

Reckoning with the Anthropocene: Human Impact, Existential Crisis and Ecological Ethics in *First Reformed*

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Abstract

The Anthropocene, defined by humanity's profound impact on Earth's systems, finds a compelling expression in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed* (2017). This film unravels a narrative steeped in the ecological anxieties and moral dilemmas that portray an era of environmental degradation. At its heart lies Reverend Ernst Toller, a conflicted spiritual leader whose personal torment mirrors the broader existential crises of a world on the brink of collapse. Through its stark imagery and poignant storytelling, the film invites contemplation of the intricate entanglements between human spirituality, ethical responsibility, and ecological fragility.

Schrader in *First Reformed* puts forth rich symbolism and varied narrative elements that suggest the total estrangement of humanity from nature. Through the depiction of barren landscapes and recurring images of decay, the movie portrays how human interventions have been devastating for nature. The literary choices of the film evoke a cinematic and philosophical worldview, which facilitates a profound investigation of themes that serve as stark reminders of existentialism and ecological ethics. The movie can be evaluated in the light of concepts such as Morton's "dark ecology" and Heidegger's "dwelling". The analysis based on these ideas would rather bring into the picture how humanity and its environment are deeply connected, where ethical responsibility towards nature is disrupted.

First Reformed compels a deep critique of the Anthropocene, where subtle, individual human struggles are paralleled against a spectrum of environmental crises. The ecological concerns are raised not as an interrogation but have been presented through the journey of Reverend Toller, who carries a moral and ethical dilemma. His emotions represent the collective guilt of humanity against the ecological decay that at times evades and awakens in his role towards the environment. The movie clearly captures the tension between human society and natural systems, making the consequences of the Anthropocene more visible.

The movie, through its narrative, themes and imagery, is a vital context to explore the purpose of contemporary cinema and environmental humanities. The landscape of the Anthropocene has to be reimagined and reconstructed to explore ecological and existential themes. Through its unflinching gaze, the film becomes both a mirror and a call to action, capturing the cultural and moral dimensions of an era defined by human influence.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Ecological ethics, Existentialism, Environmental humanities, Cinematic symbolism

The Anthropocene, an epoch defined by humanity's profound and irreversible impact on Earth's ecosystems, is vividly rendered in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*. The film functions as a cinematic meditation on ecological degradation, spiritual disconnection, and ethical accountability. Reverend Ernst Toller, the film's central figure, embodies the existential and moral dilemmas of navigating a world on the precipice of collapse, his internal struggles mirroring the broader crises of the Anthropocene. Ernest Toller plays a Protestant minister who is depressed at the loss of his son and is unsure about the faith he is preaching. His problems become more complicated when Mary comes to meet him to share her apprehension, Michael's depression and suicidal tendency over the ecological crisis.

First Reformed is a psychological thriller starring Ethan Hawke set in New York, where he is a minister of a church. He has growing concerns over his health, disillusionment in the scenario of loss of faith and is horrified at the state of the planet, he is part of. The film is a profound meditation on the struggle between faith and overwhelming despair, particularly in the face of a seemingly intractable environmental crisis. The movie captures the isolation of the minister, Reverend Toller, who is suffering from loneliness and despair. The film is rich with symbolic images, and the decisions of the characters underline their ignorance regarding climate change and how irresponsible religious institutions are compromising with corporate organisations. The movie navigates pressing contemporary issues: environmental collapse, the commercialization of religion, and social isolation, which could lead to a crisis of faith and a spiritual awakening for individuals like Toller.

Paul Schrader's *First Reformed* serves as a profound exploration of existential despair, ecological crisis, and spiritual inquiry. The Anthropocene underlines the irreparable damage humankind has inflicted on Earth. This geological time of Earth's history challenges the orthodox theological outlook, where one cannot overlook the ecological degradation and the failure of moral responsibility. The conversation between Reverend Toller and Michael, played by Ethan Hawke and Philip Ettinger, respectively, is the pivotal scene of the movie that initiates a serious meditation on the Anthropocene. In the movie, Toller, a pastor who is quite unstable about his own faith, meets Michael, a disillusioned environmental activist who is on the verge of suicide owing to depression. The dialogue is not in an assured setting but in a hopeless air. Toller is unable to convince himself to place his arguments before Michael, who is not sensibly available for any counsel and has his own convictions to bring an end to his life. It is more like the failure of spirituality and the severity of ecological damage. Michael raises his despair early in the conversation, stating, "It is just inevitable. The Earth is dying. The environment is collapsing. Species are going extinct every day. And what do we do? Nothing. We are killing ourselves and we are killing everything else too" (Schrader 2017).

