Ecologies of Refuge: Trees, Crosses, and the Art of Neighborliness
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I. Framing Neighborliness: Perception, Vulnerability, and the More-Than-Human

The question posed in the Gospel of Luke, "And who is my neighbor?", has endured within Christian ethical discourse as a provocation toward compassion and responsibility beyond familiar boundaries. Yet its force lies not only in moral demand but in perceptual reorientation. Before neighborliness becomes an ethical response, it unsettles habits of seeing. It disrupts assumptions about proximity, belonging, and relational significance. The parable of the Good Samaritan may therefore be approached not solely as instruction in charitable action, but as an invitation into transformed perception.[1]

Interpretations of this narrative have often operated within implicitly human parameters, focusing on social inclusion or interpersonal obligation. Such readings remain indispensable, but they risk reinforcing an anthropocentric horizon in which vulnerability and recognition are confined to human actors alone.[2] In an era marked by ecological destabilization, species loss, and environmental displacement, the conditions under which neighborliness must be perceived have shifted. Exposure to vulnerability extends beyond human encounter. Landscapes flood, forests burn, and ecosystems fracture, rendering visible forms of precarity that exceed conventional ethical framing.[3]

This expanded field invites reconsideration of how neighborliness itself is constituted. If perception precedes response, the scope of ethical relation is shaped by what becomes perceptually available. Ecological theology has drawn attention to this dynamic, suggesting that recognition of more-than-human presence emerges through disciplined attentiveness cultivated in encounter.[4] To ask who counts as neighbor is therefore to ask how perception has been structured and how it might be reconfigured.

Visual culture plays a significant role in this reconfiguration. Images do not simply illustrate ethical commitments. They train perception by staging encounters that redistribute attention. Works of art create environments in which vulnerability and refuge become experientially available rather than conceptually asserted.[5] This paper approaches neighborliness

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[1] Luke 10:25–37 (NRSV); Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, II.19.
[2] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (1961); also see Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* (2010).
[3] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009); IPCC, *Sixth Assessment Report* (2021).
[4] Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (1999); Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology* (2008).
[5] David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze* (2005); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World* (2015).

through such encounters, exploring how the figures of the cross and the tree operate within modern art as sites where exposure and belonging are held in tension. Rather than treating these forms as symbolic carriers of predetermined meaning, the discussion attends to how they reshape relational awareness across human and more-than-human domains. In doing so, it proposes that neighborliness may be understood not primarily as moral extension, but as a cultivated capacity to dwell within shared exposure.[6]

II. Displacement and Vulnerability in the Anthropocene

If neighborliness is shaped by what becomes perceptually available, contemporary ecological conditions compel reconsideration of the field within which vulnerability is encountered. The Anthropocene, whether understood as a geological designation or a cultural diagnosis, names not only environmental alteration but the redistribution of exposure across planetary systems. Flooded coastlines, intensified storms, disrupted migration patterns, and collapsing habitats reveal forms of displacement that extend beyond human experience while remaining entangled with it. Vulnerability is not confined to human subjects. It emerges within shared environments where human and more-than-human precarity unfold together.[7]

Images of ecological disturbance often stage this entanglement with immediacy. Uprooted trees along storm-damaged shorelines or inundated terrain present encounters with destabilized belonging. Exposed root systems and displaced soil register rupture materially rather than metaphorically. Such scenes resist interpretation as distant spectacle. Instead, they invite recognition of vulnerability as relational condition distributed across bodies, infrastructures, and ecological networks.[8]

Within this expanded horizon, neighborliness cannot be reduced to proximity or cultural familiarity. It must contend with shared exposure to environmental instability. Ecological theology has emphasized that human participation in planetary systems entails responsibility grounded not only in stewardship but in mutual vulnerability. Recognition of such participation requires perceptual transformation. One must learn to see fragility as relational rather than isolated, and exposure as shared rather than segmented.[9]

Artistic engagement with ecological disturbance contributes to this transformation by rendering instability perceptible without collapsing it into catastrophe. Contemporary visual practices foreground material trace and duration, situating viewers within environments of change rather than presenting crisis as spectacle. Through such encounters, perception becomes attentive to process and entanglement. Vulnerability appears not only as a dramatic rupture but as an ongoing condition of relational existence.[10]

