

It's What We Do Best:  
Essays on War Films by Godard, Malick,  
and Carpenter



TOM WHALEN

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## The Poetry of Negation: Godard's *Les Carabiniers*

The world of *Les Carabiniers* (1963) is not an easy one to enter. A travelling camera enters a darkened tunnel, whose opening and exit are both in the rectangular shape of the movie screen; just before we are about to leave the tunnel, we jump cut to another tunnel, and just before we exit this one we jump cut to a third, and just before we exit this one we jump cut to a fourth, and just before we exit this one we cut to the cold, bleak outskirts of the city where the film's main characters (Ulysse, Michel-Ange, Cleopatra, and Venus) live. At the end of the tunnel's negative space *Les Carabiniers* is projected.

War is, of course, the ultimate negation—of our life, our humanity. Godard's "objectivity" can parallel a shot of a mannequin on the ground having her hair cut for being a "collaborator" with that of Venus having hers cut for the same reason. Both the mannequin and Venus are, at bottom, images designed and controlled by the powers-that-be and both, in the universe of this film, are of equal value, equal

“reality.” Definition allows for individuality and emotion, neither of which is permissible here; there is a dominance of long shots and a shallow depth of field which keeps the images two-dimensional, undefined. The characters show excitement when they think they are going to be rewarded and look despondent or pouty when they think they aren’t. But no emotion is ever shown when a death occurs. Michel-Ange chews the stem of a plant as he repeats affectlessly “encore” again and again while a young woman is being shot.

The universe of *Les Carabiniers* is one drained of emotion and morality. Our four characters—Ulysse and Michel-Ange, who go off to war, and Cleopatra and Venus, the women who wait at home—are really no more than amoral children. The landscape is a wasteland without depth, colorless. “I tried to film war objectively, without passion; with neither fear nor heroism, courage nor cowardice,” Godard has said (Roud 42). It is as if Godard took every war movie ever made and sucked out all their “humanity,” their glorification and sentimentality. It’s the war film we would see, were such a thing possible, after it had come out the other side of a black hole—the absolute negation of the war movie.

It is a world, too, that embodies all wars, all history, that shows us “what all wars are and have been, from the barbarian invasions up to Korea or Algeria [...] always, however, showing the tediously similar faces of war” (Godard 197). But if the faces of war are all the same, then in one sense we have no

history. The handwritten title inserts, ostensibly excerpts from letters home, are in fact taken from actual soldiers' letters. By using documents not from one war, but from several ("letters by soldiers encircled at Stalingrad, from a hussar of Napoleon during the Spanish campaign, and especially from Himmler's memos to his various combat groups" [Godard 199]), Godard again emphasizes the generic nature of war.

In three instances of doubling, Godard negates time itself. We see in long shot a soldier ask a young woman he has captured, "Qui êtes vous?" and then lift off her cap. Then we hear the same question and see the cap lifted off again, this time in closeup. Ulysse, later in the film, has a medal pinned on his jacket; this, too, is shown in long shot and repeated in closeup. And finally the rifleman, who recruits Ulysse and Michel-Ange in the beginning, twice (long shot/closeup) says, "Je vais vous expliquer" to them before he explains why they can't receive their reward from the king. "Two shots which follow one another do not necessarily follow one another," Godard has remarked (Godard 215). What occurs in long shot can be repeated, with or without variation, in closeup, because film time, as we know, is not real time, and because time in *Les Carabiniers* is war time, negated time.

Nor are the characters themselves, despite their names, conscious of time. When we avert our gaze from history, as the characters do in *Les Carabiniers*, there can only be a continuous present, a perpetual ignorance. The title insert

that appears after Michel-Ange photographs the Sphinx and pyramids reads: "From the base of these pyramids, we looked at forty centuries of History contemplating us." The next shot is of Cleopatra combing her hair before a handheld mirror and Venus looking at the card. Both Venus and Cleopatra face right, the same direction as the Sphinx in the previous shot. The women then exchange mirror and card, so that where the mirror was, is now the photograph of the Sphinx. This time, though, the photograph is turned toward the camera; the Sphinx, forty centuries of history, is now contemplating *us*.

Overuse of irony would give a frisson, an inappropriate "life" to this world. Often when it is used, it simply emphasizes the affectlessness, as in this excerpt from a letter sent home in which the two sentences cancel one another out: "We leave traces of blood and corpses behind us. We kiss you tenderly." Many of the other title inserts negate their imagery with their matter-of-factness. "Sometimes we force people to lie on the bodies of those who just preceded them, and we shoot them in this position." "We pull rings off women's fingers and we make people undress before shooting them, stark naked, at the edge of an anti-tank ditch." "Always the same words: corpses, rot, decay, death, etc."

"War isn't funny," Ulysse tells the recruiter. "Au contraire," *le carabinier* replies, and faintly smiles. The rifleman is shot in closeup as he says this, so that we see the

two white crosses [+ +] on his cap and two white x's [x x] on each side of his jacket collar. A fifth x or cross is formed by the barrel of his gun and a shelf behind him [+].