Michael, as evident from his words, is overwhelmed by 'eco-pessimism' where he stares at an imminent doom to humanity on earth. His statement clearly captures the existential crisis associated with the Anthropocene. The words reflect profound

‘ecological grief’, which is a psychological and sentimental response to the loss of a blissful environment. It also reminds us of the precarious state and anguish of individuals against a collapsing nature, where any prospect of mending is unreal.

Reverend Toller responds with a mixture of theological reflection and personal uncertainty. He asks, "Will God forgive us for what we're doing to His creation?" (Shrader 2017) This rhetorical question highlights the profound moral and spiritual implications of ecological degradation. It suggests a dual failure: humanity's negligence and the inadequacy of religious frameworks to address the Anthropocene crisis. The exchange between Toller and Michael reveals a theological tension in the Anthropocene. Michael's despair reflects a loss of faith in human capability, and perhaps in divine intervention. In contrast, Toller's question implies that humanity's ecological sins demand accountability, not only to future generations but also to a divine authority.

These relevant questions of both Toller and Michael directly challenge the Anthropocene notion of human superiority over nature, a concept validated in the chapter of ‘Genesis’. Toller's viewpoint can also be referred to as "eco-theology," which is a desperate and futile reinterpretation of religious doctrines in the context of environmental ethics to pacify environmentalists and rationalists. The movie highlights the destructive consequences of the unrestrained dominion of humanity over nature. The conversation between the two is more significant as there is no resolution to the problems raised. As the queries are left unresolved, the movie is open for discussion and critical analysis for the viewers and critics. Michael's loss of faith in institutions to address the issue is contrasted with Toller's futile efforts to propose a solution. Their discussion urges the need for a significant discussion on how Anthropocene has to be addressed to resolve a conflict of interests. The question remains, ‘Is it right to take a stand of radical pessimism like Michael or look forward to redemption, as echoed by Toller?’

Toller's journal is a reflection of his thoughts on the conversation he had with Michael. He writes down, “Courage is the solution to despair. Reason provides no answers. I can only hope that God will forgive us” (Shrader 2017). This statement highlights the existential struggle in the film. The struggle is equally that of Michael and Toller, leaving no exemption for all of humanity. It has been portrayed as a conflict of despair against faith and action against indifference, which brings out the film's fundamental existential struggle, which cannot forbear an impending ecological collapse.

One can view the encounter between Reverend Toller and Michael in *First Reformed* as a thought-provoking context of the existential predicaments and ethical responsibilities of the Anthropocene. Their conversation is rich with themes of anguish, culpability and the chances of redemption. The dialogue instigates audiences, both religious and secular, to revisit their role in the ecological crisis. The director, Schrader, has placed the conversation to elicit the best in the script to facilitate a critical analysis for viewers on how humanity has to be responsible in an epoch where its destructive

actions have to be replaced by sustainable practices. The conversation can be perceived as the most relevant and dramatic high point in the movie. The dialogue significantly contributes to the objective discussion around the Anthropocene, which demands introspection of human interventions and necessary remedial measures to reverse the ecological crisis of the Earth.

A depressed Michael is on the verge of suicide, and he has made an explosive-filled vest ready for it. His decision is a symbolic and literal rejection of hope in ecological degradation. His choice to end his life is a rational and sentimental reaction to the passivity of the institutions against the ecological crisis. The decision can also be seen as his conviction on the inadequacy of individual and collective measures to address the large-scale harm to its habitat. Michael's decision is a result of "eco-anxiety," a psychological response to environmental crises that manifests as despair, paralysis, or moral outrage (Pihkala, 2020). His characterisation manifests an existential crisis and it is the core problem raised by Schrader in the movie. Michael is unable to come to terms with environmental degradation and wants to distance himself from further actions, which he finds just futile, in a state overwhelmed by ecological collapse. This existentialist thought can be found in the works of Camus and Sartre. Camus' idea of the "absurd", the conflict between humanity's search for meaning and an indifferent universe (Camus, 1942), is clearly reflected in Michael's dialogue and his decision to end his life.

The decision to end his life poses serious ethical questions about individual responsibility and the moral considerations of humanity towards the planet. His death cautions on the seriousness and urgency of addressing ecological degradation. It also criticises the choice of self-destruction, which shows rational individuals behaving irresponsibly and thereby failing to act wisely and decisively in solving the ecological crisis. Michael's choice exemplifies the selection of extremism, whereby he plans to use explosives. It generates a sensation that radical measures are inevitable when the authorities are busy in their own gains, ignoring the larger crisis. If we consider the act from an eco-theological perspective, it can be reread as a form of sacrificial protest challenging ecological sin. Sallie McFague (2008) argues that environmental ethics demand a shift from anthropocentric to theocentric and biocentric worldviews, appreciating the intrinsic value of all creation. Michael's despair, however, reflects a failure to find such an ethical framework, leading him to conclude that his death is more impactful than his life.

