

# Collaborative Survival in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*

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**Abstract:** This article examines Paul Schrader's film *First Reformed* (2017) from an ecocritical perspective, building on Lawrence Buell's understanding of the climate crisis as a crisis of imagination, and the subsequent need and search for new, non-individualistic perspectives that could aid in the resolution of said crisis. I predominately employ two critical frameworks: affect theory and the concepts from Donna Haraway's essay "Symbiogenesis, Symptoiesis, and Art Science Activisms for Staying with the Trouble." Drawing on the notions of climate-induced anxiety and depression as well as Ann Cvetkovich's term 'public feeling,' I analyze the workings of affect in the film. I argue that both Haraway's essay and Schrader's film propose similar strategies for survival in the face of climate change. The article also includes a brief rejection of eco-theological perspectives that, at first glance, may seem relevant to the film. Instead, I propose a reading of *First Reformed* as a text that upholds collaboration with others as the most crucial strategy for survival in the face of climate change.

The Anthropocene is an unprecedented time, and the struggles and challenges it presents often question the beliefs that lie at the very basis of human societies. Consequently, we are in constant need of imagining new ways for conceptualizing our contemporary reality and the solutions to its pressing problems. The need to inform and engage the general public in attending to environmental issues is crucial for the survival of life on Earth as we know it. Affects play an immense role in this task, according to Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, they "are at the center of contemporary biopolitics and are more public, more powerful, and more pertinent than ever" ("Toward" 1). In response to the Anthropocene, new and unique 'bad' affects emerge, including "despair, resignation, climate grief, and solastalgia, as well as familiar feelings like disappointment and anxiety" (11). These affects tend to work against the common goal of survival. Nevertheless, numerous scholars and artists are constantly proposing new ways of thinking which birth strategies and ideas that help battle

despair and give hope for living on a damaged planet, while also harnessing these 'bad' affects toward survival efforts.

In his 2017 film, *First Reformed*, Paul Schrader attempts to present a strategy for survival. The destructive power of climate change-induced anxiety is highlighted and contrasted with yet another affect—hope. He seems to argue that it can solely be found in collaboration with other creatures and sees that as the only chance for survival. Hence, the film appears to echo Donna Haraway's ideas from her essay "Symbiogenesis, Symptosis, and Art Science Activisms for Staying with the Trouble" that surviving in the age of climate change requires adapting a collective mindset and cooperating with other creatures (M25-37). This essay will demonstrate that *First Reformed* can be read as a rejection of the paralyzing fear of the future in favor of hope that stems from a collaboration with others as the only possibility for survival in the age of the Anthropocene.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Transcendental Style, Ecotheological Perspective, and Ecocinema

*First Reformed* appears to be an example of the transcendental style as described by Schrader in his book *Transcendental Style in Film*. In the introduction he wrote over forty years after its first publication, Schrader explains that he sensed the existence of a specific kind of link between spirituality and cinema, "a bridge of style, not content" (2). He describes how certain stylistic characteristics of film can push the viewer toward introspection. Schrader argues that "[b]y delaying edits, not moving the camera, forswearing music cues, not employing coverage, and heightening the mundane, transcendental style creates a sense of unease the viewer must resolve" (3). This is facilitated by the features of perception through time as described by Gilles Deleuze, and the technique he calls "time-image" (qtd. in Schrader 3). In this perceptual device, "a film edit is determined not by action on screen but by the creative desire to associate images over time" (3). This technique can be exemplified in the following way:

Man exits one room, enters another—that's movement-image editing. Man exits one room, shot of trees in the wind, shot of train passing—that's time-image editing. Man exits one room, the screen lingers on the empty door. That's time-image editing. Deleuze called this the "non-rational cut." The non-rational cut breaks from sensorimotor logic. (4)

The fact that human minds 'fill in' such ambiguous images causes introspection. A film made in a transcendental style "[is] no longer primarily concerned with telling stories to our conscious selves but now also seeks to communicate with the unconscious and the ways in which the unconscious processes memories, fantasies, and dreams" (5). The goal of such cinema is to evoke in the viewer a different state of consciousness and what Schrader, adopting Rudolf Otto's concept, calls "the Wholly Other" (23). Most often, movies made in the transcendental style will deal with spiritual and religious themes. James Lorenz argues that *First Reformed* is, to a large extent, a successful example of the transcendental style (142). To support his claims, he writes:

The film is contemplative; it withholds action in order to distance the viewer, while at the same time its focus on the mundane and the everyday details of life draws the viewer into the film in such a way that it engenders introspection and reflection on the film's spiritual themes. The transcendent is never an explicit subject of the film but is alluded to and suspended just out of the picture, anticipated in the long silences of Schrader's slow, meditative shots and intimated in his wide, distanced frames. (142-43)

Therefore, *First Reformed* arguably fits into the tradition of transcendental cinema.

