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## "Will God Forgive Us?": Christianity and the Climate Crisis in Auteur Cinema

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**“WILL GOD FORGIVE US?”: CHRISTIANITY AND THE CLIMATE  
CRISIS IN AUTEUR CINEMA**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

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*For Tegan*

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## ABSTRACT

Climate change is an unavoidable and real catastrophic threat to the future of Planet Earth. This dissertation is interested in how contemporary auteur cinema draws on Christian forms to give expression to the ineffability of environmental collapse. In this rhetorical generic criticism, I discuss three recent auteur films: *First Reformed* (2017, directed by Paul Schrader), *Interstellar* (2014, directed by Christopher Nolan), and *mother!* (2017, directed by Darren Aronofsky). In order to best rhetorically analyze these films, I perform a generic criticism which utilizes aspects of psychoanalysis and affect theory as per the work of Gunn. Each film is discussed both for its auteur qualities, but also for the Christian forms that are utilized by the auteur to express the cultural anxieties of climate change. Through this analysis, I argue several important conclusions, most importantly that current environmental cinema fails to present opportunities for intervention in global warming, forming audiences with little to no efficacy. By utilizing Christian forms to tell stories about climate change, audiences are both challenged and reaffirmed in their understandings and misconceptions about the links between contemporary Judeo-Christianity in America and global warming.

## INTRODUCTION. THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

We may be doomed. As in, the future of the human species on Planet Earth may indeed be hopeless. Increasingly, popular press authors, scientists, and politicians are positing that the human race may have waited too long to prevent total global collapse due to climate change (Wallace-Wells).<sup>1</sup> Take, for instance, the opening words of noted climate change journalist Wallace-Wells' *The Uninhabitable Earth*, "It is worse, much worse, than you think. The slowness of climate change is a fairy tale, as pernicious as the one that says it isn't happening at all, and comes to us bundled with several others in an anthology of delusions" (1). As Roy Scranton so joyfully puts it, "to even ask the question of what the future holds today is to face an abyss of suffering that defies all reasonable thought" (par. 5). There are obvious and clear downsides to advertising the inevitability of total ecological collapse. Morton argues to advertise the apocalypse due to climate, is "part of the problem, not part of the solution" (103). However, as Franzen argues,

Some climate activists argue that if we publicly admit that the problem can't be solved, it will discourage people from taking any ameliorative action at all. This seems to me not only a patronizing calculation but an ineffectual one, given how little progress we have to show for it to date. The activists who make it remind me of the religious leaders who fear that, without the promise of eternal salvation, people won't bother to behave well. In my experience, nonbelievers are no less loving of their neighbors than believers. And so I wonder what might happen if, instead of denying reality, we told ourselves the truth. (para. 14)

This apparent nihilism does not function to release the public from its responsibility for caring for the planet and each other, but instead to realize that "half measures", as Franzen titles them,

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<sup>11</sup> In this dissertation, I chose to use both "climate change" and "global warming" to discuss current ecological destruction which impacts global climate. I would like to note that I agree with arguments put forth from Morton and others that the use of the term climate change feeds into further denialism and considerations of it as less of a dire problem, e.g. "the phrase climate change has been such a failure that one is tempted to see the term itself as a kind of denial, a reaction to the radical trauma of unprecedented global warming" (8). However, I find the prevalence of the term climate change to replace global warming a persuasive reason for its utilization in this dissertation.

are just as important or more important than pursuing unrealistic and arguably unattainable goals of zero emissions, for instance. Franzen makes an important comparison between religion and climate change, both in this quotation and throughout his article. For instance, further in the article, Franzen compares the work of cutting carbon to the concepts of the Protestant Reformation.

A serious problem with the reality of climate change and its contested inevitability is that it truly is incomprehensible. Franzen argues that Earth's "impending collapse is even harder to wrap my mind around than death" (para. 5). For Morton, this incomprehensible nature of climate change is a hyperobject. Morton "coined the term *hyperobjects* to refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (1). There are countless hyperobjects, and they have various commonalities, but most importantly, the hyperobject is at times "a conceptual fact so large and complex that, like the internet, it can never be properly comprehended" (13). Morton himself says of climate, "Given our brain's processing power, we can't even really think about it all that concretely" (104). Thus, humans arrive at climate change as inevitable, irrefutable, and yet simultaneously ineffable. This ineffability results, perhaps, in a lack of conceived efficacy. This dissertation functions in part to answer a question posed by Scranton, "What can narrative do in the face of global ecological apocalypse?" (para. 24).