The frequency and variety of this visual motif underpins the theme of negation in *Les Carabiniers*. In one of the examples from the documentary footage Godard inserts, we see missiles shooting diagonally from right to left, then cut to the missiles shooting from left to right. The unseen C formed from A and B is an implied X. Several times in the film, Venus goes to the mailbox which stands foregrounded on a pole. In the middle distance to the left is a metal tower of x's and in the background to the right is a construction girder also formed by x's. Michel-Ange's body itself is shown as an X. After he has received his medal, he stands alone in front of their ramshackle house and leaps in the air. As he does, he splays both his arms and legs [X]. And when he goes to the movies for the first time ("Yesterday we captured the tower of Santa-Cruz. Girls threw flowers. That night, I went for the first time to the movies") and sees the Lumière-like train coming into the station, he crosses his arms over his face, x-ing himself out.

These x's are not to be confused with Godard's call for a return to zero in such films as *La Chinoise* (1967), *Weekend* (1967), or *Le Gai savoir* (1968). X in *Les Carabiniers* does not create a place from which we can begin again. It is not a cleansing of the soul; it's the absence of soul. States do not

start wars to protect liberties; none of the soldiers are fighting for ideals. A documentary still shows us a mutilated body laid diagonally from top left to bottom right [ \ ]. The next shot is another documentary still of an even more mutilated corpse in the opposite diagonal [ / ]. X imprints its negativity on every frame of *Les Carabiniers*. It represents not so much an absence as an act of destruction. It explodes, obliterates. X cancels out everything.

The only positive force in *Les Carabiniers* is Godard's cinematic eloquence in presenting his ideas and imagery. Consider, for example, the following two consecutive shots:

A. Michel-Ange and Ulysse step out of their jeep; Ulysse exits frame right. On the street behind them a truck passes from left to right, then a car from right to left [X]. The camera tracks *right* with Michel-Ange who comes up on Ulysse's *right*. The camera continues its movement, this time in a pan, and moves past Ulysse's arm which is outstretched and pointing toward the gray cityscape that now fills the screen.

B. The same setting. Michel-Ange appears this time on Ulysse's *left* and the camera pans *left* past Ulysse's outstretched and pointing arm to reveal a gray cityscape. In the right foreground is a metal girder with its vertical row of X's rising to the top of the frame.

The gesture is subtle and, on first viewing, perhaps only subliminally perceived, but the denotative and connotative X's produced by the conjunction of camera movements, line dynamics, and character placements in these two shots are oddly, surprisingly transcendent, as if Godard's romanticism, his love of cinema, had suddenly risen from the ashes of his film's world.

All awareness of such privileged moments is denied Michel-Ange and Ulysse. Michel-Ange, before his impending rape of a woman is interrupted by approaching gunfire, stands before a print of a Rembrandt self-portrait, salutes it, and says, "A soldier salutes an artist." But any understanding or appreciation is lacking, just as it is lacking for Ulysse who, in the same house, looks uncomprehendingly at a print of Madonna and child. (The woman whom they are threatening also has a child.) Ulysse and Michel-Ange believe in transcendence only *after* death. The last handwritten sentence, obviously not an excerpt from one of their letters since they have both been shot, reads: "Thereupon the two brothers went to sleep for eternity, believing that the brain, in decay, functions above and beyond death, and that its dreams are what make up Heaven."

The X motif of negation is all around and on them, but they never see it. They ask men beside a truck if they know where the riflemen are, but do not notice that one of the men is painting a black cross on the truck to replace the white



cross, the emblem of the king's army. Nor do they notice that the rifleman, who is about to show them a "secret," that is, who is about to kill them, has replaced the white crosses on his uniform with black ones.

But despite the naiveté of these characters, their inability to understand their world, to distinguish the signifier from the signified, Godard never treats them as objects of fun. Venus smiling with the magazine ad for a bra (*Rosy a la secret des formes*) covering her torso and the childishly smiling Michel-Ange holding an underwear ad over his crotch are sorrowful figures. When Michel-Ange, Venus, and Cleopatra each look in turn at a photo of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and tilt their heads, we do not laugh. There is nothing funny, finally, about the sign's power of manipulation, nothing funny in observing a self's lack of autonomy.

From the criticism of Kawin and Monaco, we know *Les Carabiniers* to be a Brechtian *Lehrstück* whose lesson can be reduced to "The more the audience loses itself in the screen-as-dream-world, the more likely it is [...] to be seduced by directorially manipulated illusions; the more one remains aware of the director, of the theatricality of the image and of the film as sign-system, the more likely one is to be edified and instructed" (Kawin 158); or "If we know the difference between an image of a woman and a woman who lives and breathes we are less likely to kill the latter" (Monaco 133)." And indeed, with its set pieces, its little *Lehrstücke*, of Michel-

Ange trying to enter a movie screen wherein a woman is bathing, or Venus placing an ad for bras over her chest, or the long sequence showing picture postcards brought back from the war that are regarded by the film's principal characters as title deeds they can redeem for real objects, *Les Carabiniers* serves as a statement and warning about the relationship of self to sign.

