

# Narrative and Experiment, Religion and Politics in Terrence Malick's *THE TREE OF LIFE*

## ABSTRACT

While Terrence Malick's 2011 film *THE TREE OF LIFE* is ordinarily analyzed in light of its Christian—and implicitly Augustinian—theological rationale, I argue here for the importance of analyzing *THE TREE OF LIFE* for its connection to the Emersonian artistic heritage. In so doing, I elucidate the film's unique political vision, a vision that emphasizes experimentalism and is allied with American avant-garde cinema. That vision, furthermore, carries with it an awareness of the differences and historical conflicts between the Augustinian and Emersonian traditions in American politics, as well as insights into these two political strains' prospects for rapprochement, particularly in regard to how avowed religionists and secularists might cooperate on contemporary environmental concerns

## KEYWORDS

Terrence Malick, *THE TREE OF LIFE*, Religion, Politics, Augustinian Theology, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emersonianism

## BIOGRAPHY

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## INTRODUCTION

Whereas many heretofore have considered the import and implications of the Christian theological resonances of Terrence Malick's *THE TREE OF LIFE* (US 2011), I want to consider the political vision of Malick's film.<sup>1</sup> Malick, I will demon-

1 See, e. g., Leary 2011, Leithard 2013, Barnett/Elliston 2016, Handley 2016, and Larsen 2017.

strate, leverages the tension between two strands of American religio-political thought to illuminate a politics not typically associated with traditional Christian theology. The two strands to which I am referring are Augustinianism and Emersonianism. By eschewing narrative in favor of an experimental approach to his filmmaking – an approach grounded in the American avant-garde cinematic tradition – Malick envisages a radical politics much as Ralph Waldo Emerson does in his best-known essays. Yet Malick does this while still centering *THE TREE OF LIFE* on traditional Christian theological inquiries. The result, I argue, is a cinema of religio-political possibility that contains meaningful insights for contemporary American environmental politics, which up to now has struggled to bring religionists and secularists together on shared projects and goals.

## AUGUSTINE, EMERSON, POLITICS

For all the theological attention *THE TREE OF LIFE* has received since its release, the film's politics has received rather short shrift. This is attributable to two main reasons. The first is related to what Mark Lewis Taylor has called theology's normative "imperio-colonial sense", by which he means the ways theology (insofar as it is taken up in academic discourse) is assessed without consideration of its extradiscursive effects – that is, its cognizance of power arrangements in society.<sup>2</sup> The discursive focus of professional theology is doctrinal. Analyses of topics like the nature of God, creation, sin, the Holy Spirit, the church, and eschatology serve to structure orthodox belief. Theologians' interests in transcendental knowledge, Taylor argues, tend to swamp their concerns within the imminent, political frame. The second is the habit of interpreting Malick's films through the lens of, as Hannah Patterson has called it, an "Edenic yearning to recapture a lost wholeness", which means Malick is often assumed to be more interested in retrospective reflection than in considering present-day political possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning with *THE TREE OF LIFE*, all of Malick's recent films – except *THE VOYAGE OF TIME* (US 2015), a two-part documentary examining the birth and death of the known universe – have been set in the present day. So while visions of nostalgic recovery may still be read in Malick's work since 2011, perceived conceptions of a romanticized past in Malick's films are not the hindrance they once were. That the political vision of *THE TREE OF LIFE* has not elicited more attention from theologians is more difficult to fathom, however, for it is not so easy to separate the political from the theological. To put this point in terms of a phrase made popular by second-wave feminism, it is not just the *personal*

2 Taylor 2011, 53.

3 Patterson 2007, 15.

that is political, but the *theological* is inherently political too. The fact that the theological significance of THE TREE OF LIFE seems to have overwhelmed theologians' awareness of its political resonance serves to bolster Taylor's criticism of professional theology's inattentiveness to extradiscursive interpretive factors.

