

**“Flowing Perpetually Outward”:
Quest and Journey in Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998)**

Keywords: Terrence Malick, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Over-Soul, Nature, war

Abstract: North American director Terrence Malick’s films poetically explore inner journeys that, particularly in his early work, deeply engage with the narratives surrounding the American Dream, often intertwining these with literal journeys. The protagonists of Malick’s cinema share a common experience of existential inquiry, which propels their personal journeys and serves as the core narrative element of his films. In Malick’s transcendentalist framework, the interplay between a character’s path and the surrounding landscape connects to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s concept of the Over-Soul, a philosophical idea in which all things converge and unify. This article examines Malick’s interpretation of mobility in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), analysing its (meta)physical journey through thematic and philosophical lenses. This approach aims to illuminate how the notion of the Over-Soul continues to shape Malick’s spiritual approach to storytelling. The analysis will consider both narrative structure and formal style to explore this relationship.

Introduction

In this article, I aim to explore the trope of the journey in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), directed by Terrence Malick (b. 1943), in relation to a key concept in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s metaphysical thought (1803-1882), the Over-Soul, which is the universal divine essence accessed by each individual via the internal power of their own souls.¹ While Emerson was a pioneer of literature and philosophy in the recently founded United States,² Malick played a central role in North American philosophical and transcendental film a century later.³ His films tell tales of men and women seeking their spiritual purpose⁴ and the notion of the journey is present in every one of his narrative trajectories. The importance of communing with nature, the ethereal unity of all things

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and the optimistic belief in individual spiritual revelation situate Malick's philosophical sensibilities within Emerson's thought (Fech 8).

In the pages that follow, I analyze the North American soldiers' journey to Guadalcanal in *The Thin Red Line* with reference to Emerson's Transcendental philosophy. To this end, I begin by mapping the place of movement in the director's feature films. Then, I explore how random encounters bring the traveller into contact with otherness, revealing different dimensions of this movement. Finally, I examine the links between the journey in Malick's work and Emerson's notion of the Over-Soul and the ways in which these links are codified in the director's filmic style. The landscape, as a stage for contradictory natural worlds and the rhetorical figure of light, is key to my analysis of a war film that is unconventional in its portrayal of a physical and metaphysical journey to a specific geographic location, which is itself twofold.

Roads, Paths, and Journeys in Malick's Work

In Malick's first four films, *Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and *The New World* (2005), the journey structures the narrative in the sense that it depicts events that are made possible by the characters' physical movement. *Badlands* is an existential road movie in which a young criminal couple travel through the Badlands of Montana on their way to Canada in the 1950s. *Days of Heaven* narrates the story of a couple who travel with the young man's sister as part of a diverse, multicultural group of immigrants in 1916: they are all seeking work, so they move from Chicago to the Texas panhandle in search of opportunities. In *The Thin Red Line*, American soldiers from Charlie Company cross the island of Guadalcanal in the Pacific Ocean in 1942, during World War II. *The New World* tells the tale of English colonizer John Smith, who arrives in Virginia in 1607 and falls in love with the young Pocahontas from the Powhatan indigenous community. Initially fascinated by the untouched landscape of North America, he eventually becomes disillusioned with it and decides to leave. The journey as a metaphor of the existence of the North American nation occupies a prominent place in United States literature,⁵ and Malick follows a similar path, using visual motifs rooted in the mythical imaginary of the United States to paint a clear picture of a community's domestication of a natural (wild) environment and trace the country's history (Cerero 238).

However, in his following films—*The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2013), *Knight of Cups* (2016), *Song to Song* (2017) and *A Hidden Life* (2019)—the journey is not central to the plot, despite forming part of the narrative arc. In other words, it is no more significant or consequential than any of the other tropes used by Malick, such as the suburban domestic space, the rural landscape, the angular cityscape and other spatial figures that gradually came to form part of the Texan director’s filmic lexicon: the luxury villa, the music festival, the prison. *The Tree of Life* focuses on Jack, who ponders his earlier family life and the impact of his younger brother’s death as he strolls around the city and its modern architecture. Featuring flashbacks and a whole sequence exploring the evolution of the universe and organic life on the planet, the film ends in an allegorical natural landscape where every moment in Jack’s memory of a time beyond time comes together. *To the Wonder* (2013), *Knight of Cups* (2016), and *Song to Song* (2017) are hyperlink films that are also set in the present day and each focus on a small group of four characters, whose fates become interwoven at some point in time. The feelings aroused by these encounters prompt each character to talk at length about their lives in existential and spiritual terms. Finally, *A Hidden Life* (2019) returns to the past, narrating the tragic experience of a conscientious objector who revolts against the Nazis’ actions and principles in World War II Germany.

