

First Reformed: Contextual Analysis

First Reformed (2017) is a film written and directed by Paul Schrader, starring Ethan Hawke, Amanda Seyfried, Cedric Kyles, and Victoria Hill. The film follows a small-time yet respected reverend of a small church in upstate New York and his life-changing encounter with a nihilistic climate change activist. This bizarre experience changes his outlook on faith, his own beliefs, and motives of the 'big machine' and the role it plays in his religious journey. The film is a deep character study, disguised as a psychological thriller-drama. A cerebral masterpiece, *First Reformed* follows themes of spiritual culture, environmentalism, radicalization, faith, and existentialism. Schrader made the film in 2017, a reasonably recent year in an era of widespread fear and panic regarding climate change, political change, and a swift change in the social and moral landscape of the United States. This essay will illustrate how the film tackles themes of transformation and spirituality within a modern context, reflecting upon its position within the socio-political landscape of the time it was made.

The film is, thematically, in large part, about environmental catastrophe and ecological destruction. There is a backdrop of stark criticism against industrialization and capitalism that looms over the events and characters of the film. Over the past few decades, there have been growing concerns regarding the future of our planet and how climate change and emissions from industrial production and consumption habits may lead us down a path of planetary collapse. Such panic has slowly grown within the world of science and the psyche of the educated public. As this panic has exponentially increased, it seems that the biggest polluters of the environment - big corporations - continue to ignore, or even double down on, their significant contribution to these phenomena. The film addresses all of these concerns through its protagonist - Reverend

Toller (Ethan Hawke). His internal and external struggles are manifestations of the effects of existentialism and growing despair within society, at an individual level. Toller's spirituality and faith come as both a challenge and a conduit for his development as a character and the changes he sees within himself. As he goes down a path of self-discovery, the film explores his changing outlook on religion, beliefs, and the motives of industrialization - and the role these changes play in his spiritual journey. Schrader makes us question our morality and purpose in this world and pack an all-encompassing question into a film that narrows the macroscopic impact of existential doom down to a relatively microscopic scale. He employs various technical and creative decisions to convey these messages and creates a compelling and visceral viewing experience.

This film is a sobering representation of how the threat of ecological collapse can affect one's mentality. Reverend Toller lives a relatively somber lifestyle in a small residence not too far from his place of work. Throughout the film, his narration clues us into how he navigates his daily life.

*Narration is the moment-by-moment process that guides viewers in building the story out of the plot. Many factors enter into narration, but the most important ones for our purposes involve the factors we've just sketched out: the range and the depth of story information that the plot presents (Thompson and Bordwell, *Film Art: An Introduction* 87).*

Schrader utilizes narration differently, though. Toller's voice is a separate character in and of itself; there is a slight disconnect between Toller's actions and his narration. The voice-over is not a mere representation or prediction of the plot events. Instead, it seems like Toller's alter ego feeds him ideas to push him toward radicalization. Toller's subconscious push towards radicalization is realized in the final scene of the film, wherein he straps a suicide vest to himself and wraps his body in the Crown of Thorns - striking an interesting balance between repentance

and continuity of sin.

Toller's self-destructive tendencies seem to play out in both subtle and glaring ways. His *external* struggle is characterized by his worsening health and alcohol abuse. We learn that Toller has stomach cancer and is pained regularly with pains in his abdomen and blood in his urine. In many instances during the film, we also recognize the steep alcoholism that plagues him. All of this is apparent within the first 15 minutes of the film, but it is clear to us that Toller's *internal* struggle is something that is kept from us, something deeper and more complex. As the movie progresses, these internal struggles come to light in the form of his sudden and growing feelings of existentialism.

In the middle of the first act, Toller encounters an expecting couple in his church. The wife, Mary (Amanda Seyfried), consults the Reverend on an issue regarding her marriage. We learn that her husband, Michael, is against the idea of them having a baby. This solid opposition for Mary, who is entirely against the idea of abortion, feels stuck and seeks Toller's help. He then visits these congregants' house in order to speak to Michael and better understand his position. Michael is revealed to be a strong environmentalist who presents himself to be deathly afraid of bringing another life into a world of *despair*, a world that is seemingly collapsing in on itself due to environmental degradation. This despair has led Michael to a dark place that feeds into his cynicism and existentialism. Through this conversation between Toller and Michael, we learn how Toller views God, and as he speaks to a fellow religious man, his acknowledgment of his own sins. We learn about his son, that had died in the war. These elements of his character form our expectations for the narrative going forward - expectations that may either be subverted or reinforced - and Reverend Toller becomes a much more comprehensive character through these two revelations. Once Michael, a depressed, nihilistic environmentalist, expresses his grief and

anguish about the world around him, we empathize with him. Not because we have a deeper connection to Michael but because it is relatable to the real world. These are concerns that everyone must deal with. The consequences of mass industrialization and consumerism are being seen right at this moment in the journey of humankind; radicals who demand change are going through extreme hardships with everlasting skepticism and cynicism.

Later in the film, when Michael is found as a victim of suicide by Toller, this shocks him into rethinking his own position on the world. This was not a sudden change in his conscience; the seeds of his transformation were planted in the earlier scene of their conversation. In his essay, "Into the Night: Religion and Environmental Catastrophe," Anthony Carew writes:

...as Michael presents him with grim facts about climate change, Toller's equanimity starts to erode, as if despair is being passed from one man to another, like germs in a pandemic. When Michael dies by his own hand, the reverend is essentially bequeathed his burden, as Toller starts contemplating his own acts of environmental activism and eco-terrorism (Carew 17-18).

