

## On “First Reformed”

Robert S. Griffin

[www.robertsgriffin.com](http://www.robertsgriffin.com)

I’ve written favorably about screenwriter and director Paul Schrader on this site (see the thought “On Paul Schrader,” October, 2014). I’m starting to change my mind. I’m coming to the conclusion that throughout Paul Schrader’s long career--all the way back to his book *Transcendental Styles in Film* and his screenplay for the film “Taxi Driver” in the 1970s—he has demonstrated but one notable talent: he is able to come off, including to me, as a first-rate thinker and artist when in fact he’s second rate in both.

Schrader wrote the screenplay and directed the mostly well-received 2017 film, “First Reformed.” If you are big on the radical environmental movement and a social reform mission of the Christian church, and you think that love is all you need, and would like a sermon/pep talk confirming your (and Schrader’s) wisdom and moral superiority in those areas, this is the movie for you. Plus, you’ll get superb acting by Ethan Hawke, and the excellent cinematography of Alexander Dynan. In fact, Hawke and Dynan are so good in this film they largely cover for Schrader’s hodgepodge, pedestrian screenplay.

“First Reformed” is basically a remake of director Ingmar Bergman’s 1963 film “Winter Light,” with Schrader’s environmentalism and take on religious concerns and human happiness replacing Bergman’s, and elements of two 1954 films, Robert Bresson’s “Diary of a Country Priest” and Carl Dreyer’s

“Ordet,” and, my guess, an aspect of Schrader’s own life added to the mix.

The best reason for watching “First Reformed” is that it might prompt seeing—or, as it did for me, watching again—the far superior “Winter Light,” which is available in DVD and on streaming. The difference between Bergman and Schrader is that of a mature, wise, and gifted artist and a sincere and hard-working but plodding graduate student. Actor Hawke and cinematographer Dynan are indeed first rank in “First Reformed,” but in “Winter Light” you get to see the *top* of the first rank in their counterparts, Gunnar Björnstrand and Sven Nykvist.

Some things about Schrader’s “First Reformed” that brought me up short:

- The film really comes down on this evil capitalist polluter, his name is Balq—oh, is he bad, let’s kill him. On the other hand, one of the good guys in the film is an environmental activist who thinks his unborn child should be slaughtered, and that the best thing he can do with his life is end it by blowing his brains out with a shotgun, leaving his pregnant wife to fend for herself. No questions raised about him in this film; he’s Mr. Sensitive.
- Hawke is very good at showing the angst of his character, Ernst Toller, a Protestant minister, which ultimately leads to self-flagellation and the intention to annihilate himself in agonizing fashion. But what are we given to account for this? References to a child killed in the war, with a broken marriage as the result, Thomas Merton’s writings, and whether God cares about all the evil in the world. These remain abstractions, bits of dialogue, “over

there.” In “Winter’s Light,” Bergman connects us with what’s going on with the lead character, another minister, Tomas Ericsson--we see it, we feel it, we get it.

- Clearly derived from “Winter Light,” Toller verbally rips into Esther, a woman who shows concern for him. She’s left in tears, devastated. Why did he do this, and what is the justification of this conduct toward another human being? In “Winter’s Night,” what Tomas does to Marta, the parallel character to Esther, makes nuanced sense. In “Winter’s Night,” it comes off as simply an inexplicable abusive attack against a vulnerable person.

- Mary, a young, attractive female parishioner of Toller’s approaches him with the suggestion—get this--that she lie on top of him, and he jumps to the task. Whether she meant it as such, at least consciously, there’s an obvious sexual overtone here; what about the ethics of a man of the cloth doing this? The outcome of this, to me embarrassing, pairing—a CGI “Big Lebowski”-like flight of fancy --is heavy-handed, didactic, and absurd.

- Apparently taken from “Diary of a Country Priest,” Schrader inserts into the plot Toller’s apparent stomach cancer. And with perhaps an autobiographical reference, he does the same thing with Toller drinking heavily in response to his personal anguish. Inartistic add-ons that scatter and dilute the thrust of the story.

- Our man Reverend Toller decides to blow Balq up (nothing understated about “First Reformed”), and in the process, blow himself up, level his 250-year-old church (speaking of environmental destruction), and murder up to 200 innocent people seated in the pews of the church. Ah, but then he decides that isn’t

such a good idea, because into the church walks someone he personally cares about, Mary. To a Christian clergyman, killing all those other people is a fine thing to do, but not Mary. The words that comes to me are contrived, sophomoric, silly, and irresponsible of Schrader (to have an appealing protagonist—think Ethan Hawke—embody this demonic outlook).

- The big finish of the movie, Toller—get this--decides to bind himself with barbed wire and end it all by drinking Drano. But, unexpected and announced, into the room comes Mary. Toller sets down his glass of Drano. He charges across the room—quite the sight with his shirt speckled with blood—and out of the blue, nothing like this has happened before in the film, smothers Mary with hugs and kisses, which, with the barbed wire cutting into him, has to have stung big time, ouch! But at that moment, Toller feels no pain. And then, the height of pretension, a “Sopranos” blackout and a blank screen for an extended amount of time before the credits start to roll. The stark, sudden ending and the time lag before the credits were obviously intended to leave us with moments of awestruck contemplation in response to the great art we have just experienced, the barbed wire and Drano and hugs and kisses (rather than, as it did with me, with snickers).

What’s this ending supposed to be about? Love solves your problems, no matter how big they are?--or, more particularly, perhaps extracted from “Ordet,” what you really need is a young curvy body to clutch? Unlike Märta in “Winter Light,” who is emotive and thoughtful and articulate, including about her feelings toward Tomas, Mary has been very limited in affect and hasn’t said

more than one banal sentence at a time the entire film, and zero about her connection with Toller. This Toller's-bull-rush *finis* comes out of left field. Give me a break.

My advice, skip "First Reformed" and go straight to Winter Light." If you want to see a film with Ethan Hawke in an equally fine performance that actually works intellectually and artistically, check out the all-but-ignored "The Woman in the Fifth," 2011 (see the July, 2014 site thought on that film). It's written and directed by Pawel Pawlikowski, who is everything Schrader isn't.