, but the mission of saving the individual life that brings death to nearly the entire unit. With this story, Spielberg seems to resolve the fundamental conflict of the classical war film, that between providing an image of sacrifice and testifying to an act of violence, in a paradoxical way of reading the founding act of the nation. The right of the individual to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, this highest value of the political community, is secured and maintained through the sacrificial death of innumerable individuals. In fact, however, the face of the weeping veteran among his family transfers the historical pathos of the shell-shocked face into a sentimental image of remembrance. The soldier, who comes back to the graveyard, thinks of his commander's last words: "Earn this."

After nearly everyone has fallen so that he, James Ryan, can keep the right to life and liberty, this last order seems as terrible to us as the image of the battle at the beginning of the film. But the guilt that this survivor has to deal with consists only in bringing to an end the platoon's mission, for which the others died. He owes the dead nothing more than to use his life and liberty to pursue happiness. This is why, at the end of the film, it is not the pathos formula of the shell-shocked face that we see, but the weeping face of the remembering survivor.

The surviving soldier at the grave of his fallen comrades, his face, the tears turned away from the family; the wife, the children, the grandchildren stand slightly off in the background, their gaze fixed on the weeping man. This scene is also a reprise of another scene; we might think of it as the primal scene of bourgeois sensibility. Indeed, here Spielberg is reconstructing a scene of pathos-laden remembrance, and its serial repetition almost designates the *movens* of sentimental entertainment culture: the family gathered at the father's deathbed, merging into a community, their feelings focused in the same direction as they empathetically gaze at the dying man. In his play *Le Père de famille* (1758), Diderot deployed



this scene as the prototype of the sentimental theater with the purpose of newly re-staging it over and over again in order to awaken in the audience the idea of a community connected to one another by the bond of their shared sensations.<sup>4</sup> For the sensitive bourgeoisie, this bond was sentimental compassion. Seen in this way, it is in fact the primal scene of an art and entertainment culture that constructs media in order to configure affects. At any rate, the closing scene of *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* could not have been better arranged to illustrate the character of the absorbed beholder, which Michael Fried has developed as the type-case for this subjectivity.<sup>5</sup>

*SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* lets the war film end in this scene of sentimental remembrance. In fact, Private Ryan's family, positioned in a half-circle in the background of the image, confronts the film spectator as a community, literally drawing him or her into their circle; indeed, they are connected through the shared gaze at one and the same scene of someone weeping at a graveside – as if the circle of community were closing around the mourning face together with the gaze of the anonymous audience in front of the screen. The montage breaks up the figuration with a line crossing in order to link this community of sentimental remembrance in a circular sequence of shots directly with the symbol of the nation: the flag of the United States of America.

### **WINDTALKERS: the first American – conceived in the plural**

*WINDTALKERS* begins with a prologue that plays out a narrative stereotype of the classical war film. Joe Enders (Nicolas Cage), the commander of a platoon, compels his men to hang on through a crushing attack; Enders is the only one to survive the attack, hit by a grenade explosion and only seemingly dead. The conception of the character varies the basic dramatic conflict in a thoroughly conventional way. Feelings of guilt keep the survivor from getting on with his life; he is no longer capable of pursuing happiness. This characterizes the figure of the sacrifice, and this type has increasingly come to define the genre since the Vietnam War: the soldier traumatized by his culpable act.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the starting constellation, the culpable act in militarily correct behavior, is reversed. The film finds its apotheosis in the stereotype of the

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4 Cf. Hermann Kappelhoff, *Matrix der Gefühle: Das Kino, das Melodrama und das Theater der Empfindsamkeit*, Berlin 2004, 63–83, as well as 98–102, 107–109 and 148–151.

5 Cf. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkeley 1980.

6 Cf. the chapter on the Iraq War film in this book.

sacrificing hero, who puts the lives of his comrades over his own: the soldier, carrying his dying comrades on his back away from enemy fire, thus coming to his own death. This time it is the commander, the white American, who saves the life of his friend, a Navajo.

