

### Existential Dread and Political Horror in *First Reformed*

Like much of writer-director Paul Schrader's work, *First Reformed* (2018) chronicles the gradual mental breakdown of a troubled, lonely man. In this case, that man is Reverend Ernst Toller, a pastor burdened with the loss of his son and subsequent divorce which created within him a loneliness that is only amplified by the often-empty halls of his church. As a result, Toller desperately grasps for some sense of purpose as his body and mind begin to deteriorate. *First Reformed*, despite its disturbing subject matter, is categorized by most as a drama film; however, its placement into the genre of drama is indicative of the realism of the horrors depicted, such that the film must be distanced from the larger-than-life terrors often associated with the horror genre. Even with this genre distinction, the sensations evoked by the film are not unlike those aroused by horror films. Therefore, it may be of interest to examine *First Reformed* in the context of horror to identify how it utilizes elements and techniques that are typically linked to the horror genre in order to portray political and existential horror. Throughout *First Reformed*, a horrifying atmosphere and narrative are cultivated in order to reflect the protagonist's torment through a larger examination of the existential dread and political evils that plague everyday life.

#### Existentialism and Existential Dread

Before analyzing the existential dread present in the film, one must first understand the concept of existentialism in order to recognize how the filmic elements evoke it. Put concisely, existentialism relates to "the essential difficulties we face as human beings . . . exploring the fundamental dilemmas that human beings face during the course of their lives" (Whipple and Tucker 97). Furthermore, existential psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom defines existentialism through four major tenets, or givens: "death, meaninglessness, isolation, and freedom" (97). Existential dread, on the other hand, deals specifically with negative emotions that are brought about by the concepts within existentialism. *First Reformed* demonstrates these four essential givens through its depiction of the protagonist's inner torment, and as such his torment can be categorized specifically as a sense of existential dread.

To understand the contributions of cinematic horror elements towards this central theme of existential dread, one must first observe the narrative, in which the theme and the four givens are established. Chronologically, the first given to be satisfied is isolation, depicted in the narrative through Toller's living conditions. His troubled past is revealed early on during his meeting with a depressed environmental activist who questions him about his family to discover that Toller's son died while on military duty, which Toller convinced him to take up. His wife left him shortly after, leaving him with no family. Toller's family tragedy as well as his separation from the outside world in his secluded church of few members illustrate the basic definition of this tenet of existentialism. Existential isolation is, at its core, "the realization that people are going to die alone" (Whipple and Tucker 101). The narrative's ambiguous ending, which suggests that Toller committed suicide and died alone in his church, contributes further to this depiction of existential isolation.

All of the remaining existential givens are demonstrated through Toller's sudden passion for the environment that was borne from his meeting with an environmental activist. Prior to this meeting, Toller's narration suggested that he had lost his sense of direction in life; he felt that he

had no purpose. In this sense he exhibits the existential given of meaninglessness; as a result, he struggles “to find and make meaning, which helps provide a will to live as well as a sense of identity” (Whipple and Tucker 99). Toller’s newfound purpose demonstrates yet another existential given in the form of free will (freedom). Toller’s choice to change his life’s focus to the environment shows how “an individual is not only free to choose but is also responsible for the outcome of such choices” (Whipple and Tucker 98). This definition suggests that Toller was responsible for the outcome of his decision, the outcome being his own death. Death is the fourth and final existential given, or rather the intentional ignoring of death due to the fear of its inevitable arrival. Individuals use distractions which may “take the form of obsessions” (Whipple and Tucker 100) like Toller’s self-righteous obsession with environmental justice by whatever means necessary.