As a result, theology is the field with which the film may seem primarily preoccupied. Not only does it deal with religion thematically, but it is also made in a style traditionally used to contemplate theological matters. *First Reformed* could be viewed as a film that attempts to frame the issues of climate change from a Christian perspective. Such a stance is at the core of Kresentia Madina Jelangdeka and Bayu Kristianto's article "Nature through God's Eyes: Eco-theological Perspectives in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed*." They argue that the character of Mary can be seen as a symbol of nature, or as the figures from the writings of the theologian Jürgen Moltmann: "the great world mother' and 'the mother earth'" (qtd. in Jelangdeka and Kristianto 216). According to the article, *First Reformed* proposes an eco-theological approach by uniting Mary—the nature figure—with Toller, who represents Christianity. Jelangdeka and Kristianto argue that *First Reformed* offers a reconciliation of Christian doctrine and environmentalism through the conceptualization of nature as a female figure who is taken care of by the Church, thus also pointing to the idea of environmental stewardship (225). Yet, both of these concepts—nature as a woman and the call for stewardship or preservation—seem rather problematic. Hence, this essay attempts to analyze the environmental aspects of *First Reformed* from a wholly different perspective, but first, it will propose rejecting Jelangdeka and Kristianto's argument.

The equation of women and nature seems to be the product of the system which devalues and subjugates them, rather than a basis for constructive environmental discourse. At the root of ecofeminism lies the conviction that there is a link

between the patriarchal system that oppresses women and the exploitation and domination of 'nature.' The feminist critic Val Plumwood argues that numerous dualisms are at the basis of Western culture, and that reason is the master category that dominates everything with which it is contrasted. She writes: "The concept of reason provides the unifying and defining contrast for the concept of nature, much as the concept of husband does for that of wife, as master for slave" (Plumwood 3). Conceptual categories such as 'nature' or 'woman' are incarnations of the other and are the basis for oppression in the dualistic system that pits them against concepts deemed more valuable. Furthermore, Plumwood claims that the strategy used to sanction oppression is often feminization and naturalization (18). According to her, "[t]o be defined as 'nature' in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject" (4). Thus, in the modern, patriarchal Western society, the association of nature and femininity ought not to be the basis for environmental thinking. Rather, it simultaneously sanctions the exploitation of the environment, women, and other marginalized groups.

The concept of preservation of nature has also been submitted to critical scrutiny, as exemplified in Lawrence Buell's essay "Toxic Discourse," in which he challenges traditional preservationist environmentalism. Buell argues that human welfare must be placed within the range of environmental concerns, not outside of it ("Toxic Discourse" 639-40). The environmentalist thought that sought to preserve 'wild' nature is no longer relevant under the threat and persistence of toxicity which instead gives rise to the demand for environmental justice. This ecojustice activism can be linked back to the 1960s civil rights movements. Buell argues that it is unique and differs from earlier environmentalist thought in the sense that it "is the activism of non-elites" that focuses on community values and involves "the reconception of environmentalism as an instrument of social justice" (643). Instead, he proposes the term 'toxic discourse' as a way to reconcile the two historic attitudes; it is a new kind of discourse that can combine both biocentric and anthropocentric perspectives.

By saying that 'toxic discourse' has the "impetus [...] both to reinforce the deromanticization of nature and to urge its expansion as an operative category," Buell points to how it can link the ecocritical and social discourses ("Toxic Discourse" 656). It brings humans to ecocriticism and environment to social studies. As a result, nature does not exist in a vacuum and no longer is a sublime, perfect entity meant for human admiration, as it was in the preservationist thought. In toxic discourse, thinking about environmental issues is embedded with concern for social problems. Thus, the idea of human stewardship over nature becomes deconstructed and irrelevant. Perhaps we could think of 'toxic discourse' more in terms of a cojoined stewardship over humans, nature, and all other living beings.

Instead of looking at *First Reformed* as a transcendental, and thus a Christian film, this essay will propose reading it as an example of ecocinema. Ecocinema studies is an emerging field that examines the capacities that film has for contributing to the establishment of conceptualizations of 'nature.' As Stephen Rust and Salma Monani explain in their introduction to *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice*, "[c]inematic texts, with their audio-visual presentations of individuals and their habitats, affect our imaginations of the world around us, and thus, potentially, our actions towards this world" (2). This essay will follow along such lines of reasoning in its attempt at demonstrating how *First Reformed* proposes shifts in perspective, particularly from individualistic to collective ones, as a way of surviving in a damaged and toxic environment. As Rust and Monani put it: "[E]cocritical reflections of things apart become shared memories in the mirror that cinema holds up to the world" (11).