Michael's ashes, following his choice, are scattered at a toxic waste dump. During this scene, an environmental protest song is played in the movie, effectively capturing the central tension of the film. It shows despair against hope for the present and future of the planet, reminding us of the need for activism against inevitable fatalism and the destruction of the ecosystem, in pursuit of a recovery for a sustainable existence. The scene in the movie is a stark reminder of humanity's recklessness with nature and natural resources, raising awareness on how industrial waste can be devastating for the ecosystem. If humanity neglects its responsibility towards nature, then it would be the

failure of its ideals, which should have thrived for a sustainable future. Michael is fully convinced that humankind has failed Earth and he has little hope of a sustainable future.

The scattering of ashes is a sacred ritual, especially in the oriental context. By scattering the ashes in a toxic waste dump, the filmmaker is portraying spiritual irrelevance, highlighting the failure of religious institutions. Michael has disregarded spiritual reverence in the context of ecological degradation. The environmental protest song in the scene brings irony. The scene and the song mourn not just Michael's death, but also the self-destruction humanity has inflicted on itself through ecological degradation. The viewers are confronted with the ethical environmental responsibilities of their acts of environmental degradation through the scattering of Michael's ashes in a toxic wasteland symbolising protest and despair. The scene forces an introspection on the clash between faith, environmentalism, and existential despair, capturing the film's profound engagement with the moral and spiritual crisis of the Anthropocene era.

The film's barren landscapes and recurring motifs of decay serve as silent witnesses to the pervasive consequences of environmental neglect and moral corruption, reflecting the protagonist's internal crisis. By employing a minimalist aesthetic and a foreboding sense of emptiness, Schrader crafts a visual and thematic landscape that underscores the film's existential concerns, particularly the ethical dilemmas surrounding climate change, corporate greed, and the erosion of spiritual conviction.

One of the most striking visual elements in *First Reformed* is its bleak, austere setting. Reverend Ernst Toller, the film's protagonist, presides over a declining, historic church, 'First Reformed', that serves more as an artefact than a beacon of faith. The sparse interior of the church and the cold, desaturated cinematography are used to convincingly express Toller's spiritual and psychological deterioration. Schrader's use of the 1.37:1 aspect ratio further compresses the frame, creating an atmosphere of claustrophobia and inescapability. It appears as if the walls are closing in on both Toller and the viewer. This restrictive visual style complements the film's thematic focus on human-induced destruction, suggesting that the modern world is increasingly suffocating under the weight of its own excesses.

The motif of decay is omnipresent throughout the film, serving as an allegory for both environmental degradation and moral collapse. Toller's own failing health—his persistent stomach pain and self-destructive drinking habits—parallels the physical decline of the natural world. His crisis intensifies after meeting Michael who is overwhelmed by despair at the irreversible damage inflicted upon the planet. The pollution-spewing industrial complex, owned by the church's corporate benefactor, further emphasizes the hypocrisy of religious institutions complicit in ecological ruin. Schrader aligns these images of contamination and corruption to critique both capitalism's unchecked destruction and organized religion's complicity in environmental decline (Kozlovic 112).

The barrenness of the landscapes in *First Reformed* also serves a theological function, echoing the barren spiritual condition of its characters. The film frequently

invokes *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and *Winter Light* (1963), two films that explore the isolation and existential crises of clergymen. Toller's increasing alienation and his ultimate choice to embrace violent action reflect the bleak trajectory of a world in moral freefall. Schrader's screenplay offers few moments of solace, instead allowing the emptiness of both physical and spiritual landscapes to underscore the film's overarching sense of doom. As Kutter Callaway notes, the film presents "a modern-day version of the dark night of the soul, where faith and despair become indistinguishable" (Callaway 157).

Ultimately, *First Reformed* employs barren landscapes and motifs of decay as profound symbols of humanity's failure—both to protect the Earth and to uphold moral integrity. Schrader's vision is one where silence and emptiness speak louder than words, urging the viewer to confront the devastating consequences of human apathy before it is too late.

