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# Affective Incongruity and *The Thin Red Line*

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**Abstract:** Most films, most of the time, are affectively unified. What I call “synesthetic affects” are orchestrated in an attempt to provide a holistic affective experience congruent with the film’s unfolding narrative and thematic concerns. Yet Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* elicits contradictory or incongruent affects, such incongruence neither being justified by genre conventions, “excess,” irony, nor stumbled upon through incompetence. *The Thin Red Line* elicits incongruent emotions for the purposes of generating an experience of rumination and wonder. The study of such incongruent emotions, still in its infancy, raises important methodological issues about the study of mixed emotions and the conventions for mixing affects in the cinema.

**Keywords:** affect and film, emotion and film, film criticism, film interpretation, Malick, *The Thin Red Line*

Viewers justifiably assume that mainstream films, most of the time, exhibit unity and singleness of purpose. Such unity requires a kind of affective fittingness whereby elements of style, structure, and narrative content work together to elaborate and reinforce a sequence of dominant emotions or moods—among them, for example, suspense, eager expectation, relief, or joy. Most scenes in mainstream films provide cues for fitting or congruent emotions that contribute to a consistent dramatic arc and dominant affective experience. *Touch of Evil* (1958), for example, couples narrative scenarios of corruption, betrayal, and death with low key lighting, night scenes, skewed and cluttered framing, and industrial settings littered with trash, oil wells, and rusting machinery. Conversely, the musical *Oklahoma* (1955) celebrates marriage, community, and the land, and uses high key lighting, balanced and symmetrical compositions, bright colors, bucolic natural settings, and plenty of sunshine to accompany its exuberant proclamations of the goodness of life.

In this article I explore a different kind of affective experience at the movies, the process by which films, in part or in whole, elicit incongruent or contradictory emotions and affects. It is not merely garden-variety mixed emotions that I explore. Mixed emotions in a film may be motivated by genre, their admixture thus becoming conventional and expected. Fear and disgust, for example, might be thought to work together congruently in the horror

film, because they share the same negative valence and contribute to an overarching and unified effect, which Noël Carroll has called “art horror” (1990). My interest here is in incongruent emotions and affects, the mixture of which is not motivated by generic expectation. Using Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998) as a case study, I argue that films may elicit contradictory or incongruent affects for particular thematic purposes. In the case of *The Thin Red Line* contradictory affect serves to facilitate, for the spectator, the questioning or rumination that also lies at the heart of the film for Witt and some of the other characters.

### **Cross-Modal Matching and Emotional Salience**

In our daily lives, we are bombarded with diverse stimuli, far too much to attend to. How do we avoid sensory overload and rampant cognitive and affective confusion? J. J. Gibson (1979) holds that perception is selective, and that individuals attend to *affordances*, that is, to objects and events that bear salient meaning for the individual’s goals and plans. The search for affordances, usually automatic and occurring beneath the threshold of consciousness, causes us to seek out certain stimuli and ignore others. In similar terms, film scholar Joseph D. Anderson notes that this selective perception is rooted in a schema-driven encounter with our ever-changing environment. The senses evolve not in isolation but together, and work simultaneously to help us perceive our world. Perception is also multi-modal, in that schemata lead us to find invariant properties across and within sense modalities (Anderson 1996: 86–89). Cross-modal binding, or multi-modal perception, is the process by which spectators unite diverse percepts from multiple sensual channels.

Cross-modal binding, both inside and outside of media consumption, is a basic perceptual and cognitive activity by which we attend to some percepts and not others, and by which perceptions are quickly unified and given meaning in relation to our goals or needs. Such binding, having been incentivized over years of evolutionary history, is pleasurable in itself. This might explain one of the pleasures of the audio-visual media, with their cross-modal presentation of sounds and images. Michel Chion calls the binding of sound and image in film “synchresis,” the phenomenon by which viewers unite images and sounds into an overarching perception or interpretation of a filmic event or object. Chion’s concept of “audio-vision” suggests that through cross-modal binding, seeing and hearing are mutually determinative (1994: 1–5). One example of cross-modal binding, from the world of speech perception, is the so-called McGurk effect. When seeing or hearing someone speaking, the perception of which phonemes are being spoken depends on the sensory mode by which the phonemes are perceived. Three modes are possible. The perceiver may 1) see the speaker mouthing the words but hear nothing, 2) hear but not see the words being spoken, or 3) both see and hear simultane-

