

*Please cite the published version of this book chapter:

Chandler Rogers and Tober Corrigan. 2020. "The Dark Night of Ecological Despair: Awaiting Re-Consecration in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*." In *Philosophy, Film, and the Dark Side of Interdependence*, edited by Jonathan Beever, pp. 69-81. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington.

The Dark Night Of Ecological Despair: Awaiting Reconsecration in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*

Chandler Rogers and Tober Corrigan

After wrapping himself in barbed wire and covering himself with a bloodied vestment robe, Reverend Ernst Toller pours drain cleaner into an empty glass. He readies himself to drink the poison and end his life in a brutal and violent way, when a young woman appears in his peripheral vision. She comes to him like a guardian angel, calling him by name without moving, no sound beforehand to acknowledge if she had slipped in through the door or merely arrived. Toller lets the glass slip from his hand and walks with longing to the pregnant, cherubic woman before him. He embraces her, then draws her into a long, passionate kiss. A haunting solo vocalist singing "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" provides the soundtrack for the scene, heightening the drama and lending cathartic significance to this impulsive, carnal act. Cut to black.

Described above is the final scene from writer-director Paul Schrader's film *First Reformed* (2018). It's a climactic moment that's hard to interpret, even for those who have taken the full journey and watched the film in its entirety. Yet as with so much of Schrader's work the *chaos* of this ending is very much by intention. Schrader has admitted in interviews about the film that its ending is "designed to be ambiguous" (Cortellessa 2018). The final scene as it now exists was, after all, adapted deep into the eleventh hour of the post-production process. Schrader made continual editing tweaks to the scene we have just outlined in detail, always in hopes of reaching a "50/50-ish split" on the audience's answer to the question of whether Mary's appearance was real or imagined.

Whether Toller is really seeing Mary or just imagining her is an interesting question, but an even more distressing one—deep beneath the mere diegesis of the film—remains for the viewer. It is the question each audience member must ultimately face for themselves as the credits roll: how do we live, even thrive, in a world where every person, act of nature, and outside force appears to be conspiring to hasten the end of life on earth? How do we press on once we become existentially aware of the horrors of interdependence, when seemingly autonomous human actions added together inevitably lead to drastic ecological consequences? If Toller's final moments on-screen are unresolved merely for the sake of ambiguity, many will walk away with only heightened anxiety and confusion. For those who commiserate in Toller's inner darkness, the despair may be taken to heart too literally. Yet a third reading of the film's ending does exist, and can be accessed with the help of an elucidating framework.

Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's work on religion and the hermeneutics of suspicion, we argue that *First Reformed* and its ending actually provides an implicit way forward, a glimmer of hope amidst the overwhelming darkness of seemingly inevitable environmental trauma. With Ricoeur's essay "Religion, Atheism, and Faith" as our guide, we maintain that Toller's final hope must rest in openness to transcendence—which in Toller's case arrives in the face of the Other, incarnate. His fate stands or falls with a receptivity to the Other that has passed from an abstract, other-worldly belief in resigned interconnectedness, through the dark night of ecological despair, wherein he recognizes the dark underbelly of self-interested, otherworldly concerns in their corporate effects upon all species, and finally to embrace the carnal, the mundane, and the *this-worldly*. By charting *First Reformed* loosely on Ricoeur's design in this way, we hope to demonstrate the film's philosophical weight, emphasizing its timeliness in highlighting a veiled response to the heightened environmental, political and cultural climates of our time, and the way these stifle our own ability to relate to one another in authentically positive ways.

To briefly outline the film's plot, *First Reformed* follows the aforementioned Toller, pastor of a dying Dutch Reformed church, who, in meeting an environmental activist, Michael, and his wife, Mary, becomes attuned to the realities of rapid, anthropogenic climate change. At their fateful first meeting, Toller attempts to comfort Michael's distress at what he believes to be the end of the world by relying on abstracted notions of "courage" and "grace" in the face of the unknown. At this point in the film it is understood that Toller has resigned the enjoyment of worldly pleasures, conceiving of his religious community as a loosely connected conglomerate in this life, whose real cohesion will only blossom in the next. In contrasting the extreme solipsism of Toller's actions with the inherent role of his vocation as luminous comforter, we come to understand the belief system that he *actually lives out* to reflect a world made of interconnected, autonomous agents leading loosely related, but ultimately separate lives.