Yet something else remains on the viewer's "field of consciousness" (Bazin's phrase) besides Godard's filmic essay in semiology. David Bordwell's attempt to release Godard criticism from the strictures of semiotics ("These films suggest much but prove nothing") leads him into a restrictive reading of seeing all of Godard's characteristic techniques as serving only to "assert the cineaste's presence" (Bordwell 313, 327). "In Godard's films, the [jump cut] signals one thing unequivocally: the intervention of the filmmaker at the editing stage" (Bordwell 328). But again, something else remains and overrides our awareness of "the cineaste's presence": the emotion of sadness, for one thing, in *Vivre sa vie* (1962), *Les Carabiniers*, *Le Mépris* (1963), *Alphaville* (1965), *Masculin féminin* (1966), *Sauve qui peut* (1979), which, at least for this viewer, impresses more than these films' flagrant artifice. For beyond (or beneath) Godard's classicism, his semiology, and self-consciousness, lie the bleakness and poetry of a romantic.

We can be grateful that Godard did not entirely succeed in filming war "objectively, without passion; with neither fear

nor heroism, courage nor cowardice. As Franju filmed the abattoirs in *Le Sang des bêtes* [1949], but even without his closeups, because a closeup is automatically emotional in its effect” (qtd. in Roud 42). The prisoner whose hat was removed twice and was asked “Qui êtes vous?” remains anonymous in long shot, but in closeup we see her face, her blonde hair, the expression in her eyes. In closeup she becomes individuated, and the voice that asks “Qui êtes vous?” is quieter, subdued, made personal. “Qui êtes vous?”

The notion of Godard as a romantic may be, as Bordwell notes, a cliché (Bordwell 311).<sup>1</sup> But the question remains how it is that such an analytical film as *Les Carabiniers*, Godard’s “coldest film,” the one most “strictly organized around its logic,” can still affect us in ways rarely discussed in criticism (Monaco 131). “The power or virtue of the created image depends on the nature of its connections,” Godard’s voiceover says in *King Lear* (1987), “for what is great is not the image but the emotions it creates” (Robinson 24). Godard’s images and the emotions they produce, the poetry of his negations—these are what give substance to his lessons on war.

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<sup>1</sup> Bordwell’s chapter “Godard and Narration,” it needs to be said, concentrates on and is an excellent study of the narrative strategies and modes in Godard’s films.

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“Maybe All Men Got One Big Soul”:  
The Hoax Within the Metaphysics of  
Terrence Malick’s  
*The Thin Red Line*

“Art, Bell decided, creative art—was shit.”  
—James Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (214)

What went wrong? How could the director of *Badlands* (1973), one of the most moving and intelligent works of film in the early seventies, become in the late nineties the purveyor of the maudlin metaphysics that saturates to bursting *The Thin Red Line* (1998)? Of all the questions that arise from Malick’s ambitious, problematic war film this is the one that troubles me the most. War not only brings out the worst in man, but also, it seems in this case (though not in Fuller’s *Fixed Bayonets* [1951] or Peckinpah’s *Cross of Iron* [1977]), the worst in an artist. How did it happen? How did a film so long in gestation, so serious in intent become the worthy successor of Lewis Milestone’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) rather than, say, Godard’s *Les Carabiniers*

(1963)? I certainly won't propose a psychological or even socio-cultural explanation, but by comparing Malick's *The Thin Red Line* to *Badlands* and to Malick's source text James Jones's 1962 novel and by examining several of Malick's questionable aesthetic decisions, I hope to expose the film's inexcusable descent into the sentimental.

One difference between the 1973 Malick and the 1998 one can be found in *Badlands's* singular instance of directorial self-inscription. During the interlude when Kit (Martin Sheen) and Holly (Sissy Spacek), on the run after a series of murders, are staying at a rich man's house, Kit answers the doorbell to find a man in a white hat and suit with what appears to be architectural or engineering plans rolled up under his arm. Our visitor is played by the director Terrence Malick who, before Kit turns him away, reaches in his pocket for a notebook and pen. "What's that?" Kit asks. "Well I'd," Malick says, "I'd like to leave a message, if that's O.K." "Sure," Kit says and takes the piece of paper. "You'll have to excuse me now. I have to go back inside. Bye." But after Sheen closes the door on his befuddled director, he drops the message into a large standing urn. The point seems clear enough: if the director as actor wants to leave a message, the director as artist is smart enough not to reveal it.

