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Film Review

FIRST REFORMED (Paul Schrader, US 2017)

Most of the initial critical response to Paul Schrader's latest film has largely ignored the elephant in the room: the extensive influence of *JOURNAL D'UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE* (*DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST*, Robert Bresson, FR 1951) and *NATT-VARDSGÄSTERNA* (*WINTER LIGHT*, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1963) on the film. This review seeks to remedy this failing by analysing *FIRST REFORMED* through an emphasis on its relationship with these two films. This approach functions on three levels, which this review will explore sequentially: narrative, thematic concern and form.

The plot of *FIRST REFORMED* is best summarised by considering these two major influences. Indeed, Schrader's pastiche of these two films is to transpose Bresson's protagonist from *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST* into the scenario that challenges Bergman's protagonist at the beginning of *WINTER LIGHT*: Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke) is Schrader's conflicted minister and, like Bresson's priest, he suffers simultaneously from a crisis of faith and from stomach pain caused by cancer. The events of the film are set in motion when – just as in *WINTER LIGHT* – a young wife brings her reluctant husband to Toller for counselling. Whereas Bergman's troubled husband despairs at the threat of nuclear war, Schrader's husband, Michael (Philip Ettinger), is an eco-activist tormented by the threat of climate change. With prophetic urgency, he argues that it is immoral to bring a child into the world because an environmental cataclysm is imminent. Bent on this apocalyptic vision, he reveals he wants his pregnant wife, Mary (Amanda Seyfried), to abort their unborn child.

From this point in the narrative, Schrader documents the events of the next few weeks, leading up to the climactic dedication service for his church. Central to this narrative is Toller's own struggle with faith and his theological beliefs, as well as the instability of various personal issues, such as his relationship with a colleague with whom he once shared a romantic past. The catalyst for all of this is Toller's encounter with environmental activism, his theological interpretation of the ecological crisis and his conflict with the worldly forces that are simultaneously responsible for this crisis and for the financing of his church. Over these weeks, two more events occur that trigger Toller's unravelling. First, Mary discovers a suicide vest that it appears her husband intends to use in an act of

eco-terrorism. Second, upon realising the vest has been discovered, Mary's husband ends his life brutally with a shotgun. From here, as he grapples with the environmental issues that led to this suicide, Toller descends into radicalism, apparently conceiving a plot to use the suicide vest himself and commit a similar act of eco-terrorism. His rationale is at the same time starkly understandable and completely unsanctionable, and the viewer is left to wait as the film moves inexorably towards the dedication service, which seems to be Toller's target.

At face value *FIRST REFORMED* is a film about the place of religion in a modern age when worldly forces like politics, money and industry dominate our existence. However, the film's deepest thematic concern is with the struggle for faith, characterised through the problem of spiritual self-neglect. Schrader demonstrates this simply and powerfully: the protagonist's malnourishment is used to represent spiritual malnourishment. Toller subsists on a meagre diet of bread and alcohol, which Schrader presents in such a way as to pervert the eucharistic allusion inherent in this aesthetic. This is clear from one particular image in the film, where, in an early scene, Toller sits alone in his stark kitchen, dipping bread into a bowl of whisky. Schrader's wide angle and long take serve to isolate Toller in this shot; there is no sense of communion in the act, only a profound sense of aloneness. This is compounded by the austere editing and use of sound, especially the heightened sound effects of the mundane elements of the scene, like the scratching of the threads as the bottle cap is unscrewed. Furthermore, by substituting whisky for wine, Schrader retains the façade of the eucharistic allusion while stripping it of its substance and its interiority. The effect of this is to evacuate the act of its spirituality, and so to pervert the eucharistic image of spiritual nourishment.

The consequence of this diet adds another level to Schrader's symbolic connection of Toller's spiritual and bodily health. As the film progresses, his physical health deteriorates as a sign of his unravelling spiritual health and, incubated in his isolated and conflicted psyche, sin surfaces. Toller's spiralling descent into radicalism coincides with the rapid failing of his body; his racking cough and bloody stools become outward signs of an inward spiritual sickness. Yet the film climaxes with a moment of astounding self-realisation, where this sickness is acknowledged as sinfulness. Just as Toller is about to go through with his act of mass murder, Mary arrives unexpectedly to attend the dedication service. Her arrival opens his eyes to what he is about to do, and the psychological horror causes Toller to spiritually disintegrate. Raving, he wraps barbed wire around his torso so tightly that it draws blood. It is a moment of terrible self-flagellation, which emerges from the impulse for penance but fails drastically. However, the ending is not void of redemptive hope. This redemption is never explicit, and the film's ending is deliberately ambiguous: Toller, wrapped in barbed wire and – for the first time in the film – clothed all in white, prepares to end his life;

suddenly, Mary appears in the room. It is unclear how she passed the locked door; in fact it is uncertain whether she is even there and if this is not all an illusion created by Toller in his delirium. Vision or not, her appearance causes Toller to desist from suicide. The two embrace and the camera whirls around them as they kiss. Unexpectedly, Schrader departs from the reserved and austere style of camerawork and music he had employed up until this moment. The spinning shot continuously circles the two of them and the music from the church swells until the most abrupt of cuts, with which the film incongruously ends, and the viewer is left in stasis with silence and unanswered questions. Was Mary's appearance an act of grace? Is redemption even possible at this point? In the end, the questions that matter are not narrative questions; "what really happened" seems inconsequential, and the ambiguity of the ending leads to more interesting questions about the state of Toller and the possibility of salvation, if indeed there is any such hope.