I quote from a summary:

In the Pacific War the marines Joe Enders (Nicolas Cage) and "Ox" Henderson (Christian Slater) are given the secret order to act as a kind of bodyguard for the radio operators Ben Yahzee (Adam Beach) and Charlie Whitehorse (Roger Willie). The two Navajos are in possession of a special code that must under no circumstances fall into enemy hands. The grim battle over the island of Saipan bonds the men together. And it is only a matter of time before the two protectors of the code speakers are confronted with the terrible question: Would they give their all to protect the code?<sup>7</sup>

The special code is the language of the Native Americans, the Navajos. As much as it might give us pause to contemplate that it is precisely the language of the natives, whose almost complete annihilation forms the foundation of the nation, which now provides a decisive strategic advantage in the battle against the Japanese, the director, John Woo, is not content to leave it at that. Even the circumstance that the Navajos physically resemble the Japanese enemies more than they do their white comrades cannot be taken as merely anecdotal. Both refer much more to a rather marginal narrative of the genre that *WINDTALKERS* is working with. Indeed, in the classical US war film, ethnic heterogeneity is regularly highlighted as one of the fundamental characteristics of the American army. It goes without saying that this topos was due to the pragmatic demands of propaganda during the Second World War, which made it necessary to represent the widest possible number of ethnicities (with the exception of African American soldiers) in the personnel of the film. With this topos *WINDTALKERS* is certainly singling out a characteristic element of the American nation, which defines itself in its political self-understanding by permanently and dynamically refiguring a community that can be consummated beyond all ethnic and religious boundaries.

In fact, this can be taken as a statement of the film's subject matter. One by one, the different ethnic backgrounds of individual soldiers come forth; so that the initial contrast between Navajos and white Americans breaks apart into multiple figurations of many individuals of various backgrounds. Among them all, the Navajos are in fact the only true Americans, indeed, Native Americans. Here, the idea of a political community meant to traverse the oppositions of ethnicities and religions acquires a specific turn. From the film's perspective, the

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7 Content information of the German DVD edition, distributed by MGM.

other ethnicities initially always appear to be menacing, foreign, and adversarial; but they are only transitional appearances in determining the dynamically expanding boundaries of the community. Admittedly, this historical dynamic is ultimately determined by military force, the racist roots of which are in clear evidence. So just as the initial antagonism in the platoon between Navajos and the other Americans transitions into a community of individuals who are foreign to one another but are connecting by a growing bond of friendship, the war against the Japanese appears as a further stage of the dynamic reconfiguration of the political community. The war in *WINDTALKERS* becomes a metaphor for racist violence, the repression of which defines the political goal of this community.<sup>8</sup>

The interpretation of war as the basis for a dynamic collectivization of ethnicities that are foreign and hostile to one another has found a telling rhetorical intensification in the film. After every battle – almost like winding down after work – we see the decimated troops at the graves of their just fallen comrades. The soldiers chat after burying the dead, they relax, they receive their commendations, they go into a rage, haunted by the voices of the dead, they take off from here to their next battle. We see the horde of men transform: living bodies become fields of crosses and steel helmets – while the friendships between the survivors become closer and closer. Like the refrain of a ballad, the recurring battles structure the arrival of a community that seems to get its power from the increasing number of the dead.

*WINDTALKERS* stages the process of this collectivization in the friendship between the two main characters: Joe Enders and Ben Yahzee. Their relationship begins with great disconcertment and remains defined by a battle in which one of them struggles for distance, the other for recognition, in order finally to end in literal fusion. Their faces are staged as radical antagonists: the one empty, stony, a mask of the choked power of sensation – a shell-shocked face; the other open, always laughing. It seems to have an overabundance of precisely the powers of sensation that have been obliterated from the face of Enders. Joe Enders therefore is

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Wedel also thematizes *WINDTALKERS* as a film focused on the question of community. In order to do so, he primarily draws on Nancy's theories. This constitutes a fundamental difference from what I understand as a political community in this text. Cf. Michael Wedel, "Körper, Tod und Technik – Der postklassische Hollywood-Kriegsfilm als reflexives »Body Genre«," in *Körperästhetiken: Filmische Inszenierungen von Körperlichkeit*, ed. Dagmar Hoffmann, Bielefeld 2010, 77–100.

From the perspective that I am attempting to develop here, the war film in fact appears to be a genre that confronts two incompatible models of community: that of the political community and that of the military community. On the term 'military community', cf. Kappelhoff, "Shell shocked face."

also given the mission to protect the Navajo, because, as is shown in the prologue, he acquired this stoniness as a quite particular qualification in battle. It would not be past him to kill the one entrusted to him if he threatened to fall into enemy hands.