Yet when Michael commits suicide two days later, arranging for Toller to be the first to find his corpse, the Reverend becomes doubly horrified, both by the image of the corpse and by his sudden existential implication in the larger ecological drama which first prompted Michael's own despair. As the script unfolds, Toller stumbles down a path marked by increasingly dark discoveries. He finds that environmental destruction is inextricably intertwined with corporate greed, hypocritical religious institutions, apathetic attitudes, and gross self-interest. The more he aspires to make a positive change, to involve himself with matters in the here-and-now, the more he experiences palpable resistance from the very leaders of the religious and business world[s] that have assumed fiscal responsibility for his atrophying country church. As a result, Toller comes to reckon with his own powerlessness to effect change on his own, turning his once-thin conception of the world as interconnected—necessarily interacting, but with agents largely left to their own devices and potentials—on its head and revealing the darkness of interdependent living that's been present all along. The truth, he must now recognize with much terror and despair, is that we necessarily depend on one another's actions for our own existence and flourishing.

This discovery and other factors lead him to identify fully with Michael, as he gives himself over to despair after multiple failed attempts to help others see the light. He eventually becomes convinced that ending his life, and taking a few perpetrators out with him, is the only redemptive move still available to him. Yet in the film's ending scene, it is Mary who, either as a vision from God or as one who happens to be in the right place at the right time, breaks in radically from

without to save Toller from himself. Her unforeseen entrance compels Toller to choose love against all odds—not just as an idea or as a religious rite, but as a vulnerable and pre-conceptual act of the body.

Where First Reformed and Philosophy Meet

The thematic arc of *First Reformed* and the argumentation of “Religion, Atheism, and Faith” share common ground in part because of their similar cultural contexts. Both writer-director Paul Schrader and philosopher Paul Ricoeur attempt in these works to bear witness to sincere religious exploration in an otherwise post-religious age. After over a half century of writing and directing films known for their controversial characters (such as the disturbed Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*) and taboo alterations to sacred subject matter (such as the unorthodox depiction of Jesus Christ in *The Last Temptation of Christ*), Schrader finally chooses, in *First Reformed*, to make an austere and slow-moving religious drama, removing the stylistic punches for which his fans and critics had largely come to know him. Unlike the explosive *Taxi Driver* or the anachronistic *Last Temptation*, Schrader mostly plays *First Reformed* straight, at least until the eruptive ending, keeping the camera direction, performances, soundtrack and *mise-en-scène* withdrawn and cerebral for the majority of the film’s running time.

However, Schrader’s link to religious, or spiritual, cinema actually reaches back to his only book-length study of filmic style, *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972). In it, Schrader traces the transcendental through film history with extended readings on the works of such hallmark international filmmakers as Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu and Carl Theodor Dreyer. Besides their shared style, each director also shared an intense interest in spiritual themes, exploring them deeply and without irony. Until *First Reformed*, Schrader had never tried to make a film even remotely similar to Bresson, Ozu or Dreyer.¹ In an interview with *Vulture* magazine, Schrader admitted to often feeling too “intoxicated with action, empathy, sex and violence,” and other aspects of film that weren’t “in the transcendental tool kit” (Lincoln 2018). It wasn’t until after a conversation with the Polish director Pawel Pawlikowski, whose 2013 *Ida* Schrader considered to be a contemporary exemplar of transcendental style, that he finally felt ready to take on the type of sincere religious exploration he’d watched with an academic rigor for so many decades.

Similarly, Ricoeur moves with caution before embarking on his own religious project. He knows he can only broach the subject of religion by first framing his “Religion, Atheism, and Faith” as a deep and probing response to the religious disenchantment wrought upon Western civilization by Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. From the first line of the essay, Ricoeur admits to the reckless ambition of his pursuit: “the subject of this essay compels me to take up a radical challenge” (Ricoeur 1974, 440). He presses on, at peace with the risk of “failing to reach the goal”, of articulating a vision of a post-religious “faith” (Ricoeur 1974, 441). Ricoeur argues that true religious belief, or faith, comes only on the other side of a dark night: that of atheism. Toller’s