First Reformed explores ideas of self-accountability and introspection regarding one's own actions and misdeeds regarding the environment from a fresh perspective - the spiritual. William Blizek, in his issue for the *Journal of Religion & Film*, claims that Toller's inner turmoil characterized by his lost soul is awfully similar to what "real religion" is; the search for self-knowledge and one's personal journey of finding their place within the universe (Blizek 1). He claims that this is a movie about a man's search for his soul and the recognition of the horror hidden deep inside of him. Toller recognizes his hypocrisy as he considers the fact that the church he works for, Abundant Life, is primarily funded by a prominent, mega-rich tycoon who

rebuffs climate change for the purpose of profit. Ed Balq, who can be considered the semi-protagonist of the film, owns multiple factories and toxic waste plants, and is also the main financial backer of Abundant Life. Toller begins to struggle with the fact that he, a now disturbed man who has seen the consequences of the pain brought out by such men, works for and is paid with this *blood money*; money at the expense of the well-being of the planet he lives on. This leads him to garner a growing sense of despair as he ventures down a road of self-destruction.

Paul Schrader's, as he calls it, signature "transcendental style" of storytelling and filmmaking has shined through in all of his works, dating all the way back to the 1970s, with his screenwriting work in *Taxi Driver*. His revolutionary book, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, discusses how a film can reach a special place in its existence wherein it succeeds in capturing the feeling of transcendence without anything about the filmmaking making it seem apparent. The editing is unceremonious, the camerawork is unfeeling, and the colors are cold; as Schrader describes, transcendence is "striving towards the ineffable and the invisible". In his attempts at achieving mystique, Schrader avoids vagueness and experimental style - he substitutes trope-y elements with a more unapparent approach toward the mystical. Blizek breaks this style down into three steps or components in the context of *First Reformed*. He says,

First the movie begins with the ordinary. Second, we encounter some kind of cognitive dissonance. We face some things that are incompatible...Third, we return to the ordinary, but we are now transformed. We may be in the ordinary, but we have transcended the incompatibility, the conflict (Blizek 2).

This theory of cognitive dissonance Blizek can be applied to Reverend Toller's struggle with the fact that his faith and spirituality are at odds with organized religion and political power; he wants to do good and be good but finds it impossible as a result of his position within the church and to his benefactors.

Paul Schrader and cinematographer Alexander Dynan succeed spectacularly in creating a rather poignant, yet neutral aesthetic for the film. Their use of metallic and uniform colors, and jarring switches to brighter and variable ones during crucial story beats illustrate the inner turmoil of our protagonist. Schrader also makes a bold decision to keep most of the shots static and immobile no matter the position of the characters. For instance, this is apparent in the diner scene with Jeffers, Ed Balq, and Toller. Toller is being reprimanded for his newfound environmentalism by his two bosses, both of whom consider it "bad PR" for their leading Reverend to be making statements against the Church's key benefactor. The scene begins with an establishing shot of the outside of a diner. We see a black, tinted-out SUV pull up to the front of it, dominating the frame. Out walks Ed Balq, escorted by his chauffeur. We are immediately aware that this is a man of high importance or status within the world this movie takes place. As he enters, we cut to him being greeted by the host at the diner, suggesting that he frequents this place and is, metaphorically, at home base. In the corner of this same shot of Balq entering, Reverend Toller is seen in the lower corner of the frame, almost cowering away from this confrontation. As Balq arrives at the table and sits opposite Jeffers and next to Toller, Toller moves further into the seat and disappears behind a table divider; but the camera does not move. Even when the subject is present outside the frame, Schrader chooses to keep the camera where it was. This technique is used most effectively in moments of disconnection and unfamiliarity - it puts us in the protagonist's shoes and brings to light the assumed narrative uncertainty. We sympathize with Toller in this scene and are also afraid for him. We are alienated from how he feels. His own fear of

confrontation has pushed him further away from us; we feel worlds apart from Toller and this only reinforces his feeling toward his own despair. Related to the subtraction of certain shots, in an interview with Randall Colburn for *Consequence of Sound*, Paul Schrader stated that “when you start withholding things, people become a little uncomfortable, and out of that discomfort, out of that disparity, you can weave another reality”.

Schrader also makes the world it presents feel small and claustrophobic, almost trapping its characters within its grasp. It is shot in Academy ratio, or 4:3 format, and “feels as if it’s pressing in on its characters” (Carew 2018). The art and set design evoke strong feelings of coldness and unwelcomeness; the church looks tight and run down, Toller’s residence feels dark and uninviting, even the outdoors feels uninhabitable - the grayness overshadows any feeling of upliftment or positivity. The despair his character enters seeps into the psyche of the viewer and as a result, the themes and tonal characteristics of the film begin to make themselves clear. In his article, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, French filmmaker and critic elucidates his perspective on photography being the quintessential innovation in contemporary art. He claims that photography “produces a reality of nature.” As he points out the surrealist nature of photography and the ‘image’, we find our intention to compare his analysis to Schrader’s accomplishment in *First Reformed* to be well founded. Schrader does not achieve the surrealism present in his film through any fancy techniques or CGI-filled dream sequences characterized by abstractions; his surrealism comes out in daily life. The nature of the story he is telling brings out the ineffable elements of the world it takes place in. The way he captures the world in which this story takes place provides it with a sense of realism that helps him treat his characters as they would appear in real life.

The mystical or fantastical elements of *First Reformed*, whether illustrated through the lens of faith, environmentalism or political commentary, all serve the thematic and narrative purposes of the film.

Regardless of what each individual viewer takes from the ending, Schrader accomplishes what he set out to - the viewer finds a piece of themselves that was once either lost or hidden. According to Schrader, that is the prime principle that pushes religion forward; it is the fact that no matter which faith or God humans follow, the very process of finding one's faith is to find *themselves* in a world of messes and evils. Reverend Toller's journey towards uncovering his truth led him down a dark path of despair, but eventually comes out on the side of *hope*.

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