The power of narrative is expressed in film. Due to the rising threat of anthropogenic climate change, as well as film narrative's possible influence on audience's perception of and ability to solve for climate change, I conduct a generic criticism, utilizing close textual analysis, of three popular environmental auteur films: *mother!* (2017), *Interstellar* (2014), and *First Reformed* (2018). I provide insight into these films which each address general environmental anxiety with different Christian rhetorical forms: genesis, the jeremiad, and the apocalypse.



First, I position this project within the broader history of climate change and science within American culture. Next, I detail important concepts within environmental communication, before discussing the role of film in American culture. This provides the grounds for discussing environmental film as a genre. Next, preconceived notions about the relationship between Christianity and climate change is discussed. Finally, I make an argument for the study of *mother!*, *Interstellar*, and *First Reformed* as environmental and auteur cinema worthy of rhetorical criticism.

This project began with each theory and film occurring to me independent of one another. I had seen each of these films casually and later realized that each film reflected a different rhetorical tradition which could impact ways of understanding climate change in contemporary cinema. As I began preliminary research for this project, to understand the implications of ecocriticism, I realized that in order to do quality research which advocated and fought for the end of global anthropogenic climate change I need to guide this project ethically through the theories of new materialism. I argue that new materialism provides the groundwork for radically reconceptualizing nature; a required component if one is going to do quality ecocriticism. Following these decisions, I chose to integrate the work of Gunn and other rhetorical theorists who argue for the integration of psychoanalysis and affect in generic criticism in order to provide more nuanced arguments for audiences. This theoretical trajectory sets up a series of research questions which guide this project in order to best attend to the impacts of film and narrative on climate change awareness and activism for audiences.

Through these topics, I arrive at the research questions which provide a framework for the goals of this dissertation:

1. How do *First Reformed*, *mother!*, and *Interstellar* depict the current climate crisis, and general ecological collapse, and how is this depiction influenced by religious forms?
2. How might depictions of these ecological problems, when combined with religious forms, complicate previous conceptions, especially those perpetuated by popular news media, of the relationship between Christianity and environmentalism?
3. What alternative responses to climate change are presented in these three films? How might these films construct audience's understanding of possible solutions?
4. How do these films complicate or expand current understandings of genesis, jeremiad, and apocalyptic rhetoric?
5. How do the films expand our understanding of the relationship between religious forms and cinema as it relates to generic criticism?

While I mention above that climate change is irrefutable, it is essential to provide the caveat that the irrefutability of climate change amongst the scientists is not always reflected within the general public. Despite the call from activists as well as climate scientists, who are 97 percent in agreement that human beings are the cause of climate-warming, the planet continues to warm at an alarming rate (NASA). While a great deal of politicians are in agreement that something must be done, and soon, the former President of the United States of America claimed, on his Twitter account, "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive" as well as referring to the phenomenon as a "hoax" (Trump 2012, 2013). Trump decided to back these claims with action, by announcing in June 2017 his withdrawal the United States from the Paris Agreement, an international agreement to work to decrease greenhouse gas emissions in order to stave off anthropogenic climate change

(Wei-Haas). Trump's administration has also chosen to roll back the Clean Power Plan, thereby loosening regulations on toxic air pollution (Gibbens). The President also signed an executive order in early 2017 to significantly relax regulations on fossil fuel industries (Lavelle). As Kraft and Wuertz argue, "As the intense disputes over environmental policies in the 104th Congress illustrate, effective policy making is not based solely on credible scientific research and policy analysis" (96).