This melodrama of love between friends finds its counterpart in the representation of the war action. In blinding speed, a highly mobile camera links series of unattributable views together with blurry, internally moving medium shots and wild pans to form an elaborate landscape of war. It culminates in long shots that look like computer animated paintings. These are images of classic Hollywood cinema, from John Ford's westerns to Sam Fuller's war epics, estranged through the rhetoric of action cinema into a kind of high-tech realism. In the film's final rescue operation, both sides, the melodrama and the action film, come together. Enders saves the Navajo from enemy fire instead of taking him away from the clutches of the enemy with a deadly shot.

One might see the rescue of the Indian as an ironic commentary on the military code of honor of "no man left behind." This complies with the impression that the scenes of winding down after battles between the increasing graves at the camp above all emphasize the deep ambivalence of this promise of indissoluble bonds. The death of the individual is the medium of soldierly solidarity. But the irony goes deeper; it refers to the political community. In the apotheosis described, *WINDTALKERS* links back to the topography of a narrative tradition in which the history of colonizing the American continent was poetically formed into a myth of the birth of the nation, an image of the historicity of "our country."

"A key scene in almost every Vietnam movie" – so it is said – is the helicopter that flies away leaving a GI behind. "The traumatology of the new war film is built up on the experience of leaving behind and being left behind."<sup>9</sup> This scene is certainly much older than the Vietnam War film. The soldier abandoned among the enemy – threatened with torture and desecration – continues a motif that reaches back to the very beginnings of American culture: the narrative of the suffering and martyrdom of prisoners captured by savages, the scenario of the puritanical 'captivity narratives.'

The poetic phantasm of the captivity narratives conform – here I am drawing on Winfried Fluck's functional history of the American novel<sup>10</sup> – to the basic

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9 Georg Seeßlen, "Von Stahlgewittern zur Dschungelkampfmachine. Veränderungen des Krieges und des Kriegsfilms," in *Kino und Krieg: Von der Faszination eines tödlichen Genres*, eds. Ernst Karpf and Doron Kiesel, Arnoldshainer Filmgespräche 6, Frankfurt am Main 1989, 15–32, here 26 and 27.

10 Winfried Fluck, *Das kulturelle Imaginäre: Eine Funktionsgeschichte des amerikanischen Romans 1790–1900*, Frankfurt am Main 1997.

schema of the imagination of the historical that is cultivated in popular narrative forms. According to this schema, the topography of the historical image is structured by two other motifs. The first is war against the foreign, uncivilized race; this topos is historically marked by the Indian Wars. Here the enemy is positioned outside the communal world as the menacing other. The second is the struggle against the technocratic rule of bureaucracy and state power, which threatens the freedom of the individual and his pursuit of happiness. Historically, this struggle is positioned by the War of Independence, the American revolution against the forms of rule in old Europe. But the topos is very quickly related to an enemy that lives inside the community itself, and that threatens to choke the life out of this community through the excesses of bureaucracy and state despotism.

Martyrdom, the individual physical suffering of the one lost alone in the wilderness; the enemy as the menacing outside of the other race or culture; the conflict between individual claims to freedom and growing technocratic rule: this is the outline – according to Winfried Fluck – of the basic topography proposed by the popular narrative forms of American culture in order to connect the idea of the nation with an idea of history.<sup>11</sup> This topography still provides the dramaturgical pattern of the Hollywood war film genre.

The scenes in which Ben Yahzee is rescued and Joe Enders dies follow this poetic phantasm. They form a variation on the constellation of characters that came into world literature with James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826): the friendship between the last of the Mohicans and the frontiersman. This friendship spans the gulf that divides the inhabitable settlers' areas from the woods where the foreigners dwell. It is the clearing in the no-man's-land between the races who had been turned enemy in war and the area under the control of the old technocratic powers. Cooper's narrative of a friendship beyond the war of enemy races describes the beginning of a new form of community. But this beginning is also already linked to the ambivalence of the victim and the criminal, mourning and culpability. In the friendship between the frontiersman and the last Mohican, this ambivalence found its form of pathos.

WINDTALKERS stages this double figure literally as one body fused in battle. Except that in this film, it is not the native who has to die, but the non-native American. Instead of obeying orders and killing Ben, Enders puts himself under attack to drag his wounded friend out of the line of fire, carrying him away on his back. We see a grotesque figure – Enders is also hit by shots – assembled out of body parts and bleeding wounds, which can only lumber forward with great difficulty. It hobbles, creeps, crawls out of the thick of battle in the war film and into

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11 Cf. *ibid.*

the apotheosis of the melodrama. The dying soldier remembers his Italian roots, and with this remembrance all the powers of sensation seem to return to his face.