### Ecocritical Thought and Donna Haraway's Concepts of 'Sympoiesis' and 'Intimacy Without Proximity'

The crucial concept repeated in this essay is the Anthropocene, the proposed name for Earth's current geological epoch. Etymologically, the term stems from the Greek word *ánthrōpos*, meaning human being, and refers to the fact that, at the present moment, the most prominent factor shaping the planet is human activity. 'Anthropocene' was coined in 2000 by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer to point to the central role humans have played in the geology and ecology of the Earth since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (17). The Anthropocene is thus the age of human-induced climate change, a crisis that affects the entire planet. At the center of the ecocritical perspective, which this essay adopts, is the view that the struggle against such a crisis demands not only material action but also a reexamination of the pervasive conceptualizations of the world which seem to legitimize destructive human activities.

Lawrence Buell, who is widely considered to be a pioneer of ecocriticism, writes in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*:

If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it. (2)

Ecocriticism is rooted in this thought and places the responsibility for climate change, at least to a certain extent, on the inadequate perspectives humans have adopted in reference to the so-called natural world and their place in it. This critical

movement involves a reevaluation of the dominant narratives about nature, and searches for new ways of thinking about the relationships between humans, environments, and other living creatures as part of an attempt at addressing the crisis of imagination that is climate change.

One concept that is pervasive in the dominant anthropocentric narratives of the West is the cult of individualism. Its rejection is crucial to this essay, as its main thesis involves the idea that survival in the Anthropocene can only be facilitated by collaboration. Such a negation of anthropocentric individualism is clearly visible in the work of the widely acclaimed ecocritical and feminist scholar Donna Haraway.

Her essay “Symbiogenesis, Sympoiesis, and Art Science Activisms for Staying with the Trouble” contains a number of crucial anti-individualistic concepts. One of them is ‘sympoiesis.’ Haraway writes that “*Sym-poiesis* is a simple word; it means ‘making-with.’ Nothing makes itself; nothing is really auto-poietic or self-organizing” (M25). This refers to all creatures on Earth as they are inseparably interconnected at the level of microbiology. Everything is actively transforming and becoming with other creatures. Haraway also discusses the reluctance of the scientific community to accept the idea of the interconnection of all organisms as it undermines the individualistic view humans have of themselves (M28-31). Nonetheless, she asserts that “the arts for living on a damaged planet demand sympoietic thinking and action” (M31). I will argue that this is one of the strategies for dealing with climate change in *First Reformed*.

Another concept from Haraway’s essay applicable to this analysis is that of “intimacy without proximity” (M39). She describes this idea on the basis of the “Crochet Coral Reef,” an international collaborative project which consists of various artists and activists crocheting corals and other marine creatures as a reaction to the bleaching of coral reefs (M36-39). What Haraway sees in this project is:

[The crochet reef is] a presence without disturbing the critters that animate the project, but with the power to confront the exterminationist, trashy, greedy practices of global industrial economies and cultures. Intimacy without proximity is not “virtual” presence; it is “real” presence, in loopy materialities. (M39)

Hence, Haraway argues that physical presence is not required for creating a real connection with creatures of this world. Moreover, she adds that this is “a practice of caring without the neediness of touching by camera or hand in yet another travelogue of discovery” (M39). It seems that intimacy without proximity could be seen as a more balanced way of establishing contact with more-than-human nature. It can be argued that this is the kind of closeness that the protagonists from *First Reformed* establish with the world.

The term used in the title of this essay, collaborative survival, refers back to Anna Tsing and her influential book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. In it, she traces the multiplicity of matsutake mushroom developments to present one kind of collaborative survival where creatures are entangled together in various world-building projects which can bring about unexpected outbursts of life, growth, and prosperity, even in what Tsing calls capitalist ruins. She asserts that when “[w]e are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination,” we must forgo the so-far prevalent myths of progress and ruin in order to find new ways of thinking, and potential solutions (19). Tsing thus invites us to notice the life-sustaining entanglements that emerge all around us, and which constitute collaborative survival, which is precisely what this essay will attempt to notice in *First Reformed*.

### Affect Theory and Ann Cvetkovich’s Notion of ‘Public Feeling’

Facing one of the biggest and most pressing challenges humanity has ever encountered—climate change—undoubtedly evokes intense responses. The sheer magnitude of the problems of the Anthropocene is incomparable to other social or political issues. The processes that contribute to the problem occur on a global scale, and they are often too huge to be grasped or conceptualized by a single individual. Affect theory enables a better understanding of the responses humans tend to have when faced with such issues. The connection between affects and environmental issues is that they both deal with the physical dimension of being. Affects are experienced in an embodied presence, which, in turn, is always situated in an environment. Bladow and Ladino confirm this definition of affect, as they assert that it can be understood as an “asignifying, precognitive bodily feeling, an ‘intensity’ or a perpetual state of ‘becoming’” (“Toward” 5). Thus, affect is something that is not yet described or categorized in one’s mind, rather, it is predominantly experienced by the body.