This demonstrates a rather unique problem for United States in the battle against climate change: the issue is no longer, or perhaps never was, a scientific question but instead a political battle. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center study, Americans have never been more divided on how much priority should be given to climate change or to the environment (Bowman). Additionally, according to a 2019 Gallup poll, "89% of Democrats compared to 34% of Republicans said they believe increases in the Earth's temperature are due more to the effects of pollution from human activities than natural changes in the environment" (Bowman p. 4). As Herndl and Cutlip state, "Especially in sustainability studies, scientists and engineers know that good science is not enough" (5). Despite whether or not the public agrees on the reality of climate change, the United States continues to be one of highest greenhouse gas emitters in the world (Wei-Haas). Without the United States' participation in agreements such as the Paris Agreement, regardless of whether this particular initiative is substantial enough, there is no hope for solving for climate change.

Climate change, and science more broadly, are rhetorical issues primarily because both exist as ideological issues in the United States. Rhetorical studies scholars interested in science have typically engaged in criticisms of specific representations within science, or as Ceccarelli posits, "critics of the world-defining hegemony of scientific discourse, interpreting the

complicated social and technical entanglements that coproduce scientific ‘discoveries,’ and thus bringing the scientific establishment down a notch or two” (199). Condit and Lynch identify three other additional types of studies within rhetorics of science: theory building, recommendations of improving science rhetorics, and the oftentimes negative power of science on public policy making. However, rhetorics of science have also turned towards illuminating the importance of returning the power to scientists in specific issues, especially climate change. As Ceccarelli notes in her study of manufactured science controversies, “there are also times when the rhetorical critic should be prepared to develop scholarly insights that can be turned to the defense of a scientific orthodoxy” (199). Condit, too, replies to the preponderance of studies which negatively portray science, “I am suggesting that the predominance of ‘science bad’ studies is ill-considered and probably disadvantageous to our own interests, as well as those of humanity more generally” (4). As the threat of global collapse from climate change continues to grow, rhetoricians invested in science have begun to investigate the role they play in that crisis, especially in previous critiques of science as unreliable and fact as unattainable (see Herndl & Cutlip).

The apparent contradiction between consensus among climate scientists and outright denial of climate change by a proportion of the United States has several key factors. Ceccarelli discusses the development of a manufactured controversy surrounding climate change which was possible because, “We assume that there are always two sides to a debate, and we structure our institutional discursive forums around this belief with balancing norms that ensure both sides are given equal representation and equal time” (205). Mark Moore writes of the use of uncertainty framing by President George W. Bush in complicating notions of climate change. Tesler, writing more empirically, found that “conservatives doubt the existence of global warming in large part

because of elite rhetoric” (307). Of course, conservative perceptions and reactions to climate change are substantially influenced by free market orthodoxy; solving for global climate change will require state intervention on the market which is in direct conflict with conservative ideology. Dahlstrom and Rosenthal also utilized more empirical data to investigate the relationship between narratives and self-perception in relation to climate denial.

Environmental communication scholars are invested in change making both inside and outside of the academy (Pezzullo “Hello”). One primary focus of environmental communication scholarship has been environmental social activism and the study of specific activism groups. Researchers have written about Greenpeace and other, national radical environmental groups (DeLuca “Greenpeace”; Delicath & DeLuca) as well more localized forms of activism (Endres; Sun, DeLuca, & Seegert), and broader discussions of environmental justice (DeLuca “Possibilities”). Especially relevant for any engagement with environmental cinema is an understanding of how rhetorical scholars have examined the salience of images in environmental communication. Researchers, such as Barnett and Delicath as well as DeLuca, have also focused on the salience of images, which is relevant to the analysis of cinema.