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ously. In each of the three cases, subjects almost invariably perceive different spoken phonemes (Eysenck and Keane 200: 343). Most salient for our purposes is that the phoneme perceived by a combination of audio and visual perception is different from that perceived through either audio or visual perception in isolation. The conclusion to be drawn is that although perception occurs through discrete sensory channels, it is unified by the schema-driven perceiver.

There is good reason to think that emotions and affects have an important role in this binding of experience; in other words, such binding is not just a perceptual or cognitive process but also an affective one. Thus Noël Carroll (2008: 157) has described the “searchlight function” of the emotions. When a person is in a particular emotional state—for example, fear—she or he attends to stimuli perceived to be threatening, rather than to the visual beauty of a nearby flower or its pleasant scent. The emotions work to facilitate attention to salient aspects of the environment, according to the emotional state of the perceiver. When experiencing wonder I am more likely to notice wonderful things, while the fearful perceiver scans the environment for signs of danger. The overarching point is that our experience is often unified and directed according to our goals (whether conscious and intentional, or unconscious and automatic), and in relation to what we take to be salient, such that we continually both interpret our experience and attend to some stimuli rather than others.

### **The Unity of Experience in Movies**

In mainstream narrative films much of this work of unification is done for us, in advance. Noël Carroll calls this “critical prefocusing” (2008: 263–264). Affects and emotions are coordinated for particular purposes; that is, both the events shown and their manner of presentation are designed to elicit unified, or congruent affects and emotions. When toward the end of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) is being stalked by Jamie Gumb (Ted Levine) in his dark basement, the lighting, music, facial expressions, gestures, body movements, shot compositions, and camera movements work together in an attempt to increase suspense about the outcome of the deadly confrontation. It is only after Clarice shoots Gumb that the window breaks, allowing sunlight to stream into the basement, and revealing various souvenirs and combat paraphernalia that suggest Gumb’s past as a Vietnam Veteran. The revelation of such character information is reserved for a less dramatic moment, and could have gone unnoticed earlier, while Clarice’s life was in danger and the audience was in the thralls of suspense. After Gumb’s death, however, when he no longer poses a threat, the audience may contemplate his past, and perhaps see him humanized a bit. In this way not only affects, but affect and cognition work together, and there exist conventional rules of

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thumb about what sorts of affects mix, and what sorts of affects elicit types of cognitive activity.

Greg Smith (2003) has argued that the chief emotive effect of film is to create moods. Moods are overarching and long-lasting affects— affective organizing states—that prime the viewer for brief bursts of appropriate emotion. It is as though movies offer an experience that is cross-modally bound and affectively unified, as though movies mimic or approximate conscious experience. In part this is why observers as diverse as William James, Henri Bergson, V. F. Perkins, and Hugo Münsterberg have found movie experience to bear a strong resemblance to the stream of consciousness itself (Plantinga 2009a: 48). As author and neurologist Oliver Sacks writes, “the technical and conceptual devices of the cinema . . . rather closely mimic (and perhaps are designed to mimic) the streamings and veerings of consciousness” (2004: 41).

I call such an organizing state in the movies a “synesthetic affect,” drawing attention to the means by which filmmakers orchestrate congruent affects and emotions in an attempt to elicit a particular affect or mixture of congruent affects, for example feelings appropriate to shame and guilt in certain scenes in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* (Plantinga 2009a: 156–166). Synesthetic affect depends on what psychologists call “weak synesthesia,” the sort of cross-modal fittingness most people experience. In weak synesthesia certain sounds and shapes, for example, a soothing melody and a soft curving line, are thought to be fitting with each other. This fittingness is, in part, one of affective response. Thus Hitchcock may employ numerous features of a scene in such a way that they elicit affects associated with shame or guilt. Such a mixture of affective states might not elicit actual guilt or shame in the spectator, but it may well elicit a range of diverse affects that are fitting with, or appropriate to, experiences of guilt and shame.