Much like Spielberg seeks to resolve the ambivalent pathos of the war film in a sentimental scene, John Woo transfers the pathos scene of friendship into a melodramatic figuration. But unlike in Spielberg, this is no internalized sense of remembrance, but an analytical set up. The reversal of the positions, the play with the poetic topography of the primal narrative of the nation, gives the pathos an ironic distance and allows for the ambiguity to come forth even more strongly (see Figure 3). In its representation of the Second World War, *WINDTALKERS* develops the image of history itself as a poetic form, in which a society imagines itself as a community. It thus refers much more to the contemporary issues of a multiethnic, postcolonial society than to the significance of the Second World War for just this historical image of this society.



**Figure 3:** Melodramatic figuration (*WINDTALKERS*).

The film contrasts the self-image of a political community that sees itself as neither an ethnic nor a religious unit with the narrative of the war between races. It thus allows communitization itself to appear as a deeply ambivalent process of violence, a constantly shifting frontal progression, a moving frontier between what is one's own and what constitutes and marks the foreigner.

When, at the ending – before the grandiose backdrop of Monument Valley, which became the iconographic signature landscape of the myth of genesis of

America in the western genre – Private Ben Yahzee completes the mourning ritual of the native Americans. This happens in a very similar way to *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, under the gaze of his wife and his son. It is a different American family. Dressed in the traditional clothing of the Navajos, high above the location of so many films about the wars on the Indians, the family creates a highly unreal appearance. A reflection of the cinema in which the image of America's history seems to be corrected in a similar way as it is through the story of rescuing the soldier James Ryan. The frontiersman gets his last respects from his friend, the Native American.

While Spielberg in fact attempts to integrate the American European campaign into the historical image of the United States with the sentimental scene of mourning (a war that saved the lives of individuals<sup>12</sup>), John Woo reverses the poetics of the narrative of the birth of the nation itself against historical facticity. According to this poetic, the societal dominance of the white race is only a temporary appearance in the becoming of the community – a becoming that sketches out its historical shape in the topography of narratives of war against the foreign races, of the martyrdom of the sacrifice, and of the victory of freedom over the rule of technocracy.

### **THE THIN RED LINE: the singular face**

Terrence Malick's *THE THIN RED LINE* also takes up the poetics of this talk of war. He transfers it into a lyrical form. Right from the beginning, he varies the theme: Why is there still war at the foundation of the most peaceful relationship? Why this division into two fighting powers everywhere? There dark-haired children, here light-skinned soldiers; there mothers of color, holding their children on their hips as they carry them home from the beach, here the steel grey gunboat that the soldiers maneuver right into the middle of the South Seas paradise. The film's prologue shows idyllic nature. Like a cathedral of light, it surrounds the kind of everyday life that the soldiers had left behind when they became members of the military corps. We see soldiers playing with children, dancing, bodies floating in the water; they are reflected in the foreign gazes of women carrying their children home from the riverbanks to the village. It seems to be the epitome of peace, even if the dread with which one of the women speaks of being afraid of the strangers already portends something else. The gunboat turns up in front of the village; it takes the fugitive soldiers, who had left their unit without permission, back to war.

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12 Cf. Robnik, *Kino, Krieg, Gedächtnis*.



If *WINDTALKERS* is based on the narrative of the Indian wars and James Fenimore Cooper's historical novels, then *THE THIN RED LINE* is connected to the philosophical essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In fact, we get the impression that these bacchanal observations of nature translate American transcendentalism into a cinematographic hymn.

The camera moves through the landscape of the South Seas island like the philosophizing walker in Thoreau's *Walden* does through the woods of Massachusetts. Indeed, it produces an encounter with nature as an image that does not correspond to conventional representations of nature at all. It produces it, as Dana Polan writes, as the image of a purely subjective experience: "The long waves of grass ... become here a pure space of experience as we see nothing but endless fields with no advance, no logic, no fixities of point of view."<sup>13</sup> The film unquestionably follows a poetics that behaves quite differently from that of classical narrative cinema.<sup>14</sup> The images of the landscape and the battles are like the characters, their faces, their gestures and actions are themselves elements of a lyrical reflection, of a monologue folded into itself, which cannot be attributed to any individual subject. It belongs neither to the characters nor to any narrator, not to the author nor to the spectator either – and yet it links each of these elements, framing them all in a floating, expanding state that is contended in transitory first-person moments.