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[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception (1945); Tim Ingold, Being Alive (2011).
[7] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021); Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia* (2017).
[8] T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene* (2017); Jennifer Peeples, "Toxic Sublime," *Environmental Communication* (2011).
[9] Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (1997); Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015).
[10] T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature* (2016)

This perceptual shift returns us to the scriptural framing with which this paper began. Recognition of vulnerability on the roadside is no longer confined to interpersonal encounters. Displacement is encountered in landscapes and systems whose exposure exceeds the bounds of conventional ethical frameworks. To perceive these conditions is not to dissolve moral categories, but to expand the scope within which neighborliness becomes intelligible. Ecological vulnerability thus functions here as a perceptual ground from which conceptual and visual engagements proceed.[11]

III. Ecological Intentionality as Perceptual Grounding

The preceding reflections raise a methodological question. If neighborliness extends beyond exclusively human encounter, what conceptual framework allows such an expansion to remain coherent rather than metaphorical? One response lies in the notion of ecological intentionality, understood not as attribution of consciousness to nonhuman entities, but as recognition that relational responsiveness characterizes living systems in ways that complicate strictly mechanistic description. This approach shifts attention from interior states to patterns of interaction through which organisms and environments shape one another.[12]

Scientific research on plant signaling, adaptive growth, and mycorrhizal exchange has broadened awareness of vegetal responsiveness. Trees alter root distribution in response to nutrient availability, participate in chemical signaling under stress, and engage in networked exchange that affects collective resilience. These findings need not be read as confirmation of human-like awareness. They instead invite reconsideration of how responsiveness itself is conceptualized, exposing the limits of models that treat agency as centralized or purely cognitive.[13]

Philosophically, such reconsideration resonates with traditions attentive to relational perception. Uexküll's account of organism–environment worlds emphasized that living beings inhabit fields structured through engagement rather than passive reception. Process-relational thought similarly foregrounds becoming and relation as constitutive of experience rather than secondary attributes. Ecological intentionality, therefore, functions here as descriptive orientation rather than metaphysical assertion. It clarifies embedded conditions through which responsiveness becomes perceptible.[14]

From a phenomenological perspective, this orientation encourages attentiveness to the encounter before categorization. Perception does not involve neutral observation of inert objects. It unfolds within relational fields in which bodies are situated among other presences. Approached in this way, vegetal and environmental responsiveness appears not as projection but

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[11] Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015)
[12] Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* (1991)
[13] Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree* (2021)
[14] Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans* (1934); Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1929); Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead* (2011).

as encounter exceeding reduction to mechanism alone. The task is not anthropomorphization but refinement of perception through which relational complexity becomes visible.[15]

Visual culture participates in this refinement by staging encounters that render ecological relation perceptible. Artistic works that engage living materials or environmental processes do not make theoretical claims directly. They cultivate attentiveness by situating viewers within fields of responsiveness. Ecological intentionality thus serves as perceptual grounding for what follows, stabilizing the expansion of neighborliness explored in this paper and preparing the transition toward phenomenological encounter and visual interpretation.[16]

IV. Perception and Encounter

If ecological intentionality clarifies the relational conditions under which responsiveness may be perceived, phenomenological thought further grounds this expansion by attending to how perception unfolds within lived experience. Early phenomenology challenged models that positioned observers as detached from the world they perceive. Perception, instead, emerges as situated encounter structured through embodiment, relation, and participation in shared environments. This orientation provides philosophical coherence for extending neighborliness beyond narrowly human frameworks.[17]

Edith Stein's reflections on empathy offer one point of entry. For Stein, perceiving another's experience is neither inference nor projection, but an encounter in which the presence of the other is experientially given while remaining irreducibly distinct. Empathy preserves alterity even as it enables recognition. Carefully approached within ecological contexts, this framework suggests that attentiveness to more-than-human presence need not rely on anthropomorphic identification. It may arise through disciplined perception of alterity encountered through embodiment.[18]

Merleau-Ponty deepens this orientation by emphasizing the intercorporeal character of perception. Bodies do not occupy space as isolated units but participate within fields structured through reciprocity of seeing and being seen, touching and being touched. To perceive a landscape is simultaneously to be situated within it. Encounter becomes mutual rather than unilateral, complicating distinctions between subject and environment and reinforcing awareness that vulnerability is experienced relationally rather than individually.[19]