As Peeples and DeLuca note, “Today’s scene is primarily a visual one” (132). As Einsiedel et al. note, “Images play a critical role in this symbolic communication process” (44). The importance of images in environmental communication cannot be overstated and has only grown since *Environmental Communication* organized a special issue on the topic in 2009. A vast amount of this literature focuses on the aforementioned importance of environmental social activism; studies focus on the influence of images on topics such as the (in)visibility of toxins (Peeples “Toxic”, “Imaging”), fracking (Krause & Bucy), and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed debate (Schwarz). Additionally, scholars focus on the various forms of images, such as

photography (Schwarz), internet memes (Adams & Gynnild; Davis, Glantz, & Novak), and cartoons (Einsiedel et al.). A great deal of work which focuses on images in persuasive environmental communication also addresses the roles and manipulations of capitalism. One important place this occurs is in the advertisements of major oil companies. Plec and Pettenger note, “American consumers are inundated with, and potentially blinded by, media messages of corporate environmental sustainability” (460). Ads such as Exxonmobil’s “algae” has “actually discourage consumer environmental activism and interest by posing a didactic frame oriented toward technocratic and authoritarian values” (461). Similarly, Smerecnik and Renegar argue

by rhetorically aligning BP with environmentalism, providing customers with a means of participation in environmentalism, and constraining profit-hindering conservation behaviors, Helios Power functions as a vivid case study for understanding the impact of capitalistic agency on society’s perception of and progress toward environmental sustainability. (153)

Images of environmentalism co-opted by corporations which take part in environmental degradation work to limit viewers overall understanding and reaction to sustainability efforts. This occurs through advertising and product packaging of “greenwashing” (Baum; Spack et. al). Even television shows which offer anti-capitalist sentiments in regard to environmental problems may only function as “instantiation of capitalism’s insidious co-optation of anti-capitalist efforts” (McHendry 142). Images, therefore, play an essential role in environmental communication, especially in regard to activism.

Environmental images also have significant influence over audience’s perception of nature. As Takach states, “media visualizations of nature are based on implicit ideology, tending to perpetuate and justify existing power relations” (212). Ohara, Yamanka, and Trencer, in their work regarding environmental photographers, note “nature photography has largely contributed to increased understanding into natural phenomena and habitats that we are unable to directly

observe with the naked eye” (1053). Further, Hodgins and Thompson wrote of four artists whose “work seeks to destroy the comforting and familiar pleasures of the extractive and romantic gazes in order to force Canadians to develop new ways of thinking about our relationship to nature” (396). Other scholars have studied how photography can utilize images of the sublime and vast landscapes in order to invoke ideas of purity and the frontier myth (Kelly & Neville-Shepard).

Environmental images are also salient due to their affective potential. As Krause and Bucy note, “visual representations can be distinguished from textual descriptions on several different dimensions, including their cognitive accessibility, ease of understanding, and general capacity to evoke emotion” (326). These emotions, the authors argue, “are important to consider, as they may well influence policy support or opposition” (Krause & Bucy 326). Lockwood writes extensively about the history of emotion and affect in environmental images, noting “the cultural, political and embodied natures of affect are not yet fully explored in the research on public environmental and science communication” (736). While Lockwood makes it a point to define the differences between affect and emotion, they are often used interchangeably in his article. Primarily, Lockwood makes an argument that through more in-depth studies of the ways affect works, environmental communication scholars can “further understand how environmental communication can lead to behavioral changes, both positive (pro environmental) and negative (threatened and obstructive)” (739). This project works to expand Lockwood’s arguments about the role of affect in environmental images and its impacts on the behavior of audiences.

This project as a study of film also adds to the growing focus of images in environmental communication. A great deal of work which focuses on the importance of images in impacting viewer’s perception of nature and environmental degradation focus on nonfiction artifacts,

mainly images of specific environmental problems and un/natural landscapes. Or in Lockwood's article, the affective possibilities of climate change infographics and documentaries such as *Cowspiracy*. By attending too to the affective potential of three fictional films, this project contributes to the greater environmental communication scholarship which works to illuminate the prominence and influence of images in social activism and perceptions of nature.

### **Cinema and the Auteur**

Now that the importance of images broadly in environmental communication has been outlined, the influence of film in American culture and rhetorical studies can be discussed. In this section I will first discuss film's cultural significance, before moving on to the treatment of cinema in rhetoric studies, before finally discussing the concept of the auteur both in the literature and this project. Taking from Sklar's germinal work *Movie-Made America*, "It is important to begin with a recognition that movies have historically been and still remain vital components in the network of cultural communication, and the nature of their content and control helps to shape the character and direction of American culture as a whole" (x). As Sobchack notes, "American film and American culture are considered mutually interdependent, each illuminating and providing context for the other" (281). Cinema is "part of the broader system of cultural representation which operates to create psychological dispositions that result in a particular construction of social reality, a commonly held sense of what the world is and ought to be" (Ryan & Kellner 14). Film is a sign of the times while also working as a demonstration for audiences of what society should be.