In doing so, the film proves to be a strict transposition of the narrative strategy of the novel *The Thin Red Line* (1962). In the style of laconic realism, James Jones depicts a landscape, a situation, an atmosphere in broad strokes; the outward qualities of the characters are broadly outlined in a similar way. This also brings them that much closer to the authorial narrator in the form of his speech. Indeed, in diction and perspective, this speech is much like that of the characters, even in

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<sup>13</sup> Dana Polan, "Auteurism and War-teurism: Terence Malick's War Movie," in *The War Film*, ed. Robert Eberwein, New Brunswick 2005, 53–62.

<sup>14</sup> Dana Polan has described this form as follows: "The narration in *THE THIN RED LINE* both originates in various characters and goes beyond them, creating a floating perspective that in keeping both with the film's epic pretense and its poetic ambition to represent unities of the human and of the natural beyond all artificial divisions. Not only does the narration say things we do not necessarily imagine the particular characters to be capable of saying, but it also seems to waft beyond any particular character's perception, becoming a virtually pan-individual disquisition on war and existence." (Polan, "Auteurism and War-teurism," 59) This is as wrong as it is right in its observation. The characters are not narrated human beings, but a splintered and scattered eye, a folded subjectivity, which can be related to the narration of action and acting characters as difference, not as disintegration.

Cf. ALSO Michel Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, London 2004.



passages of interior monologue. It jumps directly to another character, motivated merely by a change in viewpoint, a fleeting dialogue, or by the simple circumstance that the other character has moved into the field of vision of the other who is momentarily not speaking. The novel thus approximates the authorial narrative of free indirect discourse, as Bakhtin defined it and as Pasolini then expounded it in relation to film.<sup>15</sup> This entails the narrator mimicking the diction, word choice, and perceptual methods of the characters, without entirely abolishing the difference between narrating speech and narrated character. This poetic procedure allows Jones to link up a wide variety of vantage points, modes of perception and sensation with each other so that the image of the military community arises in the form of speech itself. In the end there are fifteen, eighteen, or even twenty equal protagonists between whom the novel's speech circulates. The troop itself, the C-Company, can thus take shape as an entanglement of voices, perceptions, and sensations, as a sensing, expressive body. And new voices continually turn up, even down to the very last pages.

Malick's film follows this poetic procedure when, in off-voices and in the camera, it aligns itself with the faces and gestures, the voices and speech of the soldiers on the screen, without ever becoming quite identical to them. Rather, the film articulates a kind of astonishment,<sup>16</sup> which does not belong to any individual face, but is transferred from one face to the next; it does not mark any standpoint, nor any personal entity of sensations, experiences, and evaluations.

This astonishment is realized in the face of the soldier, who recognizes in bewilderment that he has been hit and is dying, and is then transferred to the compassionate gaze of the one trying to console him. It lingers for a moment in the timid horror of the inexperienced boy, who may indeed not want to avert his gaze from the terror of the defiled corpse, it loses its contours in the ecstasy of the gunman who has just killed someone for the first time. It becomes detached from the human body, transitioning through a movement that gets lost in the clouds blown by the wind, the waving grass, the slipping of shadows. It is the movement of the light filtering through the leaves, of the transforming light, joined with the sometimes strutting, sometimes flowing carpet of sound made by the music.

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<sup>15</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The 'Cinema of Poetry,'" in *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. Louise K. Barnett, Bloomington/Indianapolis 1988, 167–186. Italian original: "Il 'cinema di poesia,'" in idem, *Empirismo eretico*, Milan 1981, 167–187.

<sup>16</sup> Astonishment is the expression of an affect that is intimately connected with the experience of thinking, of reflection. (Deleuze writes about astonishment [*admiration*] in *The Movement-Image*, 88).

The landscape in this film resembles the model of old “nature,” which we know from museums and old poems, only in the foreground. It corresponds much more to what Balázs discovered in the close-up, the movement of affect with no relation to space.