Schrader's film does not offer easy answers but instead compels its audience to grapple with the Anthropocene's moral and existential weight. It is a stark reminder of the urgent need for ecological ethics that transcend individual despair, fostering collective responsibility and meaningful action in an epoch defined by human impact. Michael's suicide is a pivotal moment in *First Reformed*, reflecting his ultimate surrender to ecological despair. His act of self-destruction, driven by an acute awareness of humanity's irreversible environmental impact, reverberates throughout the narrative. As Michael laments: "If we don't do something drastic, it's over. The Earth can't sustain us anymore". (Schrader 2017) This statement underscores the Anthropocene's existential challenge: the recognition of human culpability in ecological collapse.

Michael's death, staged with a suicide vest he had intended for an act of eco-terrorism, becomes a symbol of despair so profound that it rejects life's potential for redemption. Reverend Toller's discovery of Michael's body and his subsequent reading of Michael's journals plunge him into a parallel crisis. Toller, already burdened by personal guilt, declining health, and spiritual doubt, begins to internalize Michael's ecological grief. Michael's suicide functions as a mirror for Toller, reflecting not only shared despair but also the seductive allure of radical sacrifice as a form of protest. Toller's construction of the suicide vest marks a profound shift in his character, paralleling Michael's trajectory of despair. As he dons the vest in preparation for his planned act of violence at Abundant Life's anniversary celebration, Toller's transformation is complete: he has embraced Michael's ideology and his method of response.

This decision reflects the Anthropocene's ethical paradox. Scholars like Timothy Morton describe phenomena such as climate change as "hyperobjects", vast, incomprehensible forces that overwhelm human understanding (Morton, 2013). Toller's actions following the path of Michael embody the paralysis and moral ambiguity that accompany overwhelming spiritual and ethical crises. While he attempts to destroy himself and others out of despair, it is also an outcome of a radical critique

of humanity's ecological indifference, which is exemplified by the church's alignment with industrial polluters.

The film does not offer an explicit ending. It is left for the audience's discretion to decide whether the ending portrays destruction or redemption. Toller appears to be completely disillusioned; he wears the suicide vest recovered from Michael's garage to follow his path of violence. Suddenly, Mary breaks into his room, and upon her presence, he immediately abandons his decision to end his life. Toller embraces Mary in the final scene, which is ambiguous and could mean salvation or delusion. He has abandoned the idea of suicide, and could most probably be an escape from existentialism.

The climax can be understood in different ways with an Anthropocene perspective. Toller decides to throw away the suicide vest when he sees Mary, an implication that he is not going to follow the path of Michael. Mary represents the future for Toller and for humanity; it is never too late to reconsider, rectify and move on for a sustainable existence even when humanity is facing a deep ecological crisis. Sallie McFague is relevant in the context who believes in interrelation and emotional connection of humans as constructive response to ecological crisis (Sallie McFague, 2008). The union of Toller and Mary could also suggest the Anthropocene's conflict as unresolved and less addressed, entangled between despair and hope. Schrader leaves the conclusions to be made by the audience, as he himself would be finding a solution to the planetary crisis, as complex and uncertain. Another interpretation is that the final embrace can be perceived as a hallucination of Toller that shows the failure of faith for a solid action. The climax reiterates the fact that, however radical and aggressive individual actions or minority actions may be, they remain largely insignificant in the face of a huge ecological crisis.

The fall of Michael is acceptable, but the fall of Toller is unacceptable, as he represents a larger institution that is powerful. Such powerful institutions could reverse the ecological crisis from its end to a certain extent. So, the fall of Toller is the failure of all such institutions which has power over individuals. The anniversary celebrations of the church are sponsored by Industrial leaders, pointing out the reality that the polluters and the church are together, which shows the dynamics of real-world Anthropocene. The church and industry are concerned solely with economic growth; they disregard environmental obligations (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Michael and Toller suffer from depression because of their ecological awareness. Their choice for extremist action suggests the inadequacy of traditional methods for resolving crises, and they want concrete measures to address the ecological crisis. Mary's role in the climax introduces the possibility of a relational ethic, grounded in care and connection. As Bron Taylor (2010) argues, ecological ethics must move beyond despair, fostering hope and collective action.

Heidegger, in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, argues that dwelling is the fundamental way humans belong to the world. It involves a respectful, harmonious relationship with the Earth, as opposed to domination or exploitation. In *First*

Reformed, Toller's church, a historical relic, symbolizes an ideal of dwelling that has been overtaken by modern capitalist and exploitative practices. The juxtaposition of the church with the industrialized world critiques humanity's failure to dwell authentically.

Morton's "Dark Ecology" confronts the Anthropocene by embracing the entanglement of humans and nonhumans in a shared ecological fate. It challenges the binaries of nature and culture, focusing on coexistence amidst ecological despair. Toller's diary entries reveal a Heideggerian crisis: he cannot reconcile his spiritual role with the ecological destruction caused by industrial interests. His search for purpose becomes a quest to rediscover authentic dwelling, which he ultimately sees as impossible in a world dominated by ecological neglect.

