

Recent scholarship has emphasized the strong linkage between the performances of Attic tragedy and the civic ideology of democratic Athens. In the rear view mirror of history, however, this marriage of democratic politics and metaphysically inclined theatre appears as a unique moment, impossible to repeat in the modern age. Some argue tragedy can only remain relevant to political reflection if it dispenses with its metaphysical scaffolding, while others claim that without the metaphysics we can have no genuinely tragic drama action. In this paper I'll argue that the metaphysics makes tragic drama more, rather than less significant for democratic politics today, a case I'll seek to demonstrate through a discussion of Terrence Malick's 1998 World War II film, *The Thin Red Line*. Malick's film is interesting not only on account of its own formal qualities and the kind of tragic action it embodies: it's also interesting by virtue of the kinds of dislike it provoked. I'll discuss those reactions – which centred on the idea that *The Thin Red Line* was insufficiently empirical – as well as the distinctive dramatic features of the film, in particular its narrative shape and its use of voice-over.