Within rhetorical studies, a significant argument for the study of film is how it works to demonstrate current anxieties of the time in which it is made. As Rushing and Frenz state, "the relationship between critic and text, which is also implicitly a relationship between critic and



culture (or readers), since the text is symptomatic or symbolic of the culture that produces it” (“Integrating” 401-402). Rushing and Frenzt expand upon this idea in their work regarding *Rocky*, arguing for three levels of the exchange between film and society. The first of these arguments is “film projects the collective images, fantasies, and values of the culture in which the film is created” (“Rocky” 64). Second, film often depicts “symptoms of a particular societal need of an era” (65). Hoerl argues similarly considering the depiction of the 1960s in later film and television, which “provide[s] resources that enable audiences to share understandings about the function of protest and dissent. Popular culture is an important arena of cultural discourse that responds to and participates in the political struggles of the contemporary era” (10). Frenzt and Rushing’s third point is simply “films often symbolize and reinforce societal trends” (“Rocky” 65). For example, Frenzt and Farrell write of the reflection of American disillusionment with positivism and “reaffirmed transcendent Christian faith as the most viable means of coping with the problems of contemporary life” in *The Exorcist* (40). *Star Trek*, while not exclusively a film, functions to demonstrate the reach and impact beyond simply a sign of the times, but “as a cultural agent...that it actively and aggressively structures our socio-cultural landscape...it constructs a cognitive frame through which viewers are taught, not only *what* to imagine, but *how* to imagine” (Ott & Aoki “Popular” 393). To put it another way, “cinema is unquestionably an ideological machine” (Gunn & Frenzt “Fighting” 276). Finally, Lotman summarizes, “a film is part of the ideological struggles, culture and art of its era” (42). Film both reflects and influences American culture and society.

With the understanding that film has such a significant role in American culture and society, it becomes clear how it functions as a rhetorical artifact. Film was not always a respected

place of research within rhetorical studies, however. Janice Hocker Rushing was one of the first scholars to write critically about film:

to recognize the importance of popular film as a rhetorical influence that carried cultural narratives to the public. While many high-brow critics snickered at or dismissed big-budgeted Hollywood blockbusters, Janice subjected them to serious rhetorical analysis, seizing an opportunity—that few others saw—to tap into cultural consciousness. (Bochner & Frentz 110)

This project works to expand the study of film from Rushing's beginnings not only in its general contributions to the study of Christian forms and environmental cinema, but also in several specific areas of study. For instance, this project will build on previous work regarding the interrogation of modern masculinity (King "Car"; Kelly "Wounded"), the role of femininity in horror (Abdi & Calafel; Calafell & Phillips; King "Acting"; Kelly "Camp"), the specific nuances of the science fiction genre (Ott & Aoki), and finally the influence of the frontier myth (Rushing; Rushing & Frentz "Singing", "Frankenstein"; Frentz & Rushing "Mother"). These serve only as an example of the larger bodies of literature this work looks to expand upon.

The study of film in rhetorical studies allows for a unique perspective on audience, allowing for how film addresses, mobilizes, and constitutes audiences. As Frentz and Hale note, "few would argue that the rhetorical critic can address the suasive impact of discourse without considering the audience—however indirect that consideration may be" (278). However, while rhetorical studies may welcome the study of film now, film needs to be studied differently in order to account for the differences between it and traditional public address. Certain aspects of film reify its significance, and therefore it cannot and should not be analyzed similar to other rhetorical artifacts, as Sobchack argues,

The ways in which films use the rectangular spaces of the frame, construct and deconstruct time through movement and editing, express meaning and attitude through lighting, color, composition, shifts of angle, sounds of all kinds, and the complementarity

or counterpoint of all these elements presented to the viewer make the need for cinematic literacy obvious. (285)

This attention to the unique aspects of film is essential to quality criticism. As Luhr and Lehman argue, “only when the nature of the object itself has been precisely established can it be fruitfully related to larger constructs” (14). However, Goss argues that “an analysis of a film is impoverished, and at best a formal exercise, without reference to the social climate in which it emerged” (233). Finally, Lotman argues, “Cinematic meaning is meaning expressed by the resources of cinematic language, and it is impossible outside that language” (42). Therefore, not only is film an important cultural artform continuously playing out ideological battles, it is precisely because and through its form that these battles are possible.