For example, consider the scene in *Strangers on a Train* (1951) in which Bruno confronts Guy in front of Guy’s house. Bruno, thinking that he had a deal with Guy for the commission of reciprocal murders, has strangled Guy’s wife Miriam. Although Guy has committed no murder, he has good reason to want his wife out of the way, and thus he is easily made to feel guilt by association. Hitchcock uses many stylistic devices to suggest guilt and shared guilt. As Guy returns to his home late at night, we see him in two canted angles. On the soundtrack is the almost funereal tolling of church bells. Bruno calls to Guy out of the shadows across the street, and as Guy approaches him, the musical underscoring becomes eerie and discordant. Hitchcock frames the shots of Guy and Bruno to suggest, and perhaps to make spectator feel, unwanted intimacy, making use of proxemic patterns (patterns of relative distance between characters on the screen, and their accompanying affective reactions; Figure 1). After the police arrive, both men stand behind bars, lit low key, and together face the law. All of these techniques, and more that I did not

Figure 1. Guilty characters and synesthetic affect in *Strangers on a Train*.



mention, are designed to provide an affective experience for the viewer that is congruent with Guy's sense of vicarious guilt due to his association with the maniacal Bruno Antony. That Guy is literally innocent makes Hitchcock's ability to suggest guilt all the more impressive, and befits the "artist of anxiety," as Francois Truffaut called him (1967: 15).

### **Affective Counterpoint**

Yet not all affective experience in the movies is conventionally unified or congruent. What about instances in which a film's narration elicits *contradictory* or *unusual* emotions and affects? Are there limits to synesthetic affect and the spectator's tendency to unify experience? Are some filmic affects simply too disparate and clashing to be united, such that they interfere with each other? Here I do not have in mind the concept of cinematic excess, the idea that a film is a struggle of opposing forces that cannot be contained by narrative unity (Thompson 1986: 130). Excess, as the term is used in film theory, refers to that which in any film escapes the film's unifying project. Thus excess is in principle at work in all films, and not merely in films that incorporate counterpoint or contradictions intentionally. Neither do I mean to discuss irony, perhaps the most common form of affective counterpoint, both in meaning and effect. And I am not writing about the unintended ironies resulting from incompetence, in which, for example, the filmmakers intend to elicit awe and the sublime, but due to some perceived defect in the film instead draws guffaws of laughter from an incredulous audience.

What I examine in this article is the phenomenon in which the narration intentionally elicits mixed and seemingly contradictory emotions and affects

for some narrative purpose other than irony. When this occurs in a film, contradictory or mixed affective cues can at least arguably be thought to be motivated through a unity of theme, purpose, and incongruent affect. Aside from irony, perhaps the most recognized type of this kind of incongruity stems from what Michel Chion (1994) calls “anempathetic effects,” and especially anempathetic music. Anempathetic music seems indifferent to the events that occur on the screen, suggesting to the viewer a supremely indifferent universe. One example is the slow-paced, romantic music, wafting through the air from an unknown source, while a helpless Jefferies (James Stewart) watches his beloved Lisa (Grace Kelly) being assaulted by the murderer Thorwald (Raymond Burr) in *Rear Window* (1954). Chion writes that such indifferent music does not dampen emotion, but heightens it. (It may be the case that such anempathetic use of music, once unusual, has become somewhat conventional. Thus innovative mixtures of incongruent affects may in time become commonplace.) For my purposes, note that Chion rightly assumes that emotions and affects have cognitive and thematic implications—in this case the suggestion of an indifferent universe—and more than that, that these cognitive and thematic implications are developed not in some analytic propositional form, but through the affective experience that the scene offers.