Within this phenomenological horizon, neighborliness gains philosophical grounding. Recognition of vulnerability across ecological contexts emerges not from projection but from participation in relational fields of exposure. Ethical possibility arises through attentiveness to

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[15] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945); David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996).
[16] Timothy Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (2015); Erika Balsom, "Exhibiting Ecology," *October* (2017).
[17] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology* (1913)
[18] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917)
[19] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964); Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (2009).

encounter rather than abstraction from it. Perception discloses the presence of others whose vulnerability becomes available to recognition.[20]

Visual art cultivates this attentiveness by disrupting habitual perception and repositioning viewers within altered symbolic and spatial environments. Through such encounters, perception becomes practice. It is within this cultivated perceptual field that the cross may now be approached, not merely as a theological sign, but as a visual threshold through which exposure and refuge are reconfigured.[21]

V. The Cross as Visual Threshold

The cross occupies a central place within Christian visual imagination, yet its interpretive force is often stabilized within doctrinal or symbolic frameworks that treat it primarily as an emblem of suffering or redemption. Such readings remain important, but they risk closing the image before it is encountered. Approached through the perceptual orientation developed here, the cross may instead be understood as a visual threshold. It becomes not merely a sign to decode, but a spatial event that reconfigures how vulnerability, refuge, and relation are perceived.[22]

Salvador Dalí's *Corpus Hypercubus* provides a particularly generative site for this reconsideration. The crucified body is suspended within the unfolded geometry of a hypercube rather than affixed to a wooden structure. The composition gestures toward dimensional expansion rather than material weight. Exposure is rendered neither as physical collapse nor devotional illustration. Instead, the body inhabits an environment structured by openness, inviting a perception of vulnerability rather than enclosure.[23]

This transformation alters the viewer's perceptual task. The cross no longer presents itself solely as a historical instrument or a symbolic focus. It situates perception within a field that resists closure and invites reconsideration of space. Dimensional extension interrupts expectations of grounding and containment, suggesting that exposure may be experienced as participation within relational space. Encounter with the image thus operates phenomenologically, repositioning the viewer within an environment of visibility that unsettles orientation while making relation newly perceptible.[24]

Theological implications follow from this repositioning. Refuge has often been imagined as protection from exposure, as enclosure within safety. Dalí's rendering gestures toward a different articulation. Refuge appears through situatedness within expanded relation rather than separation from it. The cross does not shield. It locates. It situates bodies within shared structures of vulnerability rather than isolating them from harm.[25]

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[20] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* (1974); Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003).
[21] David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye* (2012)
[22] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (1994); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (1989).
[23] Dawn Adès, *Dalí and Surrealism* (1982); Robert Descharnes, *Dalí: The Paintings* (1993).
[24] Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible* (2004); Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (1953).
[25] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (1990); Jeremy Begbie, *Abundantly More* (2019).

Within ecological awareness, such perception finds resonance. Existence unfolds within environments of mutual exposure sustained by atmospheric, material, and biological processes. To perceive refuge as relational participation aligns visual theology with the ecological understanding of embedded being. The image cultivates attentiveness to interdependence and shared fragility across human and more-than-human domains.[26]

Seen in this light, the cross operates less as a boundary between sacred and profane and more as a threshold through which categories of suffering and belonging are reconfigured. It does not resolve the vulnerability. It holds perception within awareness of relational openness. The cross thus becomes not only an icon of redemption but a visual practice through which ecological neighborliness may begin to be perceived.[27]

VI. The Tree as Relational Witness

If the cross discloses relational exposure through rupture and threshold, the tree offers a site through which relation is encountered as duration, growth, and embeddedness. Unlike the cross, whose theological force has historically been articulated through interruption and sacrifice, the tree unfolds across time, revealing continuity within environments that sustain and unsettle it. Within ecological and visual contexts, the tree therefore emerges not simply as a symbol, but as a witness to relational processes that exceed the human temporal scale.[28]