Armed with this definition of existentialism in the context of the film, and the knowledge that *First Reformed* is a character study at its core, it is clear that the successful communication of a sense of existential dread is most reliant on the lead performance such that “nonperformance elements are orchestrated to amplify the thoughts and emotions that actors convey” (Baron and Carnicke 39). Ethan Hawke, in his portrayal of Reverend Toller, effectively portrays the symptoms of a man grappling with existential dread. Much of Toller’s internalized struggles are conveyed to the audience while still maintaining the subtlety of a reserved man troubled by dreadful thoughts. Because Toller is so reserved, much of Hawke’s performance relies on facial expressions and physicality, however there are a few moments of intense emotion which plot out the breakdown of his psyche. Since performance is such an important aspect of this type of film, it could be said that the other techniques discussed up to this point were constructed around Hawke’s performance; for example, the droning sound design is only effectively horrifying when it supplements Hawke’s wide-eyed expression of dark contemplation. Furthermore, the theme of existential dread could not exist without Hawke’s portrayal. In his role as Toller, he embodies the purposeless spiritual drifter who is outwardly numb but inwardly desperate for something to grasp onto (i.e. environmental reform). Through his subtle yet expressive performance, Hawke portrays Toller as a sympathetic yet terrifyingly unstable man who is on the brink of outburst at any and every moment, permeating the entire film with a sense of dread while embodying the theme of existentialism.

Because *First Reformed* is a character study, the narrative is of greatest significance thematically, and the horror elements are structured around it. A thorough definition of existentialism as it relates to the narrative is essential to understand why the horrific concepts evoke existential dread rather than a more general sense of disturbance or fear. For example, an unsettling score is unsettling first and foremost because of the particular musical composition, not because of the themes that it is connected to. When observing exactly what makes the film so disturbing on a technical level, it is important to connect that which is horrifying in a general sense back to the overarching theme of existentialism in order to fully comprehend the complex feelings of existential dread that *First Reformed* elicits.

## Political Horror

Moving beyond existential dread and speaking on the horror genre in general, recent cognitive studies have shown that Americans get much of their political information from the media, and an observation of filmic genres and subtexts can help us see how political evils are represented in film. In the context of horror, this political subtext deals with “facing evils in everyday life” through “symbolism that creeps beneath surface meanings to assault our dreams and awaken our minds” (Nelson 382). That is to say that the evils and horrors in a horror film are often symbolic of larger political evils that the audience may face in their everyday lives, from zombies representing mass society to malicious hackers embodying the newfound fear of surveillance in a technology-driven world. While the examples offered are extreme, the concept of political subtext in horror is still applicable to *First Reformed* and may help to explain why its subject matter is so affecting (Nelson).

Before using John S. Nelson’s discussion of political evil in horror film as a guide for this analysis, the horror elements in *First Reformed* must be clearly laid out and defined. Since the political evil argument works off of the assumption that the movie is in the horror genre, the ways in which *First Reformed* may be defined as a horror film must be identified before this argument can be applied. There are many ways in which the film intends to make its viewer uneasy—the smooth, ghostly cinematography, the disturbing narrative, the terrifying props—but the most traditionally horror-esque element of the film is its score. While nothing more than a continuous, deep, droning wave, it still manages to inject a strong sense of uneasiness into every scene in which it plays. The deep, ominous echoes are reminiscent of a dark cave that gives off a foreboding aura of looming danger. As such, this score is only present in significant moments of Toller’s spiral, such as when he first starts to contemplate a plan for martyrdom involving a suicide vest. Horror scores are notoriously simple, and effective in amplifying fear by using sound strategies that are associated with “creepiness.” In this sense, the score for *First Reformed* (or perhaps it would be better termed “sound design”) matches closely with the majority of films composing the horror genre.

Furthermore, the complex meshing of genres present in the film demand the semantic/syntactic approach to film genre offered by Rick Altman. Based on his distinctions, *First Reformed* uses the semantics of drama (generic expectations and cinematic presentation) to evoke the larger syntax of the horror genre (the meaning and/or emotion derived from the arrangement of the film’s semantics). Just as Altman described, *First Reformed* is an example of a film “that innovate[s] by combining the syntax of one genre with the semantics of another” (Altman 558). These distinctions allow us to consider *First Reformed* as a horror film, but only from a syntactic standpoint despite the few cases of horror semantics (i.e. the sound design). The dark implications of the film’s character-study narrative supplemented by this horror-esque score and syntactic approach to genre are sufficient to place *First Reformed* under the subgenre of *psychological horror*, which typically focuses on the mental instability of its protagonist, just as this film does with Reverend Toller. While the film may not be readily accepted as a psychological horror, considering it as such syntactically allows for its political subtext to be examined in the context of horror, as they should be for this analysis (Altman).