In *The Thin Red Line* Malick upturns the urn and out comes, mostly by means of voiceover, more messages per square frame than a televised church service: "What's this war

in the heart of nature?" "Who are you to live in all these many forms?" "You, too, are the source of all that's going to be born." "You give calm a spirit." "Maybe all men got one big soul." "This great evil, where did it come from?" "Does our ruin benefit the earth? Is this darkness in you, too? Have you passed into this night?" "How did we lose the good that was given us?" "What keeps us from reaching out and touching the glory?" "Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made. All things shining."<sup>2</sup> Surely this can't be the voiceover for a war film. Surely this must be the voiceover for a New Age promo. And most surely, there is, unlike in *Badlands*, with its constant contrasting of image and word, no irony anywhere in Malick's metaphysical gas.<sup>3</sup>

One can say, however, that *The Thin Red Line* is not a war film, but a meditation on the relationship of man to nature. But how does Malick present nature to us? Mostly in ponderous montage sequences—giant trees, entwined limbs, light on leaves—whose images shout: "Look at Me, look at Me. I am a Symbol of the Power and the Glory and the Mystery. Within Me is you and you are within Me. I am All That Ever Was and All That Ever Will Be. I am your Destiny, your

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<sup>2</sup>The dialogue in the film derives from the novel; the voiceover belongs to Malick.

<sup>3</sup>The absence of ironic distancing is also what felled Malick's second film *Days of Heaven* (1978).

Grace. I, too, am separated from Myself. I, too, am at war with Life and Death and the Ineffable Beyond. Ponder me and you will enter the Waters of Paradise and swim underwater with Native Boys.” But in that last sentence, I’ve leaped ahead to the film’s end and the death and afterlife of our principal ponderer, an AWOL-prone soldier named Witt (Jim Caviezel).

Not surprisingly, nature isn’t much on the minds of James Jones’s soldiers. It’s true that two of the hills they must capture are given names that suggest man’s desire to control nature (The Dancing Elephant and The Giant Boiled Shrimp), but rarely does Jones mention nature. (Nor, unlike in Malick’s film, are there any native islanders in the novel.) Rather than taking time to admire the fall of water off elephant ear plants, Jones’s soldiers “could not even remember how many hills they had captured and passed. Everything ran together in one long stumbling breathless rush of green leaves and ropy lianas interspersed with blazing sunshine on bare knobs and dusty-smelling masses of kunai grass. Somewhere in the midst of this a night passed” (390).

Malick, in the voiceover of Witt, asks “Why does nature vie with itself?” But the nature we see in the film is more paradisaical than warring. The men fight, but nature stays implacable, mysterious, grand. It’s as if Malick wants us to reconsider or approach ingenuously the questions behind the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall, but this time to look for the



source of our ruin in nature rather than man. Is there a force “mocking” man’s puny epistemological stance? “Who’s doing this?” “What seed” produced “this great evil” (war, death, decay) and “how did it steal into the world?” I admire Malick’s wanting to confront these questions and do not doubt his sincerity and seriousness. The problem is in the puerility of his response and the falseness of his execution.

“What keeps us from reaching out and touching the glory?” wonders Witt. Well, in the narrative context the answer might be that we’d get a finger shot off. (When my father had the middle finger of his right hand shot off, I don’t think it was glory he was reaching after.) Malick’s lack of irony does not allow for a reflection like Mishima’s at the end of *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*: “Glory, as anyone knows, is bitter stuff” (144). The only mention of glory I recall from Jones’s novel is when Fife<sup>4</sup> gets in a fight with Weld: “It was as though a sudden scrambled lightning bolt of happy maleness and joyous masculinity had split Fife’s skull, blinding him with glory” (415). There may be a war going on and bodies are blown to pieces and soldiers hold their guts in their hands (though the film is never as graphic as Jones’s novel on this score); nonetheless, for Malick’s Witt Guadalcanal is a place for metaphysical rumination—a Zen

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<sup>4</sup>According to George Garrett, “the young clerk, Corporal Geoffrey Fife, seems to be, among other things, a stand-in for James Jones” (136-37).

monastery, say, with fireworks and tropical flora and fauna.

Malick's Witt is not Jones's. I'm not one to expect or even think possible that a film be faithful to its source, but what Malick has done to Jones's characters in order to "spiritualize" his material is representative of the film's aesthetic mistakes. We first see Malick's Witt with his shirt off wandering amongst the natives, playing with the children, swimming in the ocean, and always with an expression of teary-eyed bemusement at the wonder, the *glory* of the universe. This is how he looks throughout the film, except when he is empathizing with the pain of others; then his look is one of teary-eyed empathy at the misery amidst the wonder, the *glory* of the universe. It's as if Rock Hudson's Dr. Bob Merrick stepped off the set of *Magnificent Obsession* (1954) into *The Thin Red Line* with all his unctuousness and saintliness still intact. In contrast, here's Jones's description of Witt:

Witt came up the road alone, a solitary figure, humping along under his combat pack with slung rifle and bandoliers, thin and frail looking, his peanut head sunk deep into his helmet shell, Witt the Kentuckian, Witt who hated niggers because they all wanted to vote. Even if one told him he didn't want to vote, Witt would not believe him. He would simply have to be lying. From beneath the shell, in shadow, his hard implacable eyes peered out like the eyes of some ferretlike animal. (388)

Jones's Witt does not, of course, sacrifice himself by leading a platoon of Japanese soldiers away from his platoon, nor is he given an afterlife voice or an underwater heaven swimming with native boys. Imagine Jones's racist peanut head speaking these lines which end Malick's film: "Oh my soul, let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining." Whatever Malick may believe, Jones's "hard, unflinching truth telling" (Garrett, 136) has no place for such pretenses.