The interplay of the church, its dwindling congregation, and the corporate-sponsored mega-church (Abundant Life) embodies Morton's concept of the mesh—a web of interconnections that implicates even sacred spaces in ecological harm. The church's complicity with industrial polluters underscores Morton's argument that no one is outside the ecological crisis. Schrader's austere cinematography mirrors Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death and Morton's emphasis on bleak beauty. The barren trees, polluted rivers, and Toller's physical deterioration are visual metaphors for the damaged yet intertwined state of humanity and nature.

Paul Schrader's *First Reformed* employs its visual and spatial aesthetics as a narrative device to explore themes of spiritual decay, ecological crisis, and existential despair. The film's setting, predominantly the titular First Reformed Church and the surrounding industrialized landscapes, serves as a metaphorical canvas where the personal struggles of Reverend Ernst Toller intersect with broader societal and environmental anxieties. Through its minimalist cinematography, Schrader constructs a world that critiques the spiritual and ecological failures of modernity, engaging deeply with theological and philosophical questions about humanity's place in the Anthropocene.

At the heart of the film is the First Reformed Church, a small Dutch Reformed structure dating back to 1767, whose dilapidated interior becomes a visual and thematic anchor. The peeling paint, sparse furnishings, and worn pews evoke a Heideggerian sense of dwelling, a space meant for existential and spiritual grounding (Heidegger, 1971). However, its decayed state reflects humanity's fractured relationship with the divine and the natural world. Schrader's use of naturalistic lighting and static symmetrical framing imbues the church with a sense of reverence and stillness, contrasting sharply with its physical decline. The church's deterioration mirrors Toller's own physical and spiritual disintegration, emphasizing the broader moral and ecological collapse in the world outside its walls.

In the movie, the sacred space, The First Reformed church, is in contrast with the polluted industrial landscapes in its vicinity, which is best established in Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology." Morton argues for a better relationship between humans and nature, which is built on humility and the idea of coexistence without harming other forms of life (Morton, 2016). The film captures the beauty of the

landscape and also images of ecological decay, like polluted rivers and industrial units. The images of decay are portrayed in subtle grey and blue light, reminding the gravity of harm caused by humans on earth.

The parsonage of Reverend Toller is a cold and plain one, which implies his loneliness and despair. The sparse furnishings and dim light contribute to a claustrophobic atmosphere. Most of the time, Toller is a loner in the frame, suggesting his confinement and limited space; several shots are static, aggravating his isolation. His journal writing reflects his dilemmas. His predicaments and uncertainties are recorded in it. His diary serves as a visual medium to represent his deteriorating mind. The First Reformed Church is a unit of the Abundant Life, the larger church, and this religious institution is sponsored by powerful leaders of the industry, suggesting the commodification of faith in modern times. Schrader critiques the misuse of religion for the interests of capitalists; their sponsorship depletes the moral duties of the church.

The movie crudely presents the failure of modernity to dwell authentically, as we critique with the philosophy proposed by Heidegger. The capitalist systems have destroyed humanity's coexistence with its counter parts of nature. The divine is also compromised for the interest of the capitalists. The ecological decay and industrial pollution suggest Morton's philosophy of "dark ecology", which is against the establishing of human superiority in the epoch of Anthropocene. By placing the church and its premises as the setting of the movie Schrader exhorts for a renewal of the spiritual and the practical, as evident from the philosophical theories discussed.

First Reformed resonates with other movies that have explored similar themes of ecological degradation and existential crisis. *The Tree of Life* (2011) by Terrence Malick, which presents the interconnectedness and evolutionary ancestry of all creations, brings all under the same tree of life, which facilitates spiritual enlightenment and wisdom. *Stalker* (1979) by Andrei Tarkovsky portrays a barren landscape reflecting man's never-ending search for the meaning of life and its devastating consequences. *Mother!* (2017) by Darren Aronofsky is an allegory on the exploitation and abuse of Mother Earth, very much in line with the anxieties presented in *First Reformed*. Science fiction movies like these reiterate the possibilities of storytelling in a larger canvas to address the relevant ecological crisis in various philosophical contexts.

As a vital text within contemporary environmental humanities, *First Reformed* provokes reflection on the shared ethical and ecological responsibilities of the Anthropocene. Its layered narrative and philosophical depth urge a reimagining of humanity's place within the natural world, transforming the film into a mirror and a call to action. The cultural and moral dimensions it explores resonate beyond the screen, inviting audiences to dwell in the uneasy truths of their environmental impact.

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