### **Affective Counterpoint in *The Thin Red Line***

Chion (1994) points to one important use of film technique to create affective counterpoint, but I now focus on incongruous emotion and affect as they are employed in a single film—through content, structure, and style. Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998) is on one level about the battle between the Americans and Japanese at Guadalcanal in World War II. In some ways the film fits the genre of the war film, presenting many of the types of scenes one might expect. We see the American troops arriving by ship at Guadalcanal and approaching the beach in landing craft; officers discussing tactics and philosophy behind the lines; combat scenes that pit the Americans against the Japanese; the horrors of combat, with the pain and suffering it entails; subjective scenes in which soldiers think about their lovers back home; scenes of rest and relaxation, in which soldiers drink, joke, laugh, and read letters from loved ones.

It is a strange war film, however, because its thematic preoccupations go beyond the experience of the men, even beyond the nature and ethics of war itself, to broader philosophical questions, as though the battle scenes are mere facades behind which lurk mysterious and transcendent realms. Although the film features the voice-overs of many of the men, it concentrates on Witt (James Cavie-

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zel). In voice-over, Witt asks many questions that the film does not attempt to answer, at least not explicitly. Some of the questions are broad and vague. “What’s this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself, the land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature, not one power, [but] two?” “Darkness or light, strife or love, are they the working of one mind, the features of the same face?”

These and many other questions imply that wonder and rumination are at the heart of this film’s concerns. Yet the sense of wonder is bound within a framework of opposed views of the world and the place of humans within it. Malick juxtaposes the perspectives of two characters, Witt and Welsh (Sean Penn). In James Jones’ novel (of which the movie is an adaptation), Witt is, as Lloyd Michaels notes, “a bigoted eccentric” (66). In the film Witt is radically different, something of a transcendentalist or religious mystic, one who asks these broad metaphysical questions in the settings of gruesome and bloody battles, on the one hand, and the serene beauty of nature, on the other hand. Witt claims to suspect the existence of a transcendent world behind the ugly world of war and death and suffering, while Welsh sees the war as meaningless and insists that *this* visible, material world, with its purposeless brutality, is the only world there is. Over the shot of a dying bird, Witt voices the dominant opposition in the film: “One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there’s nothing but unanswered pain, that death’s got the final word; it’s laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird and feels the glory, feels something smiling through it” (Figure 2).

The range of diverse interpretations that the film has generated is stunning (Chion 2004; Davies 2009; Patterson 2003: 125–191) and demonstrates the film’s thematic opacity. That the film is at its heart interrogative or ruminative is not controversial, however. What I add here is not a fully articulated interpretation of *The Thin Red Line*, a project that deserves an essay unto itself,

Figure 2.  
“Unanswered pain”  
or “something  
smiling through it”?



but rather the contention that this film's essential ruminative nature, and its thematic questions, are functions of its structure and style as they impact on both cognition and feeling. Or perhaps it would be better to say that the meaning of this film, as in all films, is in part constituted by the affective experience it elicits. One key to understanding *The Thin Red Line* is to recognize that the affective experience it offers is unconventional, and in part one of incongruity or contradiction. In this it is most similar to another Malick film, *The New World* (2005), but also bears some similarity to Malick's first feature films, *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978).

*The Thin Red Line* develops a structure of feeling characterized by affective counterpoint or incongruence. This structure of feeling is designed to offer the spectator an experience of rumination and questioning, and to offer an experience of the differing ways one can think of the world in light of its exquisite beauty, on the one hand, and jarring violence and ugliness, on the other hand. Malick attempts to find ways to elicit both the feeling of "unanswered pain," and this mysterious "something smiling through it." By such incongruent affects, Malick encourages a ruminative and contemplative mode of film viewing.