¹ For a more comprehensive look at Paul Schrader's overall thesis in *Transcendental Style In Film*, read “Will God Forgive Us?: Interdependence and Self-Transcendence in Paul Schrader’s *First Reformed*” by Vernon W. Cisney (see Chapter 3 of the current volume). In it, Cisney details the parallels between *First Reformed* and works by transcendental stylists Robert Bresson and Carl Theodor Dreyer. He also unpacks *Transcendental Style* and its own relation to 20th century philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his concept of the time-image. Cisney argues for Schrader's evocation of the transcendental style as a central piece to *First Reformed's* formulations on salvation and experience with the divine.

journey, as written and directed by Schrader, bears this journey out in cinematic form. Such a night radically calls into question the ordinary psychical and cultural functions of “religion,” namely accusation and protection: “I thus understand religion as a primitive structure of life which must always be overcome by faith and which is grounded in the fear of punishment and the desire for protection.”

Disillusionment With An Inconvenient Truth

First Reformed opens with Toller already deep into the night of Ricoeur’s “atheism.” By this we mean that the process of purgation, or of burning away the chaff of religious observances carried out solely on the basis of the primitive psychical functions Ricoeur describes, has begun. Toller is first introduced by way of voiceover narration, explaining that he is conducting an “experiment” which consists of writing out his thoughts in a journal and refusing to edit or alter a single word. At the end of one year, he vows to destroy the materials in that journal twice over: “shredded, then burnt.” This twist on religious meditation is his particularized form of prayer. However, his definition—“a communication...achieved simply....without prostration or abnegation”—absolves him of the bodily vulnerabilities typically associated with the act.

Toller’s dispassionate, measured, and un-inflected tone adds to the rational, ordered, and even lifeless persona first presented on screen. His personality finds visual corroboration in static establishing shots of his bedroom: church pamphlets; an encased Union flag; a single painting. The spartan accommodations lack any hint of a personal touch. Everything in the room looks tidy, proportional, and preserved, as if in a museum. We later learn that the church over which Toller presides, *First Reformed*, functions less as a place of worship than as a site of historical significance. Toller’s life, like his church, is undefiled, solipsistic, isolated. This abstracted way of interacting with the world puts him in tension with the role of religious comforter and guide that he is meant to assume, and which still holds some semblance of power over him, even if just symbolic. He eventually admits, again over voiceover, his inability to speak-pray. Instead he confines the act to scribbles and movements of the hands, limiting his body’s role in spiritual expression.

Despite living out the critique of Nietzsche and Freud subliminally, Toller retains a warped optimism about the consequences of interconnectedness on this side of paradise. Toller often projects positive generalities onto others even when they may not deserve such distinction. In another early voiceover narration, Toller observes that youth attendees of *Abundant Life*, the megachurch supporting and funding *First Reformed*’s operational costs, were “so excited and so full of life” in his last visit to their midweek meeting. He particularly notes the way “they were open” and how “they welcomed communion.” When the film later shows us this youth group, we learn that Toller’s observations couldn’t be further from the truth. The young adults are divisive and self-centered, succumbing to political platitudes and other prejudices passed down by unquestioning parents. How can Toller so thoroughly misunderstand his own surroundings? The strongest answer rests with his abstracted and resigned position, having seemingly removed himself from the chain of interdependence and reliance upon others in his larger community.

Toller’s own progression from solipsistic clergyman to radically unconventional martyr expresses the heightening of the tensions within the second phase of the journey which Ricoeur depicts as a

necessary purgative for the person of classical religion living in a post-religious age. Implied in our analysis of *First Reformed*, and in Ricoeur's essay, is the assumption that a religion based merely in slavish obedience to a pre-established code of ethics, and guilt-ridden punishment for disobedience, cannot possibly console us in these confusing contemporary times. This very fact is represented in the character of Michael, Mary's husband and a now-radicalized environmental activist.

The central drama of the film begins when Toller meets Michael and becomes attuned to the realities of rapid, anthropogenic climate change through him. After rattling off several distressing scientific predictions about cataclysmic degenerations likely to take effect before 2050, Michael confesses his exhaustion: "I thought things could change, you know? I thought people would listen." Far from acknowledging the peril of the situation Michael has described, Toller asks, "Do you have thoughts of harming yourself?" Characteristically, Toller's responses hardly address the ecological content Michael keeps attempting to shift to the forefront of their conversation. Refusals to fully engage with these facts are propelled by the unquestioning, unyielding belief that the world will, somehow, keep spinning.