Not that the other characters in the film don't suffer a like violation. Welsh (Sean Penn) resembles Jones's "Mad" Welsh mostly in name. Bell (Ben Chaplin) in both book and film longs for his wife (Malick tosses images by the handful of her beautiful, pure, speechless, Hollywood form to the audience), but Jones's Bell (see this essay's epigraph) would never think: "We flow together like water till I can't tell you from me. I drink you. Now. Now." And Charlie Dale, who in the film throws away in disgust the bag of gold teeth he'd extracted from the mouths of the Japanese, at the end of the book is promoted to 1st Platoon Leader and "now had one whole quart mason jar full of gold teeth" (429). Only Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) and Captain Staros (Elias Koteas) resemble their sources, though Malick manages if not to sentimentalize these characters at least to simplify them. I'm not sure what to make of Malick's changing Jewish Captain Stein to Greek Captain Staros, except that it allows Tall and Staros to quote

Homer in Greek. Perhaps, too, it has something to do with Malick's philosophy background?

"You're some individual, Kit," says the trooper seated next to the mass murderer on the plane that is taking him to prison and his death. "Do you think they'll take that into consideration?" Kit asks. The characters of *Badlands* are never simplified or sentimentalized. Nor are the images. When we see a llama in the woods of Nebraska, we're as surprised as Holly. When we're given a montage, the effect is to enhance the film's poetry and mystery.

*Badlands* denies message and morality. In its use of receding planes and "sad verticals," in a voiceover that often opposes the visual image, in its refusal to let the sign become symbol, *Badlands* ripples with dialectical energy. His amoral, deadpan absurdism comes closer to what Robert Walser called the "true truths" (105) than the straightforward *sincere* images of *The Thin Red Line*—baby birds dying from war injuries, the crocodile that slides freely into the water at the film's beginning by the end roped and poked by the soldiers.

A visual intelligence operates throughout *Badlands* absent in *The Thin Red Line*. Let us examine for a moment a scene from *Badlands* that most viewers, I suspect, find unremarkable. At the airport, Kit, in chains, is given enough "slack" to talk to Holly alone against a car. In this sequence, we see behind Kit the faded sign "Empire Aviation" and barred windows. Behind Holly the runway opens to the

horizon and a blue sky with white clouds, but there are also soldiers running in step toward and into, on the two-dimensional plane, her head. “Don’t worry now. I’m going to get you off these charges,” Kit says. “There’s a whole lot of other boys out there waiting for you. You’re going to have a lot of fun.” Cut back to Holly, and the soldiers have vanished, that is they have, on the two-dimensional plane, entered but never exited her head. Then a few shots later, back to Kit: “Of course, it’s too bad about your dad [whom Kit murdered earlier in the film].” Cut to a low angle two-shot that reveals a different sky than what we’ve just seen, a sky suddenly, surprisingly filled with dark clouds.

This low angle shot echoes one of Holly’s father (Warren Oates) earlier in the film as he stands on the platform of a billboard he’s painting (a billboard that contains, besides clouds in the sky, several of the film’s visual motifs) as well as a more recent shot of Kit on the hood of a car with clouds in the sky the moment before he’s about to let himself be caught. Kit has just stacked stones as a means, one among many in the film, to inscribe himself on the universe. “Right there’s where you caught me,” he tells the troopers when they arrive.

Three low angle shots: father on billboard, Kit on car, Kit and Holly with dark clouds above them. It’s connections such as these that make *Badlands*, after almost three decades, a constant source of revelation.

*The Thin Red Line* offers little in comparison. Witt tells

Welsh that he still sees some “spark” in him, and we cut to Welsh walking across a darkened landscape, then see the “spark” of his inhaled cigarette. If this is an example of cinematic intelligence, it’s not much of one.

Shot by shot, shot patterns, motifs of inscription, of being “neither here nor there,” ironies, mysteries, cognitive dissonance—*Badlands* makes intellectual demands. *The Thin Red Line* bypasses intelligence; it aims, it seems to me, despite its metaphysical posturing, for the heart. And in many ways it succeeds. Malick’s war scenes—bullet traces of light, exploded bodies, soldiers falling as easily as tenpins—disturb. Even the interrogative-drenched voiceovers have a destabilizing power. On first hearing Witt ask “Who are you to live in all these many forms?” I turned as dewy-eyed as Witt at the film’s display of the forms of nature in contrast with the formlessness of war and death. It’s a good question to ask. What are we when put beside the forms of the world? How can the self in any way connect with such mystery? But what soldier would ask this question? What soldier would think “You, too, are the source of all that’s going to be born . . . You give calm a spirit . . .”? Malick’s film, to borrow from Manny Farber, “has been cooled by [an] ‘Art’” (54) that puts the viewer “into a lubricated state of mind where he is forced to think seriously about the phony implications of what he is seeing” (72).