Modern artistic engagement with vegetal form has explored this witnessing capacity through material intervention rather than representation. Giuseppe Penone's sculptural practice provides a particularly illuminating example. By exposing internal growth structures or embedding bodily gesture within arboreal development, Penone cultivates attentiveness to vegetal presence that resists reduction to a passive object. Wood is carved to reveal earlier stages of growth, and human trace is positioned within organic duration. These works do not anthropomorphize vegetal life. They invite perception of responsiveness, persistence, and entanglement unfolding beyond human agency.[29]

Encountering such work shifts perception toward recognition of vegetal existence as a participant within shared environments. Growth rings and structural adaptation disclose histories of relation materially inscribed within living form. Witness here does not imply narrative testimony. It refers to the capacity of vegetal life to embody relational history through continued becoming. The viewer is invited to attend to the presence rather than decode the symbol.[30]

Ecological theology reinforces this perceptual shift by emphasizing participatory existence within creation. Trees mediate the atmosphere, stabilize the soil, sustain habitats, and remain vulnerable to disturbance. Recognition of such participation complicates distinctions between subject and environment, revealing relational embeddedness as a shared condition. The

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[26] Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible* (2014); Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth* (2018).
[27] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (1959); Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics* (1999).
[28] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958).
[29] Germano Celant, *Arte Povera* (1969); Penone, *Giuseppe Penone: The Hidden Life Within* (2018).
[30] Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking* (2013); Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants* (2018).

tree becomes perceptible as a neighbor through attentiveness rather than metaphorical extension.[31]

Visual art enables this attentiveness by slowing encounter and foregrounding material trace. Vegetal presence emerges as a witness to adaptation and persistence within ecological systems. Such witnessing does not resolve vulnerability but renders its continuity perceptible. Philosophical engagements with plant life increasingly emphasize precisely this form of relational ontology, wherein vegetal existence destabilizes inherited hierarchies of agency and perception.[32]

Placed alongside the cross, the tree deepens the perceptual field cultivated throughout this paper. Where the cross discloses rupture, the tree reveals endurance. Together, they cultivate awareness that refuge and exposure are intertwined conditions rather than opposites. The tree, therefore, functions as a relational witness whose presence expands the theological and visual terrain within which ecological belonging may be perceived.[33]

VII. Convergence and Conclusion

The cross and the tree have been approached here not as parallel symbols, but as visual and material figures through which relational perception may be cultivated. Together, they reveal complementary dimensions of exposure and belonging. The cross discloses rupture and threshold. The tree discloses duration and embeddedness. Their convergence holds these conditions in tension rather than resolution, inviting awareness that refuge and vulnerability are intertwined rather than opposed.[34]

To perceive this convergence is to reconsider neighborliness itself. Understood perceptually rather than solely ethically, neighborliness becomes the cultivated capacity to recognize shared exposure within relational environments. This recognition does not dissolve moral responsibility. It situates responsibility within attentiveness to encounter. Vulnerability appears not only in interpersonal scenes but across landscapes, organisms, and ecological systems whose precarity shapes human existence.[35]

Visual culture contributes to this cultivation by staging encounters that redistribute attention. Images that engage the cruciform form or vegetal presence do not resolve ecological or theological tensions. They hold viewers within spaces where relational exposure becomes perceptible. Through such encounters, perception becomes practice, and neighborliness emerges as an orientation grounded in attentiveness rather than abstraction.[36]

In the context of contemporary ecological instability, this perceptual orientation carries theological consequences. The cross and the tree invite reconsideration of belonging not as

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[31] Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation* (2015); Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (1985).
[32] Jeffrey Nealon, *Plant Theory* (2016); Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature* (2007).
[33] David Abram, *Becoming Animal* (2010); Ingold, *Being Alive*.
[34] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967); Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given* (2002).
[35] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016).
[36] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009); W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005).

possession of stable ground but as participation within shared fragility. They resist narratives of domination and insulation, directing attention toward relational coexistence sustained through exposure.[37]

These images do not impose metaphor upon ecological reality. They disclose possibilities already present within relational experience. To attend to them is to cultivate perception through which vulnerability, refuge, and belonging appear as shared conditions. The question of neighborliness, therefore, remains open. It persists not as a problem to solve, but as a perceptual horizon continually reshaped through encounter with human and more-than-human presence alike.[38]

[37] Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth* (2018); Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians* (1997).
[38] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*; Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

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