*The Thin Red Line* minimizes the usual narrative emotions, such as suspense and anticipation, in favor of less forward-directed, less future-directed emotions that alternate between wonder at the beauties of nature and compassion for the men that find themselves in this predicament, and horror and disgust at the brutalities of war. To see one way in which the film downplays traditional narrative emotions, consider the early scene in which the soldiers land at the beaches of Guadalcanal, expecting to meet stiff enemy resistance and heavy casualties. Instead of a tense and bloody battle of the sort featured in the initial scene of Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), nothing happens, and the beach landing occurs without incident. The Japanese forces have already retreated to the hills deeper in the island's interior. Malick later grants us a more conventional battle scene, as the Americans ascend a grass-covered hill amid heavy fire and casualties, and advance on an enemy lodged in machine-gun bunkers. Yet the first landing scene, in its refusal of narrative conflict, signals that the traditional pleasures of suspense and narrative resolution may not occupy pride of place, and may have to make way for alternative experiences. And even the machine-gun bunker assault scene is punctuated by shots that function as brief pauses, and feature the beauties of nature (for example, a shot of the play of shadows and sun on the long grasses that cover the hill on which the assault occurs). Throughout the film the spectator is cued to experience emotions such as wonder and curiosity, and the activity of rumination that accompanies them.

Malick clears the way for rumination, then provides the viewer with contradictions of feeling to ruminate about. As Chion writes, *The Thin Red Line*

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“places diverse elements side by side, without seeking to answer the questions posed by their juxtaposition” (2004: 12). The first and most obvious way that Malick creates affective counterpoint is by juxtaposing images of war’s horrors with images highlighting the beauty and succor of nature. Sometimes great beauty and fear or horror are juxtaposed within the same shot or frame. We see the aftermath of battle, for example, in a scene featuring the wounded in their agony. But they are positioned in a long shot in a verdant glen by a river, a balanced and symmetrical composition in which the sunlight streams down through the mists rising from the water. We see a shot of a Japanese command post engulfed in flames while in the foreground a vase with carefully arranged flowers rests on a table. The infantry advances up a hill toward heavy gunfire, and a colorful Blue Morpho Butterfly flutters across the screen in the foreground.

Alternatively, Malick provides separate shots or shot sequences of unmitigated despair and darkness, and those of the beauties of nature. Malick gives us shots of soldiers suffering from fear and pain, a guilt-ridden soldier sitting beside a pile of skulls, a naked prisoner of war shivering before the smoldering remains of his camp, and dogs eating carrion. But Malick regularly and consistently returns to compositions that suggest the beauty and majesty of nature—of sunsets and sunrises, rivers sparkling in the sunlight and clean, rushing water, a close-up of a soldier’s hand as he carefully cradles the leaf of a plant.

Spectators tend to associate directionality with affective valence. Thus throughout the film Malick associates low angles and upward rising with sunlight, clarity, and beauty, while high angles and downward movement are associated with mud, broken bodies, death, and suffering. For example, Malick gives us a high angle shot of a soldier suffering or dying, writhing in the arms of his comrades. He looks upward, and we cut to a point of view shot from his perspective, a low angle shot of sunlight shining through the jungle canopy (Figures 3 and 4). Such low angle shots are not always point-of-view shots, but Malick nonetheless repeatedly returns to low angle shots featuring the sun’s rays beaming through the jungle canopy. One such shot immediately follows Witt’s death later in the film.

Of course, among Malick’s trademarks are his much-discussed shots of various animals, seemingly indifferent to the human dramas around them. These appear in each of Malick’s feature films. In *Badlands*, those who watch closely will notice a llama peering through the trees at Kit and Holly’s forest hideaway. *Days of Heaven* features numerous shots of the fauna living on the wheat farm that is the setting for the film’s action. In *The New World*, Malick often focuses on a nature unspoiled by industrialization, and especially on shots of birds and the sounds of birdcalls. Similarly, in *The Thin Red Line*, we see shots, for example of parrots, a lemur, a bat, a crocodile, and an owl. Such

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Figures 3 and 4. Pain and mud below, sunlight and clarity above.

shots typically appear during breaks from the most intense action. They are rare in other war films precisely because they do not seem to fit the genre. The fascination or interest with animals and nature hardly contributes to the suspense of war or the alarm and compassion caused by the witness of suffering.