Interpreting THE TREE OF LIFE in relation to two cornerstone traditions in the history of the American debate over religion, ethics, and political community – Augustinianism and Emersonianism – can give a start to acknowledging the film's political vision. Jeffrey Stout, in his book *Democracy and Tradition*, provides a helpful conceptual framework for understanding these traditions and the sticking points of their disagreement. The first strand, Augustinianism, “is that of orthodox Christianity from the Puritanism of Plymouth Rock to the denominational soup of our own day”, Stout says.<sup>4</sup> This strand emphasizes the efficacy of institutional authority to chasten human nature, which, Augustinians believe, has been vitiated by the effects of original sin. The second strand, Emersonianism, takes most seriously the question of character as a pre-requisite for considering the conditions and arrangements of society. In the history of American politics, says Stout, these two strands have butted heads more often than not:

[Emerson] and his followers have been engaged in a tug of war with orthodox Christians over the future of American piety. Christians, ever mindful of Augustine's great work, *The City of God*, have never been reluctant to condemn the Emersonians for underestimating the human spirit's need for unsettled institutional and communal forms, including a structure of church authority to rein in spiritual excess. The Emersonians, for their part, would rather quit the church than grant that some holder of church office or even a democratically organized congregation has the authority to administer the distinctions between saved and damned, saint and sinner, true and false prophet, scripture and apocrypha. Above all, they have been persuaded from the beginning that the idea of original sin is blight on the human spirit. Orthodox Christians sense in all this the errors of ancient heresies – Montanist and Pelagian, to be precise – and have never tired of prophesying against them.<sup>5</sup>

The conflict between Augustinians and Emersonians maps well onto the traditional divide that persists between secular environmentalists and Christians, namely evangelicals. Ideological tensions have long frustrated Christian and secular groups' collaboration on ecological concerns. Evangelical Christians, for one, worry that environmentalist politics supplant theocentric values. Their concern is with idolatry to the extent that environmentalists can be interpreted as reframing devotion to God as devotion to the earth. The inclination to, as

4 Stout 2004, 19.

5 Stout 2004, 20.

Augustine says in his *Confessions*, “abandon the higher and supreme goods ... that is ... God, [God’s] truth, and [God’s] law” in pursuit of inferior goods, which no doubt have their delights but “are not comparable to ... God”, is a mark of humans’ sinful nature.<sup>6</sup> Better to check one’s commitment to earthly goods against a more thoroughgoing commitment to God, the *summum bonum*. Environmentalists have the opposite concern. Environmentalists worry Christians’ faith commitments distract from addressing today’s most pressing ecological problems. When one good is enshrined above all, other goods worthy of moral consideration inevitably get curtailed – or so secular environmentalist thinking tends to go.

All this plays out in the distrust we see between environmentalists and evangelicals today. Many Christians have come to regard environmentalists’ political efforts on issues like climate change with suspicion, some going so far as to adopt a line of argument famously articulated by the novelist Michael Crichton, who, in 2003, criticized environmentalism as a kind of new religion.<sup>7</sup> Environmentalists, though, who are cognizant of how Christians’ political influence has been co-opted by free-market neo-liberal ideologues reciprocate evangelicals’ distrust by remaining cautious about engaging too much with evangelical organizations. Recent instances like evangelicals’ coordinated resistance to the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency’s attempts to regulate coal mining in Appalachia only serve to reinforce environmentalists’ circumspection.<sup>8</sup>

## NARRATIVE AND VISIONARY FILMMAKING

Where does *THE TREE OF LIFE* fit in all of this? My argument is that while the basic content of Malick’s film is Augustinian, *THE TREE OF LIFE* is thoroughly Emersonian in form. I will demonstrate this by considering the role narrative plays in *THE TREE OF LIFE* – in how Malick’s propensity to dispense with traditional narrative form in favor of a more experimental approach to his filmmaking reveals a radical vision of politics more aligned with American avant-garde cinema than with Christian orthodoxy. This is not to say that *THE TREE OF LIFE*’s politics is divorced from its theology, just that the film’s politics has as much to do with its cinematic construction as with its theological interests.

Not many non-documentary films from the last ten years deal as explicitly with the theme of humanity’s relationship with nature as does *THE TREE OF LIFE*. This theme is standard fare for Malick’s larger oeuvre, but *THE TREE OF LIFE* marks a distinctive turn in Malick’s willingness to explore the particular Christian

6 Augustine 1998, 30.

7 See Nelson 2012.

8 See, e.g., Weaver 2014.



Figs. 1a–b: The dead emerge from their resting places in *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s finale (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:05:02; 02:05:16.

frameworks which bolster his philosophical inquiries.<sup>9</sup> For instance, *THE TREE OF LIFE* opens with an epigraph from the Book of Job (“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” [Job 38:4,7]). Malick also utilizes Christian conceptual conventions like “nature” and “grace” to frame the relational dynamics between characters and the film’s overall structural organization. And finally, *THE TREE OF LIFE* is chock full of allusions to traditional Christian theological tropes (e. g., the film concludes with a rousing rendition of corporeal resurrection, set to the score of Hector Berlioz’s 1837 Requiem Mass; see figs. 1a–b). Given the frequency of such referential touch points, it is not surprising that most theological interpretations of *THE TREE OF LIFE* are patently Augustinian.