Landscape is a physiognomy, a face that all at once, at a particular spot, gazes out at us, as if emerging from the chaotic lines of a picture puzzle. A face of a particular place with a very definite, if also indefinable, expression of feeling, with an evident, if also incomprehensible, meaning. A face that seems to have a deep emotional relationship to human beings. A face that is directed towards human beings.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, nature in *THE THIN RED LINE* appears as an impersonal, non-human face. Malick’s film articulates the impressions of a variously formed sensing, feeling, and thinking, in which ever new viewpoints and speaking perspectives arise – a cinematic hero’s song, reporting on the wars of the twentieth century like they were horrors from a far away past.

*THE THIN RED LINE* projects the lyrical emphasis of Emerson’s “nature,” the celebration of a direct view of a divine universal soul in nature, onto the poetic surface of the talk of war. What thus arises is a cinematic vision of history: a flow of gazes, gestures, faces that is brought into the living, bodily present of a perceiving, sensing, and thinking spectator. It is the photos of war reporters, from the World Wars to Vietnam – including the photo of the paralyzed GI – and the faces in shadows, taken from films that were made shortly after the war: elegiac ballads such as Lewis Milestone’s *A WALK IN THE SUN* (1945), which present portraits of fallen heroes in small chamber plays and, if necessary, superimpose the images of battle as found footage from innumerable documentaries. *THE THIN RED LINE* develops a vision of history in which the photo and film documents of the wars of the twentieth century coalesce into a multi-voiced speech that rises up from all the war novels and news coverage, the letters and the war diaries. They add up into fleeting, first-person oriented figurations – sometimes in off-camera speech, sometimes dialogically splintering off, sometimes as the interior monologue of individual characters – only to lose themselves again right away in the movement of metamorphosis of the camera’s gaze. As if the endless series of photo and film faces from the so well documented wars of the past century themselves formed a flow of memories, which crystallize for moments in scenes and characters, only always to turn back into the flow of indeterminate speech without fixed origin.

The soldiers land in the morning sun, they draw into the interior of the island, encountering the strangers, the indigenous person, who does not see

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17 Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, Oxford 2010, 53.

them, wordlessly passing by. On a muggy afternoon, they come across rotting corpses, in the evening light they see the wounded and dead from the last fight. The next morning the battle begins. Like strophes from a traditional epic, each of the new sequences falls into place. The uniform, flowing time seems similar to space, 'with no advance, no logic, no fixities of point of view': a movement without space, organized by the faces of soldiers, much like the Homeric epic is organized by meter and recurring turns of phrase. As if the events narrated were as long ago as the war of the Greeks against the Trojans. But what is destroyed is not the proud securing of the enemy city; it is the idyllic peacefulness of the village on this South Seas island. At the beginning the inhabitants of this village remain uninvolved in the face of the battle that the warring troops carry into their country from a world far away; at the end their community has also fallen to the war. At the beginning, they are part of nature in the midst of war, presented by the film as an utterly imperturbable beauty: the swimming children, the estranged smiles of the woman – we do not know if these are directed at the camera team – the singing villagers under the roof of a light-flooded cathedral of trees, the man that passes by the troops as if they did not exist. At the end the village – an Indian camp after the cavalry has pulled out – is desolated, the villagers antagonized, the household objects are in pieces. When the company finally retreats to the landing boat, past the graveyards of the fallen, we can once again speak of this foreign face: the voice, which does not clearly belong to any narrator, any character, nor any author, asks us not to ignore him when we encounter him.

This might be taken to mean the disturbing gaze of the women in the islander's village, or the gaze of the man who refused to look at the soldiers as they were marching to the interior of the island. But perhaps it could also be a face that we saw right at the beginning: soldiers standing in crowded rows in front of washbasins and mirrors. There is a stifling constriction under the deck of the battleship that is taking the troops to war. A very young man, almost still a child: he speaks of his fear, it is not entirely clear to whom. Perhaps to his immediate superior, First Sergeant Edward Welsh (Sean Penn); he briefly stops shaving to look at the boy. At the very end we see this nameless soldier for the second time. Once again, he is on the ship; this time it is meant to be transporting the soldiers back home. Crushed in between innumerable unfamiliar faces, about whom we know as little as we do about him, we now see him standing on the upper deck in daylight. Once again he delivers a monologue, and once again we do not know to whom. This uncertainty seems to define the play of features itself. We see a face that does not know if there is anyone who is looking at it; or whether it is astonished or unsettled to be seen so suddenly, becoming aware of his own face on the screen, laid bare before a mass of viewers ...

For this audience, the face becomes the appearance of exactly that nature that the film stages as a cinematographic anthem in the prologue and the epilogue;