It would be easy to dismiss these nature shots as evidence of naive romanticism; this would be a mistake. Not all of these nature shots are suggestive of beauty and peacefulness. In one of the film's initial scenes we see a crocodile partially submerged in murky, slimy water, suggesting decay and predation. And of course, the shot of the dying bird invites thoughts of suffering and death. Such shots have both affective and cognitive effects. Moreover, because the nature shots do not fit affectively, either with each other or with the war genre, they invite speculation about their meaning. This contributes to the interrogative mode in which I have claimed *The Thin Red Line* operates.

We come next to Witt, the character who in many ways is the locus of this film, the individual whose subjectivity and vision is elevated above all others, even Welsh. Witt is often seen observing the carnage around him from a low

angle that removes him spatially from what goes on, and suggests that he witnesses the world from another level of reality. Witt's perspective is thus elevated above the others and granted privilege, both literally and figuratively. For example, Witt is framed from a low angle, against a background of blue sky and puffy clouds (Figure 5), as he looks down on the carnage of wounded soldiers in agony below him (Figure 6).

Malick also understands the importance of facial expressions, and consistently juxtaposes the faces of frightened or suffering soldiers with the face of Witt, which shows compassion, sometimes wonder, but usually an uncanny calm that understandably eludes the soldiers in the midst of the carnage of war. The close-ups and medium shots of Witt's face linger over his visage, and suggest calm acceptance and deep compassion. (Perhaps this quality of actor James Caviezel's face is what led Mel Gibson to cast him as Jesus in the 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*.)

*Figures 5 and 6: Witt, framed against blue sky, observes the suffering below.*



All of what I have just mentioned are ways in which Malick cues contradictory affective responses to the experience of the war. He sometimes juxtaposes scenes of great beauty next to those of horror and death, and sometimes through Witt, who is granted privileged or special insight in the manner in which he sees and responds to the war differently from Welsh and the other soldiers. This repetition of stylistic devices that juxtapose contradictory affects and perspectives preserves the film's essential interrogative mode, that is, it contributes to the question-asking and ambiguity that lie at the heart of the film and that is initially generated by the voice-over questions. Ambiguity of thought is generated by ambiguity of feeling, itself elicited by images that combine conventionally contradictory affective associations, or images juxtaposed in counterpoint. But in this ambiguity, the film suggests through its presentation of Witt that he sees something in the world that the other soldiers miss.

All of this prepares us for Witt's death as well, as the scene in which Witt is shot not only portrays the event in an affectively surprising way, but also repeats the visual motifs that the film has developed so far. Witt is confronted by a platoon of Japanese soldiers who point their rifles at him and demand that he surrender. Witt seems to contemplate the situation for a few moments, as though deciding how to respond. We notice a repetition of the facial expressions that we have seen in Witt previously, his cool resignation in the face of violence and death—this time his own—and his seeming lack of hatred or anger in the presence of the enemy. Suddenly and inexplicably, Witt lunges toward the Japanese soldier, an invitation to death, and Witt is shot dead. Immediately following Witt's shooting we cut to a familiar low angle shot of the sun streaming through the jungle canopy, suggesting something metaphorically bright and shining in the midst of death. We also hear on the soundtrack peaceful music, suggesting repose and rest.

Through Witt's privileged perspective the film seems to throw its weight behind his search for, and perhaps intimations of, some transcendent realm, something shining through the darkness. Yet the effects of the film's prominent display of suffering, ugliness, violence, and degradation are not erased by Witt's privileged vision, but rather merely complicated by it.

What are the contradictory affects elicited by this film? On the one hand are the responses to images and scenarios of death, suffering, and moral baseness. Soldiers, native peoples, and a small bird are seen in various states of injury, illness, and dying, and Malick focuses on their suffering and on the ugliness of the spectacle. Viewers may feel what psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his associates (1997) call "animal reminder" disgust in relation to the images of torn and diseased bodies and of corpses.

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The images and events may also elicit fear, sadness, upset, and associated affects of a similar valence. Images of beautiful nature, Witt's serene face, and sunlight streaming through palm fronds suggest affects of a markedly different valence, however. And it is these differently valenced, affect-laden representations, together with the questions of Witt and other characters' voice-over narration, that may initiate rumination and wonder.