On Mobility

As we can see from this summary of his filmography, Malick’s first major foray into film was a road movie. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the road embodies the very definition of travel, as a place where encounters with the unknown—coming face-to-face with otherness—occur,

The chronotope of the road associated with encounter is characterized by a broader scope, but by a somewhat lesser degree of emotional and evaluative intensity. ... The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road (“the high road”), the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, states, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point. ... Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road); this is the source of the rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course: “the course of a life,” “to set out on a new course,”

“the course of history” and so on; varied and multi-leveled are the ways in which the road is turned into a metaphor, but its fundamental pivot is the flow of time. (Bakhtin 243-44)

The road’s existential dimension, through the fusion of space and time, renders the physical encounters it enables as also symbolic, often mythical. In this sense, the very experience of mobility is mythologized. The moving state of the individual on the road, with its encounters, stops and crossings, essentializes and reflects the traveler’s existential condition, with their linear chronology progressively materialized in time by their own life journey.

Film is the ideal medium for the chronotope of the journey (Stam 11) and, by extension, the road movie is the most fitting genre for this chronotope. The character’s experience of mobility—or even that of the camera or editing—reveals their relationship with the journey, or, in other words, mirrors specific subjectivities. The road becomes a reflection of the traveller’s identity: as the characters experience the random encounters noted by Bakhtin, they react to and are shaped by these stimuli.

In other words, the encounter implies a confrontation with otherness, thus readjusting the migrant’s identity, with greater or lesser violence. Giovanni Gasparini’s sociological thinking helps to systematize the way in which travel affects the identity of the traveler. He identifies five different dimensions of the concept of the journey. As a personal experience offering access to a more concrete vision of reality and fuller self-realisation, the journey is (I) an expression of personal freedom (freedom of movement); (II) a quest driven by the tension aroused by curiosity over what lies beyond the bounds of the domestic sphere; (III) a separation from and loss of familiar people and social constraints; or (IV) an “a-modern” experience or exploratory journey on foot in areas where there is little to no human presence. The journey is also (V) a “total social reality,” a unifying, concentrated experience that influences all the individual’s actions during the process (Gasparini 7-19).

Malick’s films are experimental in their reflective nature and filmic style. His first four feature films take a historicising approach and their narrative revolves around the motif of a journey made not only by the characters but also by the director himself, who uses these films to apply or test philosophical and religious ideas. As soon as the history of the United States is not directly addressed in the films, the physical journey of the characters no longer structures them. As a road movie, *Badlands* established a matrix

of thematic exposition for subsequent films in the first phase of the filmmaker's work that allows the character to operate in a primeval landscape and culture in which they are an outsider via the (in)voluntary exploration of a specific geographical territory. In this regard, *The Thin Red Line*, *Days of Heaven*, and *The New World* may be interpreted as road movies whose plots test the strength and elasticity of the genre's mythology, motifs, and iconography.

In Malick's films, journeys are not only quests but also "a-modern" (Gasparini 13) experiences and total social realities, as the spiritual figure of totality—"God"—is key in this universe insofar as all the characters seek a spiritual link to the world. The representation of these (personal, existential, and religious) quests encompasses the character's solitude; the contemplation of the space in combination with an internal monologue narrated in voiceover; extradiegetic (sacred) music; constant movement (of the camera, figures, and forms); nature as an embodiment of wonder; multiple individual tempos, and the simultaneous presence of material and allegorical spaces/realities.