The primary political evil in *First Reformed* may be too explicit to be defined as a subtext or a symbol, as Reverend Toller’s downward spiral is spurred by an obsession with environmental destruction. The degradation of the environment is not symbolic of any larger political evil, but rather it is a literal political evil that viewers are forced to deal with today due

to decades of environmental mistreatment. As such, *First Reformed* taps into worldwide fear created by the threat of environmental collapse by exploring it within the narrative. This aspect of the film might not be regarded as a political subtext as defined by John S. Nelson in his discussion of the topic, as it requires that the horror film uses said subtexts to help us “refine our defenses, improve ourselves, and come together in action” (Nelson 385). Although *First Reformed* seems to bring the issue of environmental collapse to the forefront, the Magical Mystery Tour sequence near the end of the film implies otherwise. This sequence features several minutes of raw aerial footage featuring beautiful landscapes that gradually change to images of land that has been altered, destroyed, or laden with civilian and industrial garbage. The viewer is subjected to such horrifyingly foreboding imagery before leaving the theater to continue his or her life of consumption and wastefulness, which may prove the film’s point in that no matter how much it pushes the environmental reparation agenda, the audience will continue to do nothing about it. This is terrifying in a manner that goes beyond the typical political horror subtext, and connects back to the accountability for one’s actions present in the givens of existentialism.

The subtler nature of political subtext is also present in *First Reformed* beyond the narrative, such as props. The most prominent prop is the suicide vest that Reverend Toller recovers from the environmental activist. Suicide vests are rooted in politics both by nature and by public perception; historically, such vests are seen by the user as form of self-sacrifice for a greater political good. The threat of mass murder suggested by this prop is inherently terrifying, but the political association amplifies this dread by associating Toller’s dark thoughts with the real-world politics of suicide vests. Another significant prop is the Pepto-Bismol and whiskey concoction that Toller creates. This prop can be linked thematically to the aforementioned environmental crisis, though the subtlety of the prop allows it to fit the definition of political subtext more closely. Toller’s degrading physical health parallels the environmental degradation in the film; so, going off of this, the image of a liquid medicine being added to a hard whiskey reflects humanity’s futile attempts to fix the damage that has been done. Our attempts at environmental reparation are often miniscule in comparison to the destruction caused by many of our other unchanged habits, just as a bit of Pepto-Bismol won’t do anything to repair the damage that Toller’s excessive alcohol consumption and other health conditions have done. Furthermore, these two props are inherently linked by the political horror they evoke. The impending doom of Toller’s potential act of self-sacrifice with the suicide vest is reflected in the bubbling Pepto-Bismol, which reflects Toller’s internal state as the dark thoughts boil inside him, building tension towards a destructive climax somehow connected to the suicide vest (Metz 67). These props, therefore, serve the film on many levels; they further the plot and character development, contribute to an atmosphere of dread, and evoke real-life political tragedy to amplify the horror and pose questions about the suicide vest as a political device.

## Conclusion

Though existential dread and political horror may initially seem to be very different concepts, they actually share quite a strong connection. The generic symbols of horror—one of which could be the mass killer, like a suicide bomber—are inherently existentialist, as are the politics associated with them (Nelson 383). Existentialism is a concept that everyone grapples with in some form, whether they realize it or not. If that very struggle yields negative emotions associated with existence, existential dread is born. And through this struggle, existentialism is faced in everyday life, just like political evils. This connection suggests that in some cases, political evils—or their portrayal in horror film—may be enough to evoke a sense of existential dread in the viewer, as is clearly the case in *First Reformed* and the connection between Reverend Toller's dread and his inclination towards becoming a force of political evil.

Though the viewer may not be able to identify why the film terrifies them, the ideas of existential dread and political evils demonstrate that the film is so deeply affecting because it uses relatable human struggles from everyday life in its construction of horror. Therefore, the horror elements which serve to propel the plot and character development of *First Reformed* also force the audience to take a step back and examine the political evils that they see in the world as well as the evils that they see within themselves (through existential dread), essentially creating horror from the modern plight of humanity.

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