Certain film genres are designed to elicit mixed emotions and affects, such as fear and disgust in the cases of the horror film, and pity and admiration in the case of the melodrama (Carroll 1999). One might search for a similar kind of generic mix in *The Thin Red Line*. In other words, can these mixed affects be explained by an appeal to the conventions of genre? I have difficulty seeing how this could be the case. If it is a genre film, *The Thin Red Line* would best be thought of as a war film. War films do often foreground the human suffering and death that are inevitable elements of war, as does *The Thin Red Line*. War films may also mix humor with negative emotions, sometimes becoming a form of black humor. *The Thin Red Line* incorporates other elements common to recent war films as well. Where the World War II combat film tended to posit certainties about the rightness and meaningfulness of war, in post-Vietnam films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), as Dana Polan (2005) writes, unity most often comes undone, the Vietnam experience having led to a "legacy of confusion." *The Thin Red Line* exhibits similar ambiguous perspectives on war.

Yet *The Thin Red Line* does something different from any other war film I know. It mixes affects that typically are not elicited together. Neither the images of "beautiful" or "conflicted" nature, nor Witt's metaphysical ruminations are generically motivated. Although *The Thin Red Line* does share elements of content, style, and structure with other films of the war genre, it also offers unique elements that are better thought of as expressions of an auteur, albeit one constrained by certain generic conventions (Polan 2005). Given this, it is not surprising that the film that offers the closest affective experience of rumination or wonder is another Malick film, *The New World*. There we also find opaque thematic ambiguities and similar incongruities and contradictions. *The New World* features audio-visual celebrations of nature, as, for instance, Pocahontas and Captain John Smith celebrate their love in elegiac scenes finding them interacting, almost dancelike, in the natural surroundings of the unspoiled continent. Yet nature is not presented merely romantically, as an Edenic garden. As in *The Thin Red Line*, nature can be cruel, as we see the would-be colonists starving during a hard winter, or in Pocahontas's death by smallpox at the end of the film. The latter is seemingly a cruel injustice, and through it Malick withholds from the spectator some of the traditional narrative rewards that might be expected. Yet like Witt's death, Pocahontas's death leaves only questions, and little attempt is made to make

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sense of it. Like *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World* is thematically complex and ambiguous, with similar ruminative voice-overs to those found in the earlier film.

If some of the oddities of *The Thin Red Line* cannot reasonably be attributed to generic motivation, one might look to common affective states outside of any particular genre, such as the experience of sublimity, for example. Is Malick attempting to elicit feelings of the sublime in audiences? Sublimity, with its recognition of immense power or vast distances, seems to hold within it not only awe, but something like fear. Could this be the affective state Malick attempts to elicit? If we take sublimity to be awe at the vastness or strength of nature, this does not seem to be what Malick is getting at in *The Thin Red Line*. We see no images of the vastness of the universe, usually represented with shots of oceanic vistas or the infinitude of stars at night, as we see in various scenes of the blockbuster *Titanic* (1997). For example, the scene in which “Old Rose,” late one night, drops the invaluable “Heart of the Ocean” jewel into the ocean to memorialize the life of her former lover, Jack (Plantinga 2009b: 252–253). In that scene, director James Cameron sets Rose’s solitary nighttime ritual against the backdrop of stars and the seemingly limitless ocean. Rather than inspiring such awe in nature, Malick gives a more intimate view, providing an extreme close-up of a leaf, a shot of the play of shadows and sunlight on the waving grass of a hill, and the colorful plumage of two parrots perched on a branch. Furthermore, Malick also shows the ugliness of nature, as in his shot of dogs eating carrion and of a dying bird.

It would obviously not be correct to say that each discrete affective experience Malick offers is new and unconventional. Rather, it is the peculiar mixture of affective cues that seem new. There are no conventional categories under which we can subsume the complex brew of affective experiences Malick aims to generate in his film. This is in part what makes the film intriguing, and what makes its stance ruminative or interrogative. The films that come closest to generating similar affective counterpoint are Malick’s other films.