Jones’s novel and war have become for Malick a place to

play with his philosophical conundrums about nature and our relationship to it. The novel ends: “One day one of their number would write a book about all this, but none of them would believe it, because none of them would remember it that way” (445). Malick’s script, with Witt’s afterlife omniscience and the director’s leaden montage sequences, never allow for Jones’s directness or give the image a chance to stand for itself, to let the viewer experience its mystery unencumbered by symbol and message. It’s not impossible; Nuridsany and Perennou’s *Microcosmos* (1996) is one successful example, Errol Morris’s montage-based *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control* (1997) is another. If the images alone aren’t sufficient, if it takes a voiceover to get across the notion that “[m]aybe all men got one big soul,” then it’s best to pick up your script and camera and leave the artist’s playground.

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## “This Is About One Thing—Dominion”: John Carpenter’s *Ghosts of Mars*

Scorned by most critics and audiences in both America and Europe, Carpenter’s *Ghosts of Mars* increasingly seems the most timely, if not prescient, Hollywood film of Summer 2001. The title alone should have clued viewers to the film’s relevance, even before the 9-11-01 attacks on the U.S. Nonetheless, this didn’t stop viewers in Europe, where the film opened and rapidly closed in October and November, from widely ignoring or dismissing it.

Who are these ghosts of war? And what are they? On the narrative level, we learn, via a flashback within a flashback, that a species long dormant on Mars has been released when Dr. Arlene Whitlock (Joanna Cassidy), while exploring a tunnel made by “someone other than man,” lays her hand on a stone seal covered with Martian inscriptions. With this human touch, the stone crumbles to dust, and from the other side comes a red pixel cloud, enhanced with Carpenter music and the suggestion of a long-buried scream or wail. We’ve heard this breathy scream before in horror films. It’s the cry

of outrage and revenge, the scream of being that ends only in death, the incomprehensible sound of the alien, and perhaps the scream mirrored inside ourselves when we confront the Other.

The scream is also one of the many referential ghosts (the sound from Carpenter's *The Thing* [1982], the cloud from *The Fog* [1980]) Carpenter allows into this highly intertextualized film. The last words we hear spoken by Commander Braddock (Pam Grier) are "Who goes there?" (the title of the John W. Campbell, Jr. story *The Thing* is based on) after a figure has sped from screen left to right in an eye-flash (a visual ghost from Carpenter's *The Thing*). Thematic ghosts from Carpenter's earlier films also saturate *Ghosts of Mars*—possession (*The Thing*, *Prince of Darkness* [1987], *In the Mouth of Madness* [1995]), the good bad guy (*Assault on Precinct 13* [1976], *Escape from New York* [1981], *Escape from L.A.* [1996]), the terror of the Other (*Halloween* [1978], *Prince of Darkness*, *The Thing*), as well as the under-siege narrative and closed spatial structures (*Prince of Darkness*, *The Thing*, *Assault on Precinct 13*, among others) which Carpenter derives from Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Hawks's *Rio Bravo* (1959), and the Hawks/Nyby version of *The Thing* (1951).

What's different this time, but still ghost-inflected, is the plot. In the narrative's outer frame, a voice informs us, over the image of the red planet as seen from space, that a

mysterious force is moving across the southern valley leaving “behind only silence and death,” while additional expository information appears at bottom screen right (Mars 2176 AD; Society: Matriarchal; Terraforming: 84% complete). In the second establishing shot, we see a train, the Transmarinara 74 Yankee (1974, the year of Carpenter’s first feature *Dark Star*) moving down screen and screen right to left across the hazy red landscape toward Chryse (an Occidental crisis is surely at hand): third establishing shot, matte work, typical science fiction city. A committee is meeting; its head, the Inquisitor (Rosemary Forsyth), says that the Cartel “would like to make a statement in two hours,” in real and reel time 22 minutes after the movie ends. As the Inquisitor gives her preliminary report of the most recent “incident,” we see Lt. Melanie Ballard (Natasha Henstridge) of the Mars Police Force, the “single survivor,” handcuffed to a bed in the “ghost train.” Lt. Ballard (Melanie, Mel) is brought before the committee for a “discovery hearing.” Her team was to transport a prisoner, James “Desolation” Williams (Ice Cube), from Shining Canyon for trial in Chryse. The body of the film is Mel’s “after-action report,” with six brief returns to the narrative present, followed by the film’s short, almost casual denouement.