As Michael brings Toller to face harder and harder questions, Toller begins to discern the deeper, spiritual problem at hand: despair, or hopelessness, in the face of a vast and overpowering crisis his religious convictions have no direct answer for. Toller's final answer—"Who can know the mind of God?"—to a particularly piercing question from Michael—"Will God forgive us?"—is ultimately an act of concession, and not just to Michael's way of thinking, but also to the hermeneutics of suspicion that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud set into motion, whereby the God of morality and order ultimately exists in an "ideal realm" which in fact may "not exist" despite a religious person's devotion to it (Ricoeur 1974, 443). Though not yet convinced that this particular idea of God, and this particular form of religion, have been exposed or critiqued, Toller has been convicted by the possibility that he is wrestling with a new, higher power: despair in the face of interdependent ruin and abandon. All of this is found and personified in Michael. In retrospect, Toller speaks of feeling as though in their dialogue he was as Jacob wrestling the angel, engaged in a struggle that was ultimately "exhilarating."

Yet no matter how far Toller's perspective has shifted in the direction of ascetic individualism, his own struggles with despair did not, we eventually learn, materialize *ex nihilo*. Bearing witness to the despair in his own past, Toller explains that despite his ex-wife's insistence to the contrary, as a former military chaplain he had persuaded his son to join the armed forces. "I talked my son into a war that had no moral justification," he confesses, referring to the war in Iraq. After his son's death and his own subsequent divorce, Toller feels he can speak to this would-be father from experience: "And Michael, I can promise you, whatever despair you feel about bringing a child into this world cannot equal the despair of taking a child from it." Having lost both son and wife, and having faced such darkness, Toller was somehow able to maintain *hope*—even if that hope serves merely as a coping mechanism, marred by isolation and the undefiled purity of an abstract religiosity.²

² While we are only able to touch briefly on the specifically interdependent relations of parent and child, Eunah Lee's "Love and Horror: In Bong Joon-Ho's *Mother* and Lee Chang-Dong's *Poetry*" (see Chapter 1 of the current volume) plays out the potentially harmful scenarios that can arise when "selfless love" for a child turns into "collective egoism." The two films offer extreme and morally-challenging examples of mother-child relationships as

When Toller finds Michael's mutilated corpse two days later, Michael's convictions no longer merely elicit religious reservations from the reverend; the very tangible act of suicide moves Toller into a physical state of revulsion. The darkness of despair which Toller believed could be found in each one of us is no longer only a concept or an idea. Death has manifested itself in flesh and blood. As Toller becomes the first human witness to this carnage, he feels a complicity in the act that causes immediate shame. The corpse is also the exemplar of a psychoanalytic phenomenon coined by philosopher Julia Kristeva, that of abjection:

In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its border: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object (Kristeva 1982, 4).

Kristeva expresses in abjection the way in which a nihilistic loss of self-identity need not come through disillusionment concerning the state of society, nor through the loss of certain ideals; it need only begin in the gut, or the gag reflex. The sad, logical conclusion of Michael's pessimism has become quite tangible in the physical realities of buckshot and blood spatter. Yet in death, Michael's life takes on a higher, symbolic meaning. His mangled body snares Toller and drags him headlong into the larger ecological drama already unfolding, to which the reverend had been blind. Toller's intuitions break down in contact with the real. He simply cannot forget or ignore the call to action which now bears association to the revolutive pull, the sight and smells, of the rotting corpse.

Independence Turns Dark

Little does Toller know that the very act of following through with Michael's request for a memorial service at a local toxic waste dump places him in contentious political opposition to the larger community of which he finds himself apart. Yet when he *does* realize this fact, he only feels greater license to take a stand in deed rather than just in word. As the teen choir from the Abundant Life megachurch sings Neil Young's "Who's Gonna Stand Up?" during Michael's memorial service, the camera cuts to a momentary close-up of Toller, looking weighed down and convicted. In a tense breakfast meeting with Pastor Jeffers, the head of Abundant Life, and key congregation member Edward Balq, the prime benefactor for First Reformed's reconsecration service and CEO of an egregiously polluting, multi-billion-dollar corporation, Toller is accused of misrepresenting the church with this politically tinged "protest memorial." Rather than silently acquiescing with a forced apology, Toller fights back in words, posing Michael's recurring haunting question: "*Will God forgive us?*"