The powerful combination of these elements prompts the character to adopt a critical distance and a questioning stance in their interactions with the world. It also creates an intense intimacy between the viewer and the character, whose personal, private sphere we are invited to access. In other words, reality in Malick's films is shaped internally and collectively by his characters as they question their place in a physical and metaphysical world. There is a certain atmosphere that is present in all his films due to his filmic style, which is rarefied from film to film and transcends the idea of a mere ambiance. Due to the way it brings together the subjective individuality of the characters, the way they connect with nature, and the way they reflect on their own trajectory, this atmosphere, as Malick stages it, is lived by the characters as a religious experience. Emerson understood this specific spiritual connection between the self and the other as a transcendent figure of totality which he named the Over-Soul. On this concept, the philosopher considers the following,

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as

the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. (Emerson 207)

This unifying entity, attainable to every human being, opposes to the chronological, rational time regulating our lives, also enables both existential freedom and spiritual fulfilment. Also, according to Emerson, nature, with its mystical qualities, is key to transcend the consecutive time and fragmented space mundane perception. Communion with the overwhelming, natural—physical—world allows for an immersion in a metaphysical, undivided realm. In that sense, Emerson states,

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (39)

It is in the natural world, then, that human beings are most directly linked to the Over-Soul via the revelation of an infinite, universal consciousness of which they themselves come to form part. This spiritual link between the individual soul and the all-encompassing soul emerges in the experience of the sublime: an overwhelming centrifugal vortex that allows the transcendental to emerge. Nature is the ultimate locus of the sublime in Emerson's thought.

With a body of work spanning more than fifty years, Malick's filmic style has naturally evolved over time, although the link between human beings and Emerson's universal being has been a constant feature in the director's work, lending his films huge thematic power and narrative structure. From a conceptual point of view, Malick's sensibility is Emersonian because it is structured around the belief in a universally accessible unifying figure of totality that transcends the material and historical. So, how does Malick's spiritual cinema codify the link between the character and the Over-Soul⁶? The character's inner world is revealed primarily through voiceover monologues that convey reflective, questioning thoughts, along with POV shots depicting individual perspectives, which are emphasized by using a hand-held camera. Meanwhile, the figuration of the unified, multi-faceted divine being and the characters' communion with

it is achieved using a wide-angle fisheye lens—to create Emerson’s transparent eyeball—hand-held camera shorts and narrative fragmentation of time and space because of non-linear editing.

The director’s decision to opt for hyperlink narratives reinforces the total dimension of this universal being, which, in turn, is mythologized and eulogized by the extradiegetic sacred music. Nature, as a place of revelation and amazement with the divine, tends to be depicted using expressive shots whose lines of force summon the sublime. One example is the main leitmotif of Malick’s filmography: a low-angle shot of tree leaves moving in the foreground, with a ray of sunlight that appears to illuminate everything behind them peeping through. Shots of animals filmed front-on at camera level, very open landscape shots and detail shots of natural life help decentralize human beings in this highly personal, complex perspective of the world.

Transcending History in Nature: *The Thin Red Line*

Malick’s war film depicts the experience of North American soldiers at the Battle of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in the Pacific Ocean during World War II. It tells their story from the individual perspectives of more than twenty men, whose voiceover narrations become muddled as they convey their complex conceptual and spiritual thoughts.⁷ The brutal attack scenes are framed by soliloquies that often personalize them without mitigating the violence and extreme racism towards the Japanese army, as well as the pervading desire to destroy the landscape.

The apparent disorder of the voiceover narrations causes them to merge into one, reconfiguring them as a whole. The inner voices of the soldiers expressing their state of mind produces a total soul: Emerson’s Over-Soul, reconfiguring the genre’s classic iconography.⁸ However, this chorus of souls is not the only element that subverts the codes of war films: fascination with the lush natural environment and its “natural” hazards, with the native people and with Melanesian culture, mythologized in the spectacular opening to the film, stands in opposition to the idea of a region being dominated by the military capture depicted in the film. The landscape is at once a contested territory and a place of death, as well as an arena for philosophical reflection (Silberman 177).

The first scene in the film, depicting a crocodile in a dark, remote tropical forest, attests Malick’s natural setting as the deadly albeit exuberant locus of existential

dissertation. The animal enters a body of water, slipping down and disappearing beneath the surface, which falls still once again. The danger posed by the hidden animal is heightened by the crescendo of deep tones in “The Carol Atoll” (Zimmer, 1999), composed of electronic sounds and, later, organ music. A lyrical sequence of images of huge tropical trees follows, accompanying a voiceover revealing the thoughts of Private Train. Low-angle POV shots track the trees’ immense exterior roots, long trunks and lush tops. The camera moves up to the sky, where rays of sunlight shine down through the leaves. The surroundings are contemplated at length, as Train says: “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?” (*The Thin Red Line*). Then, we watch as Private Witt—the first white man and soldier that we see and the main overarching character in the film—is dazzled by this little paradise. Gone AWOL, he is happily living in a small native community. Malick’s story picks up here, following the experiences of field combat of Witt and many other soldiers.