In her essay on the work of Juliana Spahr, Nicole Merola contextualizes the emergence of Anthropocene anxiety crucial to my analysis of *First Reformed*. She discusses the anxiety-producing, fundamental quality of the Anthropocene, namely the estrangement stemming from the fact that “the continuance of a habitable biosphere for currently evolved creatures” is no longer a guarantee (26). Her attempt in the text is then to answer the question of whether there are political and artistic practices that could be adequate to the strangeness of the Anthropocene, as well as pinpointing the specific “new or reworked affects” spawned by the period (26). One affect is Anthropocene anxiety. Merola describes it as “an affect specifically concerned with inaction in the face of and worry about global socioecological change” and links its emergence with a specific point in time, namely March 29,

1958, which “marks the first data point on the now iconic Keeling Curve, an ongoing graph of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> measurements” (27-28). Anthropocene anxiety thus arises at the conjecture of the detection of planetary limitations and a certain inertia in the face of the catastrophes they entail.

The juncture of affect and ecocinema is a point of interest for many scholars. Graig Uhlin uses the concept of atmosphere to theorize the workings of affect in environmental cinema. He argues that:

Atmosphere entails a dual perspective that describes both the mood of an artistic production and the experience of an environment, whether natural or built. That is to say, atmosphere characterizes the affective quality of environments both internal and external to a text, and the possible relations between them. (280)

Uhlin goes on to add that “environmental crisis registers as an atmospheric shift where a restorative or life-sustaining atmosphere turns suffocating and draining” (282). Consequently, when films deal thematically with the climate crisis, their mood often becomes dispassionate and paralyzed, which is an expression of “a palpable sense that there is nothing to be done in the face of catastrophe” (283). Even though this is the mood in which much of *First Reformed* lingers, this text will attempt to prove that the rare, yet telling, moments of departure from such a stifling atmosphere are crucial for unveiling the idea that perhaps there is something to be done in the face of catastrophe.

Ann Cvetkovich, one of the most established theorists of affect, described her engagement with the collaborative project ‘Public Feelings’ in the introduction to *Depression: A Public Feeling*. One of the aims of ‘Public Feelings’ is the examination of “emotional dynamics” behind public events and social tendencies (1). Cvetkovich argues that depression is a reasonable response to the unstable capitalist world that surrounds us, and wants “to depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than as its antithesis” (2). In her approach, depression is still associated with grief and stillness, but it becomes the affective basis for the establishment of communities and action (2), thereby establishing the possibilities of hope as a foundation for political engagement.

The way her theory of negative affects applies to *First Reformed* is twofold. First, it allows us to see the cause of these feelings as systemic. Cvetkovich attributes depression and burnout to neoliberal capitalism and, in her particular case, academia. In Schrader’s film, Toller’s and Michael’s depression also has systemic roots: It is caused by climate change which exposes the failure of our social systems most acutely. Secondly, Cvetkovich advocates for the organization of affective, politically-oriented communities whose actions are centered around hope. This



essay will show how essential both the notion of community and collectiveness, as well as hope, is for survival in *First Reformed*.

### ANALYSIS OF *FIRST REFORMED*

#### Plot Summary

The main character of the film is Ernst Toller, a pastor from a small historical church called 'First Reformed.' He struggles with a crisis of faith as well as with health issues and alcohol abuse. The film's action begins when one of the faithful, Mary, asks Toller to counsel her husband, Michael, a radical environmental activist. She reveals that she is pregnant and worries for the future of her family. During Toller's conversation with Michael, the activist appears to be in complete despair without any hope for the future. He also admits that he deems bringing a child into what he sees as a dying world immoral. A few days later, Mary shows Toller that she had discovered a suicide vest in her house. The pastor decides to take it with him in order to hide it. Later, Toller arrives at an appointment Michael has scheduled with him, only to discover that the activist has committed suicide. As he explores Michael's laptop, Toller becomes increasingly obsessed with the topic of climate change. He continues to meet with Mary in an attempt to help her cope with her loss, while also getting into conflict over environmental issues with the corporate-sponsored church group 'Abundant Life,' which owns the First Reformed church. All his attempts to engage the group in environmental activism fail. In the final scenes of the film, Toller plans to use the suicide vest during an official Abundant Life event celebrating the anniversary of First Reformed, yet he changes his plan at the last minute when he sees Mary arriving at the ceremony. Instead, the pastor tries to end his life once more—this time on his own—but is interrupted by her again. Mary and Toller embrace and kiss passionately as the film ends with an abrupt cut.