9 Films like *BADLANDS* (US 1973), *DAYS OF HEAVEN* (US 1978), *THE THIN RED LINE* (US 1998), and *THE NEW WORLD* (US 2005) each deal with human-nature relationality without overt reference to Christian theological concepts. In these films, Malick is especially interested in the ways human malfeasances are reflected in humans’ connection to nature. In *BADLANDS*, for instance, the film’s two main characters, Kit and Holly, recover to an Eden of their making in the woods of South Dakota but are forced to leave it behind when marshals come looking for Kit, who murdered Holly’s father in a fit of passion. In another example, *THE THIN RED LINE*, a film about the pivotal battle of Guadalcanal during the Second World War, examines the violence inherent to the natural world as it is reflected in human conflict.

Often emphasized in these interpretations is the condition of alienation in which humans abide as a result of their misguided loves – a sure indication of a given interpretation’s Augustinian slant. Whether it is due to one’s failing to treat God as the highest good or otherwise some perversion of the will, *THE TREE OF LIFE* treats experiences of isolation and estrangement – the consequences of human sin – as dramatic fodder. Nowhere is this more evident than in the film’s depiction of Jack, the eldest son of the O’Brien family, who is the film’s main character.

Yet for all this, there is something decidedly *un-Augustinian* about *THE TREE OF LIFE*’s cinematic complexion. I take this “something” – which I identify with the Emersonian artistic heritage – to be what makes the politics of Malick’s film so interesting. Consider the role (or lack of a role) narrative plays in *THE TREE OF LIFE*. The film plays out like a series of recountings from Jack’s formative years, tacking back and forth from the present to the past. On the anniversary of his brother R. L.’s death, Jack, played by Sean Penn and depicted in adulthood as an architect working in Houston, thinks back on his time growing up in mid-century suburban Texas (where the lion’s share of the film is set). A segment of the film is also devoted to imaging the birth and chronological development of the cosmos. Malick juxtaposes the progress of the physical universe with the progress of the O’Brien’s familial universe, where adolescent maturation and the dynamics of a marriage under duress are as complex as the dawn and emergence of all existence (figs. 2a–b). Aside from the basic progress of time, however, *THE TREE OF LIFE* is much less reliant on traditional narrative logic than Malick’s other films.

Unlike *DAYS OF HEAVEN* (US 1978), *THE NEW WORLD* (US 2005), *TO THE WONDER* (US 2012), and *SONG TO SONG* (US 2017), there is no love triangle impelling *THE TREE OF LIFE*’s plot forward. *THE TREE OF LIFE* instead is far more attuned to quotidian experience than to narrative convention. And while the mystery imbuing the everyday – what Stanley Cavell termed “the uncanniness of the ordinary” – undoubtedly has a place in all of Malick’s filmography (most will attribute this to his Heideggerian philosophical bent), nowhere is Malick as attentive to the phenomena of common experience as in *THE TREE OF LIFE*.<sup>10</sup>

Eschewing traditional narrative as he does, Malick assumes the primacy of the visual. The result is similar to what the film scholar William Wees calls a “cinema of exemplarity”, or a cinema that involves the filmmaker offering their work as an example of how one might begin to see, and ultimately think, for oneself in novel ways.<sup>11</sup> Narrative filmmaking and, more generally, representational film require conventions and norms of movement such as chronological relations

10 Cavell 1988, 153–181.

11 Wees 1992, 80.



Fig. 2a-b: THE TREE OF LIFE juxtaposes the birth and progress of the physical universe with the more modest (but no less complicated) universe of the O'Brien family (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 00:23:03; 01:20:56.



between images. Narrative-based films, then, legitimate a necessary order of causality. Politically speaking, they often work within the realm of established forms, reinforcing the perceived necessity of certain social arrangements and institutions. Yet the political upshot of Malick's visionary cinema is the *denial* of such a necessary order. Any object, event, or feeling is rather the occasion for a surprising, undetermined effect. Sometimes that effect is to challenge the social order and the political norms that ground it. Sometimes that effect is to throw society's present arrangements into doubt, and even into crisis. For the viewer of the kind of cinema of exemplarity I am identifying with THE TREE OF LIFE, any reaction to Malick's film can become the occasion for any outcome at all. Any instant may become for the viewer an occasion for transformation, whether that be personal, social, or both.<sup>12</sup>