Toller's past prescriptions for living, that of rejecting all worldly pleasures *and* all worldly responsibilities, can no longer hold. In fact, Toller's own identity as an estranged clergyman, wrought of his own volition after the fallout from his son's death, and divorce from his wife, is contingent upon the oppositional understanding of the Pastor Jefferses and Edward Balqs of the

a way of illustrating this "horrible paradox of love," with the power of memory being Lee's argued sole antidote to a sympathy that otherwise becomes susceptible to corruption and horrific actions.

world. This too necessarily includes whatever unethical measures these leaders keep in place regarding the environment to ensure the status quo remains unchanged. In equal turn, those with the greatest power and reach in Toller's immediate religious circles are themselves dependent on the perceived value of religion as a communal force for justification to carry out their politically motivated agendas. Toller's post has become less a symbol of the service of genuine spiritual endeavor, and more a symbol for the pomp and circumstance that keep religion 'historically important' as well as culturally profitable, catering to the constituents of a particular socio-political context. But what about (environmental) justice?

As Toller argues this very point with Jeffers and Balq, a voiceover from a later journal entry layers over the scene: "The man who says nothing always seems more intelligent." As if against his will, the deeper convictions of a once-silent Toller are now coerced into the light. Either from panic or uncertainty, Toller doubles down on his new, self-righteous moral agenda from this point on, whereby he breaks the silence and takes a stand against injustice. However, he quickly comes to face the effects that the darker implications of interdependent thinking can have on a human psyche. When no one is the sole cause or sole moral arbiter of anything, and when no one feels particularly responsible for the compounded effects of millions of individualized actions—when the conservative religious community from which Toller has emerged does not recognize the horrors of globalized *interdependence*, which an unquestioned modern emphasis on radical individualism only compounds—despair can only heighten, approaching a breaking point.

A pivotal scene between Toller and Mary following Michael's death is perhaps the most purely cinematic representation in the film of this very conundrum. In this scene Mary comes to Toller's room behind the church out of a fear she can't explain. "I'm frightened, I'm frightened of everything," she admits as she walks in. Mary recounts the litany of vivid experiences that have begotten her unseated anxiety. Explaining her deepening depression, she alludes to "the roof falling down," also proclaiming that a "dark curtain just fell." As an antidote to these anxieties, present even before Michael's death, she and her late husband used to perform a calming, meditative act which they called "the Magical Mystery Tour." As she describes it, the two would lay on top of each other "to get as much body-to-body contact as possible," looking deeply into one other's eyes. They would move their eyes in unison and begin to breathe in rhythm, becoming one in body and in soul. The Magical Mystery Tour is an initial means to stave off the despair and dread. The act, in essence, is expressive of an idealized interconnectedness.

As if hoping that this can alleviate his own despair, compounded by the crescendo of recent events, Toller invites Mary to join him in performing the Magical Mystery Tour. Mary lays on top of him, and they clasp hands and breathe together. After an elongated moment of stillness in the frame, something magical indeed does happen. Becoming one, they begin to levitate. The act is never explained within the confines of the film, but the consequences are clear: Toller and Mary have found a connection that transcends the weight of the concerns of this world. In an equally stunning move, Schrader fades out the drab and dimly-light backdrop of Toller's room to fade in images of the bright and wondrous cosmos, seen from above. Now Toller and Mary are floating in space, and light, ethereal music plays to further communicate the sense of wonder and enchantment that comes from being swept up in and entranced by visions of the harmonious interconnectedness of the universe.

The scene shifts to show snow-capped mountains, ocean waves and other idyllic images, a montage that feels straight out of a nature documentary. Through this series of images, the film communicates the visual idea that a fundamental interconnection is possible between us, and that “considering things in interaction” yields positive, even Edenic possibilities (Sharma 2015, 2). The most notable aspect of these backdrops, however, is that all human presence is absent. The prehuman harmony assumes a lack of interference, exposing the assumption that humanity is no longer woven into the fabric of a natural, cosmic harmony.