The Thin Red Line features different approaches to the same natural environment. Blasi identifies two visions of the natural world in the film: an organicist, vitalist vision in which humans and nature form part of a larger whole, in which all parts are connected and interrelated, and a vision in which the parts of the natural world are completely separated from the laws of causality and reciprocity that characterize organic life in general (80). In this regard, war embodies an idea of culture created by modernity (Woesser 129), reminding us that the mythical link between humans and nature was lost when it was brought under capitalist principles (Armstrong ch.1).

Indeed, the first voice heard in the film reveals its purpose as an exploration of the natural world and of human nature (Silberman 177). The journey in *The Thin Red Line* facilitates this investigation by enabling contact and familiarity with the mythical natural world, which is presented as exotic from the outset. This is a land of spiritual revelation and wonder; these are present particularly in Private Witt’s inner world. The journey brings him into contact with another reality, yet it also causes him to become intrinsically aligned with the world and everything in it. Exploring Guadalcanal’s idyllic nature allows the soldier to access the Over-Soul, tested by the historical violence of war, which, in turn, is portrayed amid the same primeval natural environment and experienced by the character. Witt’s journey on the island is a path to divine revelation, which encompasses Gasparini’s five dimensions: expression of personal freedom, quest, violent separation from the nuclear family, a-modern event, and total social reality.

In the film, the world's different forms forge a narrative about nature that generates the sublime, as it is understood by Emerson, "a thrill passes through all men at the reception of new truth, or at the performance of a great action, which comes out of the heart of nature" (214). Witt, the Emersonian Hero, as Bill Fech argues (67), experiences and personifies the whole process, but the film also conforms to the Transcendentalist vision of the world, which is apparent in the unfocused scenes, for example. The recurring motif of the sun's rays shining down through gaps in the darkness—invoking a classic idea in cinema—introduces the trope of light to the film visually from the opening scene. Sunlight represents the spirit and spiritual illumination, while the sun radiating this light symbolizes the divine eye, the active principle and the source of life and energy (Cirlot 187).

Several important dialogues between Witt and Sargent Welsh reinforce the idea of light as the presence of the divine when it appears in association with the soldier.

First Sgt. Welsh: Hey Witt, who you making trouble for today?

Private Witt: What do you mean?

First Sgt. Welsh: Well, isn't that what you like to do? Turn left when they say go right. Why are you such a trouble maker Witt?

Private Witt: You care about me? Don't you Sergeant? I always felt like you did. One day I come up and talk to you. Then the next day it's like we never even met. Lonely house now, you ever get lonely?

First Sgt. Welsh: Only around people.

Private Witt: Only around people.

First Sgt. Welsh: You still believe in the beautiful light do you? How do you do that? You're a magician to me.

Private Witt: I still see a spark in you. (*The Thin Red Line*)

Emerson explains that, "[f]rom within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all" (208). Witt believes in the "beautiful light" and can recognize luminous particles in the more sceptical, pragmatic Welsh.

At one point, Witt walks among dismembered, bloodied soldiers scattered across a plain near a stream. As he gazes upon this historical horror in the midst of the natural environment, we hear him say, "Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's a part of,

all faces are the same man. One big self. Everyone looking for salvation by himself, each like a coal drawn from the fire” (*The Thin Red Line*). When faced with darkness, Witt moves ever closer to the divine dimension of the Over-Soul—the transcendental imperative expressed in terms of light (Smith)—in the sense that he perceives it in the mundane dimension of historic reality.⁹

Witt’s physical journey on the island paves the way for his spiritual journey. In this regard, the specific geographical territory of the lush Guadalcanal is juxtaposed with another, conceived as a paradise and as a hell-as-paradise-lost. These realms are demarcated by the thin red line of the title, which is erased by the Emersonian hero’s transcendental experience as he establishes a personal, original connection with the universe: the Over-Soul, constructed by the splendour, intelligence, and visual and sonic sophistication of Malick’s film.

His individual spiritual connection with the world led Witt to transcend the physical realm towards the metaphysical, as it has been established. His inner conflict—specifically caused by a war experience lived in an idyllic landscape—as well as its resolution have existential and philosophical outlines, which, together with Malick’s film style and narrative, render *The Thin Red Line* as an abstraction, almost rhetorical, despite its obvious historiographical focus.