It is a fundamental quality of the Augustinian tradition to be bound up by narrative logic and structuring, a fact which has been noted by myriad scholars of religion and culture. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, argued Augustine, in his

12 I borrow the language of "occasionalism" from Tyrus Miller (Miller 2005), whose analysis of the cinema of Stan Brakhage and romantic politics is of a similar mind to my analysis of Malick here. My highlighting the Emersonian vision as undergirding Malick's THE TREE OF LIFE could just as well serve to highlight that which undergirds Brakhage's films.

*Confessions*, engaged in “emplotment”, or the synthesis of heterogeneous and seemingly discordant elements, incidents, and events into a concordant unity.<sup>13</sup> Augustine’s transformation from pagan sinner to Christian convert coincides with the operation to gather the disparate factors of his life into a totality – a story, in other words. The story Augustine tells, Ricoeur says, presents time as characterized by integration, culmination, and closure: integration because, as I have just noted, narrative blends elements and events whose connection may seem accidental or arbitrary into a unified whole; culmination because time, at the conclusion of a given narrative, is revealed to possess meaning and ultimacy in retrospect; and closure in that time is understood to have passed and flowed away, having left an indelible mark on the present. The politics of the narrated story serve to either justify the way things are or point toward some concrete direction the future should take as a result of things having happened the way they have. For Augustine, more often than not the discordance of the past necessitates the concordance that institutions like government and the church bring to bear on human history. As staples of social organization, these institutions mitigate the most consequential effects of human sin, so thus promote unity now and in the future.

The Emersonian tradition I have been contrasting with that of Augustinianism takes a different approach to constructing meaning, at least inasmuch as the Emersonian artistic heritage is taken up in American filmmaking. Narrative is an exclusionary device – “plots”, as Don DeLillo has said, “reduce the world”.<sup>14</sup> To emplot a story is to construct an intelligible whole from the innumerable facets of history, highlighting certain elements, incidents, and events and diminishing the significance of whatever else. Most films, and nearly all films produced by Hollywood since the middle of the last century, operate in this fashion, employing narrative to make and structure meaning. It is not that Emersonianism jettisons narrative entirely, just that it emplots story in a different way. For Emerson, time is not the stage upon which story is configured from chronological succession but is rather a series of incidents with no discernible organization. As such, time is open and indefinite. Time, as the avowed Emersonian Henry David Thoreau put it in *Walden*, “is but the stream I go a-fishing in”.<sup>15</sup>

With this alternative conception of time, the Emersonian tradition is much less concerned with constructing linear narratives so as to identify meaning in history than with plumbing the possibilities inherent in the present. “With the past I have nothing to do; nor with the future”, Emerson wrote in his journal – “I

13 Ricoeur 1990.

14 DeLillo 2001.

15 Thoreau 2008, 70.



live now.”<sup>16</sup> In his best-known essays Emerson imbued his prose with invitations and provocations to his readers to fulfill their untapped potential, to follow their genius wherever it may lead. What matters most is being oneself and seeing the world as only you might, institutions or traditions be damned. “What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?” Emerson asks in “Self-Reliance”. He goes on, “My friend suggested, – ‘But these impulses may be from below, not from above.’ I replied, ‘They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.’ No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature.”<sup>17</sup> History is affirmed not in hindsight, but in the ways it is embodied in humanity’s potential today.

P. Adams Sitney identifies American avant-garde filmmaking with Emersonianism in the ways it employs cinema as an instrument of self-discovery.<sup>18</sup> This connects with Wees’s concept of cinematic exemplarity mentioned earlier. American filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Marie Menken, and Su Friedrich, Sitney shows, work in interrelated modes of camera movement, superimposition, associative editing, and the disjunctions of language and image to link the exhilarations of their cinematic inventions to the eccentricities of their personality and experience. Like Augustine in his *Confessions*, the most visionary American avant-garde filmmakers center their art on their personal lives and the project to elucidate the unconscious. Yet unlike Augustine – and this is what allies these filmmakers with Emerson, to Sitney’s mind – visionary avant-garde filmmakers consider the measure of a work of art not its capacity to emplot narrative, but the degree to which it can surprise and thereby exhilarate its maker. “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire”, Emerson writes at the conclusion of his essay “Circles”, “is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why.”<sup>19</sup> In the address Emerson delivered in 1837 to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School, he identified this capacity for transformative experience and self-possession as the very means of incarnating God in the world. In this way, the creative exhilaration inhering in avant-garde film possesses Emerson’s call to en flesh divinity in the here and now.