A movie, then, that’s mostly flashback, and all the human characters in the flashback except the two survivors (Melanie and Desolation) are in present time dead. Who are the ghosts

in such a telling?<sup>9</sup> Rather than crisp jump cuts, Carpenter employs jump dissolves—the characters fade out and fade in a few feet from where they were. When her team first enters Shining Canyon (always darkly shot), the town is empty. Carpenter’s characteristic ominous use of empty space is not employed here. The street is without people, but in this film the emptiness doesn’t register as the container of the Other about to be unleashed into the world. It’s a ghost town, and when Melanie tells the two rookies what the town is normally like, Carpenter inserts a brief view of miners milling about the night street—a haunting, almost non-diegetic image, for these ghosts are severed from Melanie’s flashback narration. If they are meant to be part of Melanie’s POV, it’s the only time, other than when she has taken her drug of choice Clear, we enter her interior visual space. The narrative strategy also partakes of the ghostly. To tell the committee about events she herself did not experience, Melanie relies on what others have told her; the transitional points where the characters’ narratives diverge are repeated (ghostly repetition), followed by a flashback (the recovered voices of the dead) within Melanie’s larger flashback. This narrative recession is echoed visually with the shot of the tunnel at the end of which come the “literal” Martian ghosts.

Accidentally released by Dr. Whitlock (“I opened Pandora’s box; I let them out”), this red dust species inhabits the bodies of its human hosts. The Martians, after an initial

orientation stage (slow, ritualistic hand movements, which makes Dr. Whitlock speculate that they move with the wind), ornament their bodies by piercing their faces with knives or any sharp metal object. They also scrape their flesh with their fingernails, file their teeth to sharp points, paint their faces, and add as further decoration the severed body parts of their victims. These body-piercing, punk gothic figures hang sculptures of twisted metal at their sites of carnage, as well as the bodies they've decapitated. The heads they impale on sticks—strange flowers in the Martian landscape that bring the impaler to a state of frenzy. Frenzy, in fact, is their general state of being. And anger. Like Carpenter's "thing," the Martians are mightily pissed off. We can't understand their language, but their tone and message are clear. "Vengeance to anyone who tries to lay claim to our planet." And like their film ancestors, these monsters are persistent. "They won't rest short of the destruction of any invading species. As far as they're concerned, we're the invaders."

They fight, do battle, go to war. This, it seems, is what they do best. Fundamentally, they are warriors. Soon after they inhabit the humans, they form training camps where they chant and exercise in rhythm. All their weapons are handmade, they don't use guns. Swords are shaped, a battering ram improvised, grappling hooks used to scale walls. Metal is their element. When they enter their human host (hand-held video shot using a red filter—Carpenter's reprise of

the horror film monster's POV), we hear the sword-swiftly-drawn-from-scabbard sound effect.

Can anything stop them? In the films of the 1950s, we might have employed a nuclear *deus ex machina*, although often, as in *Them!* (1954), this is what created the monsters. With only a handful of humans still alive and escaping on the Transmarinara 74 Yankee, Lt. Ballard decides to turn the train around. "We've got a chance to stop this thing before it goes any further. This is about only one thing: Dominion. It's not their planet anymore." If they set off a nuclear explosion in Shining Canyon's power plant, will it kill the Martians, she asks Dr. Whitlock. "It certainly would destroy their human hosts," she replies. "As for them—hell, I don't know."

Melanie is the only character who manages to dispossess herself of a Martian, or rather her illicit drug Clear does when her fellow cop Sergeant Jericho (Jason Stathan) puts a tablet in her mouth and says, "This will mess with anything in there." After an interior montage (Martian warrior imagery followed by Clear's ocean waves and outer space shots), Melanie vomits the red pixels. A better life through illegal pharmaceuticals? Except that one of Desolation's three companions, Dos (Uno and Tres are the other two), inhales Laugher, a black market inhaler ("Turns your brain into Swiss cheese"), and accidentally chops off his thumb. After disarming a Martian, Melanie uses his sword as a grappling hook (one of the film's

many linked analogies), to climb back over the wall, but Jericho and Desolation, despite the obvious evidence, are slow to acknowledge that she's really Melanie and not a Martian. Who goes there? The redness is spreading.

For to be possessed in this film means to be reddened, turned atavistically blood-simple. When Melanie tells the Inquisitor that the female officer they found in Shining Canyon was "almost as if . . . possessed, some kind of force inside her," we see a close-up of the officer's face in heightened red light. Shining Canyon is a "graveyard," the rec room a "slaughterhouse." A man who has locked himself inside a vehicle says, "Can't fight it, it's in me," before slashing his own throat. After Melanie has finished her "after-action report," the Inquisitor smirks, "Is our statement to the Cartel going to be that Mars is being overrun by ghosts?" and her face dissolves to a red cloud which dissolves to a high angle shot of red-lit Chryse.