#### Toxicity: Polluted Landscapes and Bodies

Interestingly, in *First Reformed*, there are both images that point to the toxicity of the environment as well as the deterioration of the human body. The funeral of Michael Mensana takes place at a local toxic waste dump, and his ashes are thrown into the polluted lake. At the beginning of the scene, there is a prolonged shot of a warning sign against pollution (0:52:35). This location is a strong visual marker of the environmental degradation that is constantly being discussed in the film. There is a certain correlation between Michael's and the polluted lake's fates: They are

both victimized by the destructive human activity of the Anthropocene. The fact that Michael's remains should be scattered at this site appears rather evocative, as it seems to echo Buell's sentiments on 'toxic discourse': The human is literally placed in the environment and becomes a part of it. The demise of one means the demise of the other. Protection of 'nature' is no longer necessary only for preservation's sake, it is also a matter of human survival.

At the same time, *First Reformed* is full of images showing the deterioration of Toller's body. Throughout most of the film, the audience does not know what it is exactly that is ailing him, yet they are constantly reminded of his health issues. Toller is observed by the camera while painfully urinating, vomiting, suffering from stomach aches, and continuously drinking alcohol. Finally, we see him at a hospital, where a doctor discusses with him the test he wants to conduct and the possibility that Toller may have cancer (1:09:26). The state of the pastor's body seems to mirror the state of the world; his health progressively deteriorates as he continues to learn about the pollution of the planet. Thus, it seems that *First Reformed* contains traces of 'toxic discourse,' as it positions humans in the polluted environment, and perhaps even points to certain interconnections between their deteriorations.

### Paralysis of the Individual: Climate Anxiety and Depression

Throughout most of the film, anxiety and depression of isolated individuals are predominant themes. They are represented mainly by two characters: Toller and Michael. The latter suffers from climate change-related depression and anxiety, and the film makes use of this character to showcase the threat of paralysis and despair stemming from such psychological reactions to the climate crisis. During Toller and Michael's debate, one can clearly observe that the activist has entirely lost hope (0:10:16). Michael is also completely withdrawn from society; Mary mentions that he only ever leaves the house for work and that he has no friends (0:06:36). As Leslie Davenport puts it, "[h]elplessness, hopelessness, and isolation have long been identified as key factors in depression, and the sheer magnitude of climate change issues can easily trigger these reactions" (108). Michael's climate grief has overshadowed all other aspects of his life. Additionally, he is completely obsessed with the future which fuels his anxiety. Davenport explains that:

Anxiety tends to be future-oriented, arising out of our mental "What if...?" scenarios. With much of the climate change news projecting what dire events may occur in the coming decades, we are all living with an ongoing threat of climate-change-related disruptions. This news creates ambient stress that readily fuels anxiety. (108-09)

These issues push Michael into the direst state of despair and lead him to suicide. Hence, Michael represents the extremely dangerous threat of climate change-

induced depression and anxiety. Curiously, Toller becomes affected by his state and, as the film progresses, descends into similar anxiety. This could be seen as an echo of Brian Massumi's understanding of affect and his definition, drawn from Spinoza, that affect "is an ability to affect and be affected" (xvi). In Massumi's writing, affects are free-floating and autonomous, thus they can be transferred between bodies. It seems that this is precisely what happens in *First Reformed*: Michael's Anthropocene anxiety affects Toller.

The film seems to both capture and evoke feelings of anxiety and depression in its imagery. The editing and camerawork reflect this immobile state. James Lorenz points out the characteristics of the film's imagery:

[T]he long take, where action is spurned in favour of inertia; minimalist editing, where the director delays the cut and holds on to shots longer than the subject dictates; austere camerawork, which eschews conventional coverage in order to pursue a stillness in the frame that reflects the stillness and contemplative atmosphere of the film. (142)

These contribute to the atmosphere of paralysis and anxiety. Additionally, the picture forfeits the standard widescreen ratio in favor of a cropped square format, which evokes feelings of claustrophobia and inability. The color scheme also contributes to its anxious atmosphere, as it is predominantly muted and grim. Grey, beige, brown, and black dominate the color palette. One of the film's most frequently reoccurring images is that of Toller, sitting alone in his parsonage, drinking and writing in his journal. These scenes are made of a combination of long shots, which highlight the emptiness of the room and Toller's seclusion, and close-ups, which focus on either the main character's expressions or his activities. These images are always dark and often kept in tonally cold colors, especially when the only light in the room comes from the computer screen. At times, the lighting becomes so scarce that the viewer can barely see anything other than blackness. The grimness and austerity of these sequences help establish a connection between Toller's isolation and his anxiety. Overall, most of the film's visuals emulate a monotonous, hopeless vision of mourning.