## PERFECT EXHILARATION AS POLITICAL VISION

What makes Malick’s *THE TREE OF LIFE* interesting as far as its politics are concerned is that it draws from both the Emersonian and Augustinian traditions in order to address questions like: What is the appropriate relationship between

16 Emerson 1912, 255.

17 Emerson 1983, 262.

18 Sitney 2008.

19 Emerson 1983, 414.



Figs. 3a-b: Father-son relational dynamics and the built environment of downtown Houston serve to invoke a sense of modern alienation in *THE TREE OF LIFE* (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 01:43:54; 00:15:34.

humans and nature, and what vision of politics should order that relationship? I have already noted that a kind of Augustinian soul-searching compels much of the film's progress. A combination of humans' disordered loves and the alienation which results therefrom has led to our fractured relationships with each other and with nature. This is imaged in the strained interpersonal dynamics between characters like Jack and his father, Mr. O'Brien (played by Brad Pitt). Similarly, the built environment of downtown Houston, with its impersonal symmetry, dramatizes Jack's overall sense of estrangement (see figs. 3a–b). As both a child and a grown man Jack is a stranger in a strange land. All this grounds *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s Augustinian theological rationale.

But the means whereby Malick suggests individuals might overcome their alienation are expressly Emersonian. Malick reveals American avant-garde cinema's influence on his work – and similarly, the Emersonianism that grounds the American avant-garde tradition – by instantiating the sort of politics of exemplarity I have been pointing up. The autobiographical nature of *THE TREE OF LIFE* (Malick, like Jack, grew up in small-town Texas in the middle of the twentieth century, and he too lost his younger brother when he was a young man), paired with Malick's habit of shooting without a script, using only a Steadicam to follow his actors to catch the truth of their condition and circumstances, indicate



Figs. 4a-d: THE TREE OF LIFE is dotted with numerous means of physical ascent, suggesting spiritual progress and self-transformation (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:05:11; 00:41:13; 00:15:24; 02:04:55.

a similar deployment of cinema as a tool for introspective discovery. The surprise and exhilaration Jack undergoes when realizing the potential for his reconciliation with the world at *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s conclusion are suggestive of the surprise and exhilaration we can only imagine Malick has felt in his realization that the conditions of overcoming his own alienation abide in the possibility of seeing things in a new light. The many modes of ascent portrayed in the film (ladders, stairs, elevators, etc.) presume the infinite possibility of self-reckoning and transformation (figs. 4a–d).

Nevertheless, it is tempting to interpret in the resurrection imagery at *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s denouement a full-throated avowal of Augustinian salvation history's ultimate trajectory. This imagery calls to mind the vision of a new heaven and earth advanced in the book of Revelation, wherein suffering yields to solace, wrongs are righted, and death is annulled (21:1–8; see figs. 5a–d). According to Revelation, earthly circumstances, no matter how indissoluble they may seem, possess no real finality.

Only God's deliverance in the age to come will satisfy the demands for a perfect justice. It was owing to the imperfection with which justice is realized in worldly politics, in fact, that Augustine felt deeply ambivalent toward temporal projects aimed at establishing an ideal society. Christians, he believed, need not chance too much on accomplishing what only God can bring about at the eschaton. Augustine's affirmation of providence and divine order works to counteract the suspicion that forces like contingency, luck, and blind fate, which inhabit projects to realize a true justice on earth, will have the final say.<sup>20</sup> From this, William Connolly concludes that political Augustinianism is governed by its need to defend the vision of an intrinsic moral order.<sup>21</sup> This vision of a mysterious but nevertheless organized universe, always being shepherded to its ultimate fruition, demands that all forms of deviance, queerness, or the unexpected be curbed, lest the order of things be upset and thrown into disarray.