At a time when Americans are told once again to wave the flag and think as one, and artistic expression and dissent are suspect, when we are in danger of acting without reflecting, of looking forward without also looking back, we would do well to consider the themes arising from Carpenter's sanguinary *Ghosts of Mars*. Ballard and a few other survivors make a run to the station, but the Transmarinara 74 Yankee hasn't arrived back yet. Melanie's Plan B, she says, was the same as her Plan A. What to do now? Desolation says, "What we should

have done in the first place.” He runs into the street, blasting away at the Martians, and shouting, “Come on, you mindless motherfuckers.” But who are the mindless motherfuckers here? If you kill the human host, the ghost escapes to inhabit another body. Only if there are no bodies for them to possess will they go dormant again. One would hope that in a matriarchal society our war-like impulses could be checked. “The Matronage will protect you,” Melanie is told, but they won’t; they can’t. The Matriarchy is, after all, at the service of the Cartel, and willing to lie to them (or perhaps they don’t believe Melanie’s report) to protect their image and position. “Let’s don’t make this any more complicated than it already is,” Mel tells Desolation, and he shouts back, “It’s going to get real complicated. You can believe that shit.”

*Ghosts of Mars* refuses to conform completely to any of its generic conventions (horror/science fiction/western/war) and even to the conventions of a Carpenter film. Although Carpenter is a master of startle effects, here they seem more gestural or thematic. As Dr. Whitlock talks about the Martians going dormant, moving down below the planet’s surface when the invading species have been vanquished, the camera pulls back and down to reveal a door handle turning before the “startle effect” leaps out. The fight scenes aren’t shot to enhance the (generic) action, but appear muddled, making it hard at times to tell the humans from the Martians. Nor is this film driven in the way *The Fog*, *Prince of*



*Darkness*, and *Halloween* are by fear and sadness, or *They Live* (1988), *Vampires* (1998) and *Escape from L.A.* (“escape” an imperative verb, not a noun as in *Escape from New York*) are by anger. Few living directors have Carpenter’s sense of rhythm, but again and again in *Ghosts of Mars* he refrains from juicing up the beat. Where the characters normally would run, in the Martian gravity they lumber. The train (“I’ll get us out of here.” “Step on it”) proceeds always at a crawl.

Nor does the film easily fit into a contextual box such as post-colonialism, as one colleague of mine wanted to see it. Certainly a post-colonial or imperialist reading of the film is relevant; the Cartel is on Mars to exploit the resources of the planet and its workers. But no one knew there were any Martians on Mars to exploit. The colonial notion or excuse of bringing civilization to the savages also doesn’t here apply for the same reason. A further complication to a post-colonial reading is that there must have been at one time another civilization on Mars that contained the red dust warrior species and locked them away for, as we have every reason to believe, good cause.

Another colleague wanted to see *Ghosts of Mars* as a battle between two “ugly species,” but all the humans in the film are decidedly human, all are in some way caring. The Inquisitor is serious when she says the Matronage will protect Melanie. Dr. Whitlock initially doesn’t want to talk about what happened, she wants to sleep, to forget the horror she

has accidentally unleashed. Even Jericho, who seems only an erect penis eager to breed, is as confused as everyone else and fights to save others. *Ghosts of Mars* is hardly a character-centered film, but in their fallibility and human gestures toward one another, the characters are more than “ugly,” which makes the human/Martian links all the richer and sadder.

In the film’s denouement, Ballard wakes up to announcements that Chryse is under attack. Desolation opens the door, tosses her a gun. “Time to stay alive,” he says. “Let’s just kick some ass.” “It’s what we do best,” Melanie replies, smiling. With Desolation looking toward the camera and Melanie screen right, they move from screen left to right—into blackness, the editing off the mark, seemingly clumsy, incomplete.

The working class heroes in Carpenter movies (cops, crooks, helicopter pilots, construction workers, graduate students in physics) may keep the earth safe (“ Safe. . . for a while,” Melanie says), but their own fates are not always so optimistic. At the end of *The Thing*, MacReady (Kurt Russell) and Childs (Keith David), in an ontological standoff (Who goes there? Which of them is the thing?), await their deaths by freezing. John Nada (Roddy Piper) in *They Live* destroys the aliens’ teleportation station, but is shot, his last gesture a feebly raised middle finger. Grinning into battle go Melanie and Desolation, but considering the situation, their

chance of survival, at least as humans, doesn't seem high.

The Martians are back and they're us, or at least a part of us. As in *They Live*, which opened the summer before the election of George Bush (I), Carpenter tunes into the zeitgeist and sees there the ghosts of our future and our past. No wonder the audiences were disappointed.

Tom Whalen's film criticism on, among others, Carpenter, Coppola, Godard, Keaton, Malick, Truffaut, Tykwer, Wenders, and *film noir* has appeared in *Film Quarterly*, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, and *New Orleans Review*. He has written screenplays for the short film *Post-Op* (dir. Christopher Jeansonne, 1993) and the animated feature *Flatland* (dir. Ladd Ehlinger, Jr., 2007). A short film by Martha Ormiston based on his story "Little Doll Africa" is in production. He teaches film at the University of Stuttgart and the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart.

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