All the formal features of *First Reformed* correspond with Grieg Uhlin's ideas on the production of negative affect in modern ecocinema. He correlates the difficulty of action in the face of the Anthropocene's crises to the cinematic qualities of films with little to no action. As Uhlin puts it, "[t]his stifled mobility finds its expression in the slow or suspended movements of the film's form" (288). Thus, throughout most of *First Reformed*, the film functions as a "barometer of our pessimism or resignation" as facilitated by its atmosphere created through a number of formal measures (289). Consequently, the film transmits the affects it deals with thematically, e.g., the Anthropocene anxiety characterized by a lack of action. In

other words, the spectator not only observes the affects enacted on the screen but also might become affected by them. It functions similarly to the way Nicole Merola describes the workings of Juliana Spahr's poems which "position the human reader and body as centrally important to the composition, elicitation, production, and circulation of affect" and where "formal and syntactic tactics materialize endemically Anthropocene forms of affect" (31). In relation to film, the viewer's body participates through sight, and so *First Reformed* will, for instance, offer scenes that are barely visible in order to physically elicit discomfort in the spectator, establishing a basis for the production of negative affect.

In *First Reformed*, there are images that clearly connect its anxious tone to the specific anxiety of the Anthropocene. They first appear during Toller's conversation with Michael (0:10:15). The images in question are charts and graphs that aim at capturing the planetary changes caused by human activity. Michael is surrounded by such visuals. As soon as his conversation with the pastor begins, the audience can notice a multitude of different pictures and clippings. These visuals capture a sense of impending danger and create an ominous atmosphere. They include various forms of compressed representation of climate change data, and according to Nicole Merola, such charts are a "form for capturing the Anthropocene and understanding some of the catalysts of its affects" (28). Merola argues that they contribute to the "amplification of Anthropocene anxiety and guilt" (28).

Moreover, she points to how these images have unique capacities for synthesizing enormous amounts of data and creating models of the future, and are easily distributed around the globe. Because of that, they "make current forms of environmental feeling qualitatively different than older, more temporally and spatially limited forms" (28). In the scene of Michael and Toller's discussion, these images serve as a direct visual link between the anxiety that will from now on play a central role in the film, and the Anthropocene. The camera observes Michael become increasingly agitated as he turns from Toller to the graphs, presenting copious amounts of disturbing data. This can be interpreted to have a symbolic meaning: Michael has rejected human connection and is left only with his desperate feelings, amplified by the characteristic imagery of the Anthropocene. The same pattern affects Toller. Later in the film, we see him endlessly staring into Michael's laptop, feeding his anxiety with Anthropocene images and data (1:14:55). Once the pastor becomes affected by environmental anxiety in the same way as Michael was, it overtakes his life and becomes the driving force behind his destructive behaviors.

### Mirroring Images: Isolation of the Car vs. Collaboration of the Bike

*First Reformed* contains two relatively short sequences that can be seen as a symbolic key to the central concept for interpreting this film: the opposition of anxious and

desperate separation against the hope of coexistence and interaction. The sequences in question are portraying Toller's solitary nighttime car ride (1:31:57) and a bike trip the pastor takes with Mary (1:00:17). These two fragments are opposites on the level of both form and content. In the car ride scene, the visuals are dark and unsettling. All visible light is artificial and cool-toned; some of the neons flicker ominously as Toller drives by. The camera observing the world outside the car is shaky. Menacing, low tones of music accompany the entire sequence. As the pastor drives around the town, he sees only violence and destruction. He is alone, and there seems to be a link between his loneliness and the heightened anxiety of the scene. During the bike sequence, Mary and Toller ride slowly through the park as the camera focuses first on the wheel turning on the ground, then their peaceful faces against the backdrop of a blue, slightly cloudy sky, and finally the elaborate, dark shapes of leafless trees against the bright sky. They ride together through the outside world. The biking sequence seems to be one of the only calm, nearly cheerful moments in *First Reformed*, with the excruciating inertia and claustrophobia of the film being finally disrupted by dynamic activity.

Every detail seems important here, and the simplicity of the experience gives Mary and Toller peace; they enjoy it fully and presently. It seems that the desperate mindset of one character, Michael, is opposed by the collaborative efforts of two people in relation to the world. Moreover, this scene emphasizes embodiment. The characters engage in physical activity, and the calmness they experience to a large extent stems from the embodied pleasure of exercise. This scene also portrays the ways in which their bodies interact with the rest of the world and their environment, as the trees in the park seem to be a part of the bike ride as much as the characters. In this idea of union and togetherness, the film finds its only relief from anxiety.

