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First Reformed

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Abstract

This is a film review of *First Reformed* (2018), directed by Paul Schrader.

Author Notes

William Blizek is the Founding Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the editor of the Continuum Companion to Religion and Film (2009).

As I was leaving the theater after watching Paul Schrader's new film *First Reformed*, I said to myself: "This movie was just stunning." It was stunning because the end came quickly—maybe abruptly would be a better word—and that ending was very powerful. But it was also stunning because it dealt with the process of finding ourselves, learning who we are, exploring our souls. I sat on the aisle and as one gentleman left the theater he leaned down to me and said: "A strange movie. Lots of mental health issues." But he missed the point of the film. The Reverend Toller is not a man with mental health issues, a crazy man unlike the rest of us. Toller is us. He represents all of us. He is the everyman. What he's trying to do, find his soul, and how he goes about doing it is the same for all of us. The process isn't pretty. And it isn't easy.

The Reverend Toller has lost a son, gotten divorced, counseled a man who completes suicide, has become deathly ill, and faced political and religious corruption. The details of our lives may be different, but we all encounter those events in life that require us to take a good look at who we are. This is a man trying to find his soul. As we all must do. The movie has been called a horror film, and that it is. But the horror is not alien. The horror lies within. The horror lies in the fact that we may not find ourselves, that we may be lost forever, and that we recognize this about ourselves.

What makes this profound is that Toller's search for his soul is exactly what religion is all about. It is not about becoming famous, being rich, obeying the church's list of moral rules, or telling people how religious you are. All of those things we see in the film by way of contrast in the large and successful Abundant Life Church and in their supporter, the energy tycoon and polluter who denies climate change. This is a movie about "real" religion. The search for meaning and self-knowledge and finding one's place in the universe is what religion is about. But one cannot be simply given this information. We cannot simply be told to follow a particular sacred text or to

adopt the theology of a particular group. The search is something that we must carry out for ourselves.

If I understand anything about the “transcendental style” in film (the term coined by Schrader himself in his 1972 book, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*) then I think it is fair to say that *First Reformed* is an excellent example of it. First the movie begins with the ordinary. It is remarkable how unordinary the ordinary is in this film and it is an omen of what is to come. Second, we encounter some kind of cognitive dissonance. We face some things that are incompatible. In this film, the Reverend Toller finds his faith and values at odds with the values of organized religion and political power. Third, we return to the ordinary, but we are now transformed. We may be in the ordinary, but we have transcended the incompatibility, the conflict. We are different people. We move beyond the film and we at least come close to the transcendent. It is impossible to talk about the transcendent, but film gives us the opportunity to experience it. This is a very crude account of the transcendent in film, but it should be enough for the viewer to find this style in the film. The ending of the film is sufficiently ambiguous—we cannot be told what to believe—that it is open to interpretation. I saw the ending of the film as a message of love and hope. It comes through a kind of miraculous or mystical experience. That message is all we need.