### **Common Experiences and Diverse Audiences**

Some might object that my interpretation of the use of affective imagery in *The Thin Red Line* depends on generalized and unwarranted claims about how people respond to imagery. How can I assume that all spectators will respond in the way that I claim? My answer would be that I make no such assumption. Films are designed to cue similar affects in spectators, but there is no guarantee of success. I do suspect a certain degree of inter-subjective correlation of responses, that is, that many spectators will respond in similar ways. I am assuming, for example, that in the context of *The Thin Red Line*, low angle shots of the sun streaming through the foliage will tend to have a more positive affective impact than high angle shots of wounded soldiers writhing in agony in the mud. I also assume that close-ups of Witt’s face, with his looks of com-

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passion, will affect spectators differently from the looks of suffering and fear on the faces of other soldiers.

These are assumptions rooted in the commonplace conventions of folk psychology, our intuitive sense of how people respond to images, sounds, events, and people. I would point out that these shared assumptions about folk psychology are precisely what filmmakers appeal to in the filmmaking process, and are the assumptions they draw on when making creative choices having to do with the psychological impact of various techniques. Although folk psychological assumptions are sometimes wrong, in the work of astute filmmakers and film critics, they also are often right; we rely on them every day in gauging the intentions and feelings of other people, and to gauge how our behavior, or our art, will affect others. Alfred Hitchcock claims that he enjoyed playing audiences “like an organ,” implying that he was able to push the right keys to elicit certain responses. Hitchcock was not a professional psychologist; he was a folk psychologist, and a very good one. He utilized the tools of intuitive folk psychology and was skilled and accurate in his capacity to predict how audiences would respond to his films and their techniques.

Some assumptions about an inability to predict how audiences will respond stem from outdated assumptions about the nature of emotion, as though emotions were wholly subjective and idiosyncratic, rather than structured states with particular eliciting conditions and associated action tendencies. If emotions were as subjective as some think, it would be impossible for filmmakers to do their work. Yet just as filmmakers may fail in their estimations of probable audience response, film criticism and analysis that gauges intended affect must itself be interpretive and provisional. It cannot itself be a science.

Still interpretation can be aided by science. There is no reason why the intuitions we derive from folk psychology, so important in our interpretations of films, cannot be strengthened or amended by scientific and social scientific research, to which many quarters of film and media studies have been so far quite resistant. Our folk psychological assumptions, while useful, can be confirmed or disconfirmed, corrected or supplemented, by psychology and neuroscience, for example. Reactions to the human face as represented on film can be understood better with knowledge of emotional contagion, mimicry, and facial feedback (Plantinga 1999). The physiological effects of music can also increase our understanding of the functions of music in film. Audio entrainment, for example, is the effect whereby human physiology itself is temporarily altered by various kinds of musical rhythm (Plantinga 2009a: 147). There is a sense in which we experience what we see and hear, that seeing and hearing implicate the other senses. If this is so, then a deeper knowledge of the senses, of emotion, of neuroscience, and of cognitive processing will shed light on the nature of audio-vision.

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We need to understand the audio-visual experience as a holistic experience, not merely cognitive or affective or sensual, but all three—and even this description is reductive. Criticism and analysis, likewise, must recognize that film viewing is more than the deciphering of meaning. It is not merely information processing. And we do not read films but rather experience them. Cinema works on us through diverse registers, and the more we can learn about the complex processes involved, the better our criticism will become, and our understanding of spectatorship and its implications will increase. So far much of the film theoretical attention to emotion has been paid to congruent affects in film, and of course this is appropriate. It is just as important for scholars to continue to examine the range of mixed emotions and affects. Some films, like *The Thin Red Line*, escape generic and other conventional categories at least in some respects, and mix incongruent affects in unique and imaginative ways. By examining *The Thin Red Line*, we can see how a visionary filmmaker provides a discordant, compelling, and imaginative emotional and cognitive experience.

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