The car and the bike are juxtaposed: One separates the human from the world and renders it into a spectacle that can be watched through the windows, meanwhile the other firmly positions the human in their environment. The car seems to stand for human-made technology and its potential for isolation and commodification of the non-human, while the bike, with its power being drawn from human exercise, highlights the embodied experience. Toller is alone in the car not only in the sense that Mary is not with him but also in the sense that he is detached from the world that surrounds him, as well as perhaps even his own physical presence. Such detachment is impossible in the case of the bike; it is a vehicle that draws attention to the body. Moreover, where the car ride fragment is inexplicably tense and unsettling, the biking scenes offer the viewer some longed-for serenity. The juxtaposition of these two sequences, one almost cheerful, the other grim and depressing, seems to highlight the fact that hope and peace can only be found in collaboration with others. Therefore, it appears that *First Reformed*,

here, mirrors the idea behind the previously mentioned concepts of sympoiesis and the collective character of survival.

### Hope and Revitalization Drawn from Togetherness

Even though *First Reformed* brims with anxious imagery, the film also contains an opposing attitude, a hopeful one. It is not represented by a single character but rather by the relationship between Mary and Toller. One example of the power of their collaboration occurs in the scene where they pray together (1:03:56). After finishing their joint bike ride, Mary and Toller go back to her house and talk about Michael, and the grief they are experiencing. Suddenly, Mary asks Toller to pray with her and admits that she finds it difficult to do it alone. It has been previously established that Toller has also been unable to pray during the recent months and that this has been a great burden to him as a pastor. In fact, the religious crisis Toller experiences has been one of the central problems of the film; thus, the viewer anticipates a further breakdown when Mary first asks him to guide her in her prayers. Toller's reaction mirrors the anxiety of the audience, as he seems startled, reluctant, and quite scared. Nevertheless, the pastor agrees, and as soon as they join hands, the words come to him naturally. The scene is quite short and simple, yet extremely powerful. Separately, both of these people struggle, grieve, and fail to achieve the consolation and peace one seeks in prayer. Together, it becomes not only attainable but even effortless. Clearly, the film points to the strength that human beings can draw from connection and collaborative efforts.

Interestingly, *First Reformed* also contains a sequence that seems radically different from the rest of the film. In fact, its sharp departure from the picture's otherwise austere and realist style makes it stand out very strongly, thus persisting in the viewer's mind and seemingly highlighting its importance. The sequence in question begins when a restless and anxious Mary visits Toller in his parsonage late at night (1:18:16). They talk about Michael, and she mentions a meditative practice called 'the magical mystery tour' in which they used to engage. It involved them laying on top of each other, as close as possible, and synchronizing their breaths. Toller proposes that they try it together, and as they begin, the film loses its realist style for the first and only time for its entire duration. Ethereal, harmonious, and calm music starts playing while Mary and Toller begin to levitate. As they ascend, the interior of the parsonage gradually fades into the image of the galaxy. They drift slowly in space and the images behind them change; they fly over snowy mountaintops, green forests, and crystal clear seas in a most solemn, elevated atmosphere. The sequence is full of bright, lively colors which contrasts with the stark shades of the rest of the film. Suddenly, Toller leans out from underneath Mary, and the expression on his face grows worried. The landscapes begin to change.

The music becomes more chaotic and full of abrupt sounds. Now they drift over busy streets and landfills brimming with used tires. The camera slowly zooms closer to the joint silhouette of the characters, first focusing on their heads, and then finally cropping them out, leaving only the bird's-eye view of the polluted landscapes altered by humanity. We see huge factories, endless garbage sites, and deforested wastelands. The sequence finishes with a slow fade-out into blackness.

This scene seems to evoke Donna Haraway's previously mentioned ideas, namely 'intimacy without proximity' and sympoiesis. The characters engage with the more-than-human world in a way that does not require direct contact. They can access it as they become united in their practice of mindful closeness, without physical intrusion into 'wild' environments and without the possessives of physical touch. This contact with the outside is established first through the connection between the characters: They synchronize their breaths and touch each other to become one for a moment. This allows them to connect with the world outside of their individuality. At first, this experience is purely joyful and beautiful. It is a moment of hope and unity. Nevertheless, it seems that Toller cannot exist in this space of harmony for long. It is his worried expression that the camera shows simultaneously with the change of landscapes. The anxiety and despair of Michael live on in him; the peace of his union with Mary cannot last. This scene portrays the hope for a solution in unity and collectiveness, yet it also casts the shadow of despair and depression on it, causing immobility. As soon as Toller starts to worry, both characters disappear from the scene, being literally cropped out of the shot, losing their connection with the world and any possibility of agency.