As the camera moves in closer to focus on Toller’s face, we discover that he is no longer looking into Mary’s eyes. He parts her hair away and looks into the void of images, with fear in his eyes, for he realizes only too well the interdependent workings of humanity and the effects of their actions upon earth’s ecological relations. Next, the background gives way to equally massive landscapes, only the open land has become transformed by lanes of idling, honking cars and miles of landfill waste. Bright and uplifting music now becomes dark and foreboding, while the camera pans further up, removing Toller and Mary entirely from the scene, so that only an eerie collection of smokestacks and fiery wastelands remain. With this strange but powerful overall sequence, Schrader invites the audience to experience for themselves first the phenomenology of interconnectedness and its naive separation of human and nonhuman actors, then the realities of ecological interdependence and its darker underbelly.

A Radical Response (And A Divine Interruption)

As a result of growing despair, increasingly embodying his implicit recognition of the darker horrors behind the fundamentally interdependent state of all beings on earth, Toller turns to bitterness and resentment. The more evidence of earth’s destruction he sees on Michael’s internet search history, and the more dismayed he becomes in response to the sheer ignorance of those around him—concerning their own complicity in this ecological nightmare—the more Toller draws battle lines between ecological friends and ecological enemies. In a move towards extremism, Toller recovers the suicide jacket Michael had built in his garage and begins to toy with the idea of using it to blow up First Reformed during its coming reconsecration service. The next several voiceovers from Toller employ violent and apocalyptic Biblical language, quoting Matthew 12:37 and Revelation 11:18. The latter verse was not Schrader’s original choice for this scene, as he divulges in the DVD commentary (Schrader 2018). However, he felt going to Revelation was necessary in order to truly telegraph to the audience Toller’s transition into Jihadism before he is actually seen putting on the suicide bomber jacket and thereafter occupying the role of terrorist-martyr.

This move toward extremism largely stems from Toller’s own solitude in a sea of ignorance, and disillusionment regarding the lack of a single clear cause driving the evil he has finally come to see clearly. Though he confides in Mary alone about his inner transformation, he chooses to restrict himself to speaking to her in veiled parables and cryptic lines; for instance, “I believe Michael was standing on holy ground that day”—the day of his suicide. Schrader highlights the increasingly extreme, increasingly isolating paradox of being an individual in the age of the internet: it becomes all too easy to shut oneself up behind closed doors and read only material that reinforces one’s already entrenched views and beliefs, to pull away from society and retreat to a fringe group, and to acquiesce to politically motivated, ideological binaries that villainize all opposing viewpoints.

Such enclosure inevitably gives way to Nietzschean madness. For all of his leveling of religious hypocrisy, ultimately Nietzsche could not live up to his own ideal: “His aggression against Christianity remains caught up in the attitude of resentment...fall[ing] short of a pure affirmation of life” (Ricoeur 1974, 447). In a similar way, at this point in the film Toller is ill-equipped to embody the type of person who sees clearly the thickly interwoven webs of overconsumption, corruption, and ecological degradation, and is able to withstand the draw toward *ressentiment* that occurs in the process. Much like the Nietzsche who bemoans the permeation of such nihilistic tendencies, for the duration of the film Toller’s body literally suffers the effects of increasing material degradation.

The first time we see Toller preside over a church service he is coughing, presumably with a cold or fever. However, we quickly learn that he is nursing a much deeper illness, which, we eventually discover, is cancer. We see him retch, wince in pain as he urinates, and produce bloody stool. The more *aware* Toller believes he is becoming about the world, the less he takes care of his body, allowing its disintegration. The increase in despair at the particular level therefore corresponds to an increase in material degradation at the corporate level. Once again he rejects the bodily, this time in the belief that he is withdrawing from a frighteningly interdependent community rather than an arbitrarily interconnected one.

With Toller preparing to carry out his suicide mission, we return to the film’s final scene. As the reconsecration service begins, Toller prepares his vest. But when Mary shows up to the service he’s forced to change his plans. He wraps himself in barbed wire and prepares to drink the hemlock. But Mary, suddenly appearing, calls the Reverend by his first name: Ernst. It is a name no one else calls him in the film, her usage connoting intimacy and familiarity. She says it softly, warmly, yet without moving. With this invocation she transcends the dichotomy between clergyman and layperson, as if emboldened by a spirit of great authority and confidence. Toller immediately drops his glass, so surprised he is by this outside voice. He had become so consumed by the isolation of his own violent wishes that it failed him (and the audience) to consider an outside presence ever being possible again. Yet Mary’s voice breaks through, striking in Toller “an obedience that is no longer infected with accusation, prohibition, and condemnation” (Ricoeur 1974, 447). How did she come through the door? This is never explained, no initial sound cue given to suggest an entrance. As explained in this chapter’s beginning, Schrader never discloses why or how she arrives. All we know is that she is here, and that her appearance, along with her words, offer a lifeline to Toller, who can choose to become receptive again to someone—or something—outside himself once again.