Yet deviance, strangeness, even absurdity – all these things Emersonianism embraces as potential results of exhilarating experience. Hence Emerson's own absurd experience of becoming a transparent, all-seeing eyeball while, as he says in *Nature*, “[c]rossing a bare New England common, in snowpuddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky”.<sup>22</sup> And hence Emersonians like Walt Whitman promoted Emerson's method of privileging moments of creative exhilaration. Whitman, like the avant-garde filmmakers Sitney treats, believed any variation of the shared world is possible if glimpsed with the insight borne of ecstatic fancy. What this entails is a radical rejection of the conventions of time, tradition,

20 See Book 19 in Augustine 2003. For a standard interpretation of Book 19 of the *City of God*, see O'Donovan 2003.

21 Connolly 2002.

22 Emerson 1983, 10.

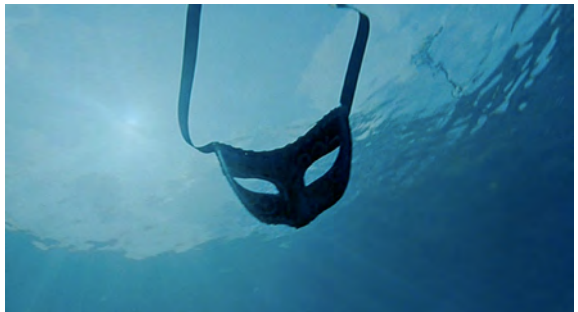


Fig. 5a-d: The pain of old age is removed, families are reunited, and reality's veneer is stripped away in the apocalypse depicted at *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s conclusion (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:08:52; 02:08:53; 02:08:44; 02:09:48.



Fig. 6-b: Outside, Jack delights in the renewal of his vision (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:12:05; 02:12:12.

and history. Any instant, according to Emerson and his progeny, can transform the perceiver so as to help them see beyond established patterns of custom and habit. Exhilaration makes the familiar strange, instilling in the seer a vision of a new heaven and earth; heaven indeed has been realized in the seer's eyes. Furthermore, all sense of one's alienation from the world is removed at the moment of unitive epiphany. Emerson himself attests to this, noting in *Nature* how he sensed an "occult relation" begin to abide between him and other beings, so powerful was his own experience of ecstatic reverie. "I am not alone and unacknowledged", Emerson writes. The trees, the grass, and all other lifeforms constitutive of the biome "nod to me, and I to them".<sup>23</sup>

Seen in this light, *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s conclusion can come to seem more like the sort of ecstatic revelation Emerson first promulgated in *Nature* than an attestation to the truth of Christian eschatological orthodoxy. The film's ending with Jack ambling among the grounds around his office building, as if in a daze, only bolsters the point – he might as well be crossing a bare New England common. Jack's epiphanic realization has opened his eyes. The very conditions of his union with the world, and, moreover, his and the world's resulting transfor-

23 Emerson 1983, 11.

mation, persist in the possibility of his finally *seeing* ontological oneness. The occasion for this sort of sight is always available, waiting to be actualized, and when it is, such experiences give rise to intense sensations of rapture. Not only is this the first time we see Jack appear to express a feeling resembling something like joy in the film, but at the moment of his euphoria, Jack also is outside. No longer is he cloistered in the built environment, which until then had been symbolic of his estrangement from the world (figs. 6a–b).

Such experiences of exhilaration are politically disruptive since they stake nothing on causal consequence, and therefore nothing on traditional and historical narrative-based methods of meaning-making. The individual and their access to ecstatic revelation is the prime locus of concern, not social institutions which often function to curb individualism to secure more favorable prospects for social order. There is good reason governments feel hostile toward charismatic visionaries, which is the same reason the established church has historically distrusted mystics who linger on the margins of the faith – to receive exhilarating insight is to receive an unsettling power, strong enough to surprise us out of our propriety and traditional commitments. This force, if left unchecked, is strong enough even to upset institutionalized conventions whose ways have become so culturally engrained that the chances of their ever changing almost *require* the radical inbreaking of transhistorical political vision. For this reason, George Kateb identifies in Emerson’s politics a kind of anarchist “wildness”.<sup>24</sup> It is not just that a politics of ecstatic vision fails to conform to the norms and habits of public reason, but that such a politics often will call the foundations of public order themselves into question.

## CONCLUSION

Though society’s most powerful institutions and overall organization may appear immutable, such appearances are not indicative of society’s – and no less the world’s – true nature. This is Connolly’s argument in his book *The Fragility of Things*.<sup>25</sup> Myriad self-organizing ecologies constitute our world, including geological, biological, and climate systems, as well as cultural and economic systems with multiform relations and complex entanglements. Because these many systems harbor their own creative capacities – from tectonic shifts on the earth’s surface to the so-called “logic” of the market – which, in turn, ramify in the larger ecosystems in which they participate, the world, Connolly concludes, is doubtless a fragile place, easily spun round by the slightest change in human and nonhuman fields.