### **Final Message: Collaborative Survival**

At the end of the film, Toller is set on his goal of executing a suicide bombing attack during the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the First Reformed church. The entire sequence is shot with great attention to detail, often prolonging shots which, in turn, evokes feelings of tension (1:38:49). While Toller calmly prepares and puts on the suicide vest, the camera is completely still. When Toller sees Mary enter the church, he loses his calm determination and engages in self-harm by wrapping a barbed wire around his body. These scenes are contrasted by elevated and somber organ music playing at the church: a nineteenth-century hymn by Elisha Hoffman, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," sung by Toller's ex-wife. We see the pastor suffer and bleed as she sings the lines: "Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms" (Hoffman). Following this, Toller, now apparently calm again, fills a glass with bleach, and just as he is about to drink it, sees Mary, who utters his name. The pastor drops the glass, and as he walks toward her, the camera begins to move. They embrace and kiss while the camera circles around them in a long panning

shot, all to the sounds of the hymn. The film finishes by abruptly cutting to a silent black screen.

These last images of *First Reformed* bring back hope for survival, even though the film was at its most desperate a moment earlier. The hymn playing immediately changes those scenes' meaning from grimly ironic to literal and hopeful. In the end, the 'everlasting arms' are no longer contrasted with barbed wire maiming Toller's body but rather emphasize the characters' loving embrace. In this context, 'everlasting arms' seem to echo Haraway's thoughts regarding the fact that earthly creatures are always surrounded by others, and that there is always peace to be found in connection. Additionally, the fact that the camera moves so noticeably and dynamically in the final seconds suggests that there is an escape from the inertia and paralysis of anxiety. Again, the film signals that hope can only be found in others.

The concluding shots of *First Reformed* seem to confirm Cvetkovich's propositions, namely the idea that the establishment of affectively engaged communities is necessary for political productivity. *First Reformed* seems to expose the problematic aspects of political acts, which are strongly rooted in negative affect as experienced in isolation, and contrasts them with the hope that stems from connection. Cvetkovich writes that "[i]n finding public forums for everyday feelings, including negative feelings that can seem so debilitating, so far from hopefulness about the future or activism, the aim is to generate new ways of thinking about agency" (2).

Throughout most of the film, the search for public forums proves fruitless, and the need for agency becomes twisted. The characters' struggle with inertia and helplessness becomes so intense that they are capable of undertaking the most radical steps to reclaim any sense of power. Still, the terrorist attacks never actually take place, even though both Toller and Michael were planning them. The reason is human connection, i.e., the relationship they have with Mary, thus pointing to the fact that the film does frame collaboration as powerful enough to counteract the destructive potential of Anthropocene anxiety. The political act we do observe on the screen is the funeral of Michael, where a community gathers to sing a protest song and grieve together for both the diseased activist and the damaged environment. As predicted by Cvetkovich, negative affect becomes the basis for the establishment of communities that find the power to engage in behavior meant to question the status quo and reclaim at least some degree of agency. Thus, what *First Reformed* leaves its viewer with is not Anthropocene anxiety fueled destruction or inertia but rather connection and activity. It seems that hope is, in the end, the most important quality the film aims at affecting its audience with.

Finally, in a seemingly reversed order, I would like to address what can be seen as a kind of hidden meaning of the title of the film. *First Reformed* is, of course, the name of Toller's church, but it seems that it also clearly relates to the idea that



Toller becomes reformed by the ecological thought he receives from Michael, the first character to experience a solitary struggle against climate change, since no one follows his cries for action. Yet, upon deeper inspection, such an account could be seen as rather surface-level. After all, the figure of the environmental fighter is present in the film almost from its very beginning, most obviously embodied by Michael, but also relevant to Mary. Thus, it seems that the transition from the state of not caring about the condition of the planet to the state of caring is not the titular reformation. Rather, it could refer to the transition from individuality to collaboration, from anxiety to hope. Throughout the film, we see the pastor unable to find connection with others and collaborate with them; he does not accept help from other characters. Toller is 'first reformed' only when he finally welcomes the need for connection with other creatures on Earth by embracing his relationship with Mary in the closing images of the film.

### CONCLUSION

Climate change is such an immense and overwhelming event that it is bound to cause reactions. Grief is a natural response to witnessing tremendous loss, extinction, and devastation. Nonetheless, feeling stuck hardly leads to viable solutions. A lack of hope tends to exclude the possibility for change. That is one of the reasons why scholars such as Donna Haraway search for new ways of thinking about this world and examine ideas necessary for living on an injured planet. *First Reformed* explores such concepts and rejects despair and inertia in its final scenes, acknowledging the struggle with anxiety and depression one might be forced to battle when accepting the truth of climate change. The film highlights the embodied nature of these experiences, and how they are shaped by environments. In the end, *First Reformed* suggests multiple times that hope is something to be shared with others, and that the strength to go on can be found in the cohabitants of our planet. It seems that the core message of both Haraway and Schrader is that we must reject individuality in favor of collectiveness in order to live in the age of the Anthropocene.

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