The story of a man inwardly surpassing a materialization of civilization’s overwhelming cruelty is of universal reach. Contemporarily, this level of brutality can be traced in the neoliberal capitalist regime that, in the pursuit of corporate wealth, has increased social inequality, generating extreme exploitation and precarity. Present-day mental coping tools, such as popular spiritual training, positive psychology, and the broader happiness industry borrow from the Transcendental Romantic Emersonian sensibility Malick displays and holds forth in the film. It can be understood in the ways they all tend to manage negative emotions by focusing on the person’s individual sphere, detaching oneself from the historical-political circumstances that give rise to those emotions, not actively reacting against the context (Purser). In the specific case of the film, the context would be the Battle of Guadalcanal, during World War II.

Malick chooses to focus on the depoliticized dimension of the war experience, associating it primarily with the spiritual path. In this way, he excludes the social and political criticism that Emerson did make, particularly with regards to the treatment of Native Americans and the practice of slavery, on the rise in the United States at the time (Goodman). Malick’s—Witt’s—ethics does not lead to agency, as opposed to Emerson’s

Transcendentalism. Notwithstanding, Emerson's Over-Soul structures *The Thin Red Line*. It does so narratively, by giving the account of the spiritual and physical journey of a soldier, thematically, by focusing on the spiritual fusion between the individual and the world, and, formally, by activating the properly filmic in the staging of this all-encompassing key concept.

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² According to Goodman, Transcendentalism is an early nineteenth-century American literary, philosophical, religious and political movement led by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Inspired by English and German Romanticism, Herder and Schleiermacher's biblical criticism and Hume's scepticism, Transcendentalists were driven by the "feeling" that a new era was dawning. They criticized the unthinking conformity of contemporary society and called for every individual to find, as Emerson put it, an original relationship with the universe (Goodman).

³ In the 1960s, the filmmaker switched from teaching philosophy to studying at the American Film Institute, leading specialized critics to conclude that his films cannot be analyzed within a purely philosophical framework as they resist the imposition of theoretical ideas about the world (Blasi 80).

⁴ Due to its narrative, thematic and stylistic characteristics, Malick's work is primarily analyzed from the perspective of spiritual and filmic philosophical thought and of its relationship with the history of the United States. See Woessner, Blasi, Sinnerbrink, Hintermann & Villa (eds.), Tucker & Kendall (eds.), Rybin, Sinnerbrink, Michaels, Paterson [(ed.), among others.

⁵ Broadly speaking, the literature on road movies draws on writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Walt Whitman because of their poetic exaltation of the self through the recognition of space and the awareness of the symbolic power of the frontier crossing as a catalyst for the full realisation of the individual as such. Whereas *Huckleberry Finn* introduces the notion of the journey as a quest for freedom, *The Road* by Jack London mythologizes the travelling vagabond (Frasca 15). In the work of John dos Passos and Hemingway, movement is associated with restlessness, while Steinbeck explores the journey as a hope-fuelled escape in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Meanwhile, the Beat Generation equate travel with bliss, rediscovering the landscape in a carefree manner ("innocent" in its insignificance) in association with a bohemian lifestyle that shuns materialism and middle-class moral values (Laderman 10). Whitman, Steinbeck, and Kerouac could be considered the founding authors of the genre and are symbolically present throughout the corpus.

⁶ Despite being only peripheral in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* (Fech 57), it is a more prominent theme in his later films.

⁷ The following utterances from Private Witt exemplify the nature of these monologues, "Everyone lookin' for salvation by himself. Each like a coal thrown from the fire"; "We were a family. How'd it break up and come apart, so that now we're turned against each other? Each standing in the other's light. How'd we lose that good that was given us? Let it slip away. Scattered it, careless. What's keepin' us from reaching out, touching the glory?"; "Who are you to live in all these many forms? Your death that captures all. You, too, are the source of all that's gonna be born. Your glory. Mercy. Peace. Truth. You give calm a spirit, understanding, courage. The contented heart."

⁸ Generally, war films depict large-scale combats or individual ones; there is a target to be obtained and a group of combatants with whom we identify, and who show different types of courage, and comradeship is a vital element (Hayward 492).

⁹ Witt's journey and life also end on the island, which, in spiritual and religious terms, evokes ideas of a departure and journey of a different kind.

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