Thematically, then, the influence of *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST* and *WINTER LIGHT* is evident in the questions the film raises about faith and doubt, as well as in the explicitly theological themes of redemption and Christological passion. Yet Schrader expands a multivalent dialogue between these two films even in the smaller details of *FIRST REFORMED*. There is Toller's profound inability to pray, which Schrader draws out of Bresson's film and throws into relief against an atmosphere of doubt akin to *WINTER LIGHT*. There is also the agonising relationship Toller has with a former lover, where a loathing is articulated in nearly the exact manner it is by Bergman's priest. There is even a perfect symmetry between the suicide event in *WINTER LIGHT* and its counterpart in *FIRST REFORMED*: the same location and even the same tool of self-destruction.

Schrader's most significant departure from Bresson and Bergman is his engagement with contemporary socio-political and theological issues. A theology of the environment is prominent, instantiated by Toller's question "Can God forgive us for what we have done?" Schrader frequently employs real footage of environmental abuse: plastic waste, oil spills and other icons of our failed stewardship. Ecclesiology is also examined, especially through the contrast of Toller's small church and the megachurch that funds it. The former is jokingly referred to as "the gift shop" in the film, while one character says that the latter "feels more like a business". Most challenging of all, perhaps, is the film's analysis of religion's dependence on money (in this case industrial money made by exploiting the environment). However, the film only presents these issues superficially, raising them in rudimentary form rather than exploring them with any significant insight. While Schrader's raising of these questions is interesting, it is frustrating that the film does not explore their true depth. For example, in one scene Toller is challenged by a youthful evangelical in such a way that the shadow of prosperity theology looms just out of shot. Yet, rather than flesh

out this particular theological debate, Schrader leaves the viewer with only a superfluous caricature of it, so that the episode becomes entirely about Toller's character and not about the theological context to this conflict. This scene, and many like it, renders the film slightly vacuous: at face value, it appears to offer genuine engagement with some urgent theological and political problems; in reality, such issues are merely paid lip service and serve only to contextualise the protagonist's motivations.

Yet beyond such thematic inspiration and narrative impetus, the influence of Bresson extends to the film's structure and form: like Bresson, Schrader positions his protagonist's journal at the heart of his storytelling. Interestingly, unlike Bresson, Schrader introduces his protagonist's journal in a highly affected manner. Whereas the journal in *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST* seems an organic narrative device (and a central inheritance from Georges Bernanos's novel), the journal in *FIRST REFORMED* is introduced as a spiritual exercise, the writing of which will last for one year, after which it will be destroyed: Toller will write in unbroken prose, forbidding himself from crossing out words and sentences so that, without any space for the oblation of thoughts he regrets or else would suppress, he is forced to confront himself psychologically, without self-indulgence. The effect is prayerful and contemplative; it is spiritual in the truest sense of a bared soul, insofar as it is bared not outwardly but inwardly and becomes the crucible for the central struggle with faith in the film.

Perhaps Bresson's most significant influence on the film, though, is stylistic. In the early 1970s, Schrader devoted a third of his book *Transcendental Style in Film*¹ specifically to the work of Robert Bresson, whom Schrader identified as a filmmaker who embodied transcendental style. As with other forms of transcendental art, transcendental style in film is an attempt to contemplate the transcendent and express the concept of the "holy other" through its art. The key elements of this style permeate Bresson's films and are readily perceptible in *FIRST REFORMED*: the 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. These techniques are the bare bones of transcendental style as Schrader articulated it in his critical theory and it is not surprising that he seems to have made *FIRST REFORMED* with aspirations of emulating this style, particularly given the subject matter. I would argue, too, that Schrader is largely successful in this aim. 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

1 Schrader 2018, first published 1972.

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.

In this sense, there is a consonance of style and form with the film's thematic concerns of faith and doubt. *FIRST REFORMED* is a valuable reinterpretation of the narratives and themes that intrigued both Bergman and Bresson some fifty years ago. Moreover, in striving to replicate transcendental style, the film is fascinating insofar as it constitutes the rare occurrence of a theorist's attempt to substantiate their critical theory in a text of their own creation. Whether Schrader achieves this style is open for debate. I would argue that he certainly creates the contemplative and distanced atmosphere typical of the style, but his somewhat rudimentary approaches to complex theological and socio-political issues often undermine his transcendental aims.

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