As Toller strides across the hall to meet her in an embrace, her pregnant body against his pierced, bleeding flesh, we must yet understand that there is no leaving this film with an easy answer. It is the same realization Toller had come to just moments before, while planning his suicide, and it is a realization given a name by Ricoeur: that of *resignation*, or full recognition of the inescapability of human suffering (Ricoeur 1974, 461). Ricoeur locates the movement of resignation first in the Biblical story of Job, whose tragic faith through great suffering is rewarded by the interruptive voice of God. Job is *spoken to*, no longer merely spoken about. That in itself, according to Ricoeur, is enough. After all, “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” is far from an all-encompassing consolation or answer to the perils of such suffering. Yet the intimacy the

presence of the Other alone can provide, interrupting the suffocating loneliness of disillusionment and isolation, proves sufficient for Job and for Toller alike.³ Until this moment no character in the film has been allowed to set foot in Toller's private quarters, the physical location where his most intimate thoughts are trapped in his journal, and the place of compounded neuroses stemming from the information gleaned from the search history on Michael's laptop. Mary's presence interrupts the silent resignation of Toller's heart: "the occurrence of word...creates a link; dialogue is in itself a mode of consolation" (Ricoeur 1974, 461).

This leads to a second movement, which Ricoeur labels *consolation*. As the camera starts to swirl around Toller and Mary, the two now kissing with great passion and desire, we find that Schrader's use of dialectic here is not with words but with bodies. At first Toller moves almost mechanically toward Mary. But in their kiss, the camera having no clear point of stasis, we experience a cinematic evocation of the sacramental quality of love, stumbling into intimations of an underlying goodness that emerges immanently, from *within* the natural order. In this final embrace, the very beginning of new life, Toller's burden has been lifted. Michael's lost faith in the possibility of life becomes a hope reconsecrated, with Toller's silent vow to raise his as yet unborn daughter. From the breakdown of symbolization in revulsion before Michael's mangled corpse, here with the promise of new life has emerged the promise of the deliverance of a reconsecrated word.

Having passed through the night of ecological despair, abstract and isolating notions of religion, piety, and devotion thrown out with it, the only thing that stops Toller from regressing to the most extreme form of political activism, and self-annihilation, is a passionate love which breaks in radically from the outside in the form of Mary. The film's ending suggests that the call of the Other overwhelms guilt, and a tendency toward self-mutilation—both for Toller and for the humanity he represents. Far from Toller's initially theoretical relation to transcendence, the love displayed in this final kiss is love incarnate, profoundly carnal and intimately present in this world. In Toller we can recognize our own temptation to despair in light of the horrors of interdependence, in the face of overwhelming denial or even petty religious justifications. *First Reformed* takes on the ecological terrors of our globalized, interdependent world, holds up the frankness of these dark realities to us as in a mirror, and offers a response that begins to expose some of the deeper roots of our ecological crisis. It points us forward to a post-religious faith, grounded in a final, unexpected affirmation of the very goodness of creation.

³ Cf. Levinas 1969, 93ff.

References

- Cortellessa, E. (2018, June 13). "Paul Schrader on First Reformed's Provocative Ending and Its Many Influences." Retrieved from <https://slate.com/culture/2018/06/first-reformed-ending-paul-schrader-explains-why-its-designed-to-be-ambiguous.html>
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Lincoln, K. (2018, May 14). "Paul Schrader Comes To Jesus." Retrieved from <https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/paul-schrader-on-first-reformed.html>
- Ricoeur, P. 1974. "Religion, Atheism, and Faith." In *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde, pp. 440-467. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Sharma, Kriti. 2015. *Interdependence: Biology and Beyond*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Schrader, P. 2018. *First Reformed*. United States: Killer Films.
- . 1972. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Berkeley: University of California Press.