24 Kateb 2006, 245–271.

25 Connolly 2013.

An awareness of the world's fragility undergirds Emerson's thinking on the outsized role individuals of visionary genius play in social transformations. "There are no fixtures in nature", Emerson writes in the essay "Circles". "The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees."<sup>26</sup> This being the case, revelation derived from exhilarating, ecstatic experience, Emerson contends, should set the course of history, not traditions of the past nor the dictates of institutional authority. To receive revelation is to receive a kind of divine power, much as Christ did millennia ago. For it was Christ, Emerson writes, who fully realized "that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world".<sup>27</sup> The implication is that those who profess a belief in Christ should do the same. Historically Augustinians have found an idea like this contemptuous, fearing the chaos that would result from a society composed of individuals believing themselves capable of all that Christ was and accomplished. Conversely, Emersonians respond by charging Christians of acting, in Emerson's words, "as if God were dead".<sup>28</sup>

Augustinians and Emersonians will both assent to the idea that God still deigns to reveal Godself to human beings, despite their disagreements over how the politics of that revelation should be chastened by the church or civil authority. That Malick so integrates an Emersonian cinematic experimentalism into a traditional Christian framework for theological inquiry is what makes *THE TREE OF LIFE* so politically remarkable. For a film so attuned to the fundamental questions of Christian theology – What is the character of God, as well as of the natural world? And what is the nature of humans' relationship to both? Whence are suffering and death derived? Will they be overcome in this life or the next? – Malick is not satisfied to give his audience many answers. Jack, at the culmination of his euphoric vision during *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s finale, may be said to have come upon a few answers himself, but our own perception of Jack's exhilaration only bolsters what I take to be the heart of Malick's rather Emersonian point – that it is the *audience's* task, not the filmmaker's, to see their way through the process of overcoming their alienation from the world. Like Emerson, the most Malick is willing to do is detail the ways in which he has conceived of a perfect exhilaration wrought by revelatory insight. It is up to us, however, to seek out whatever it is we eventually might find through whatever means revelation (and its attendant exhilaration) finds us.

Perhaps in the end visions like that which Malick portrays Jack undergoing at *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s conclusion will lead individuals away from the church, as was the case for Emerson in the late 1830s, after he experienced his own exhilaration.

26 Emerson 1983, 403.

27 Emerson 1983, 80.

28 Emerson 1983, 83.



Fig. 7: The bridge in *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s final shot (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:12:26.



arating vision. “Whenever a mind ... receives a divine wisdom”, Emerson wrote at this point in his life, “old things pass away, – means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour.”<sup>29</sup> Yet such experiences of revelation need not always lead one away from established forms of religious authority. They also can just as easily serve to affirm one’s commitment to institutional establishments, albeit with a renewed sense of an institution’s place and function in the world. Something like this occurred when John of Patmos received the vision that eventually became the book of Revelation, a text that has gone far in buttressing the church’s worldly significance. The prospective ends of revelatory vision, then, are not to be prioritized in experiences wherein exhilarating insight is acquired. Such ends are never predetermined; we rarely are able to tell exactly where revelation will lead. Instead, the simple willingness to remain open and available to ecstatic vision wherever it might find us – be it on a New England common, a remote Aegean island, or in a Houston business park – should be prized above all. This, I submit, is the basic religio-political vision Malick casts with *THE TREE OF LIFE*.

Inherent in this vision is also the prospect of religious-secular rapprochement. Augustinians and Emersonians stand to benefit from collaborating over their shared appreciation of the natural world as a site of potential revelation, and thus as a locus of extraordinary value that is worthy of protection. This lends a new significance to *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s final image – a bridge connecting two discreet land masses across a wide body of water (fig. 7). While much will continue to separate Augustinians from Emersonians on the nature of their political commitments, to view *THE TREE OF LIFE* is nevertheless to acknowledge a vision of radical possibility, not just of reconciliation but of political promise and, ultimately, of hope. An important facet of this hope is that individuals, whatever their politics, might be restored to a meaningful relationship with the earth, and experiencing this, might also finally come together to protect it.

29 Emerson 1983, 270.

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