This project looks at three particular films which are notable, in part, by virtue of their directors. Therefore, part of this project interrogates the importance of a film’s director and their additional works through auteur theory. Originally introduced by director François Truffaut, auteur cinema as a form of film critique has experienced a tumultuous and controversial existence. Andrew Sarris expanded upon the auteur from Truffaut’s original conception to a more comprehensive definition according to three criteria: technical competence, distinguishable personality, and interior meaning. In terms of distinguishability, Sarris writes, “over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels” (562). Finally, the third criteria of auteur cinema is “interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material” (562). Expanding upon these concepts, Brookey and Westerfelhause argue,

The role of the film critic then is to divine this personality from the style of the director's films, and in this critical move the persona of the auteur emerges. The auteur persona is thus the product of and is reflected in a body of work (oeuvre) stamped with the imprint of an original creative genius. (112)

While this project does not wish to interrogate each director's entire body of work, it will work to highlight some of the overall broad markings of the directors by examining some of their previous works. The personality, as Brookey and Westerfelhause argue, can be and should be analyzed by the auteur critic to make larger arguments about the film and the body of work more broadly.

Auteur cinema is a relatively contested term among film scholars, primarily due to Roland Barthes pronouncement in 1968 of the "Death of the Author" (Van der Pol). Barthes argues that audiences should be permitted to watch films without being aware of who made it, enjoying the art separate from its creator. However, in a "Post-Weinstein era" this is further complicated. In 2017, several prominent actresses came forward with formal sexual assault allegations against the film producer, sparking the beginning of the more wide-spread #MeToo movement; although it is important to note that the hashtag and phrase was originally started by a Black woman and was later coopted by white actresses (Corrigan). While Harvey Weinstein's rape accusations marks the beginning of the massive and influential "#MeToo" movement, it is not the beginning of arguments regarding separating the art from the artist. Marghitu writes of auteur apologism, which attempts to support Barthes death of the author for artists such as Weinstein, Woody Allen, Roman Polanski, and Louis C.K., to name only a few men who are accused, and in some instances charged, with sexual assault. Another important dimension of the gendered politics of auteur theory is that these auteurs are overwhelmingly white men. The framing

of auteur theory and its exclusivity of a term for white male artists feeds into a larger discourse on creativity and genius.

Several other critiques have been waged against auteur cinema. Special studies in film journals have asked if the death of the auteur has finally arrived (Evans & Graeme). Braudy and Cohen summarize the two general arguments made about the exclusive emphasis on the director in auteur theory,

First, that other facets of film language and method are more responsible for a film's ultimate success than the will of an individual; and second, that other artists—scriptwriters, cinematographers, stars, producers—better, or at least equally, deserve to be called *auteurs*. (559)

Additionally, research has approached the role of capitalism in auteur theory (Corrigan “Commerce”). Informed by Foucault’s arguments regarding authorship and copyright as a mechanism of capitalism as well as a move towards postmodernism, “many film scholars began to examine how auteurism served the same commercial function” (Brookey & Westerfelhause 112). Meaning, the essence of the auteur is “not so much the natural product of an oeuvre as it is the construction of a marketable identity” (112). These critiques, at least in part, demonstrate reasons why auteur theory has fallen out of popularity within film studies in recent decades.

However, despite its limitations, Goss argues auteurism “has proved useful in organizing the spectator’s experience of cinema as well as the industry’s promotional processes” (233). Influential to this particular project is interrogating the role of the auteur perhaps before the film even comes into being. Goss elaborates,

before an auteur arrives on the scene, substantial constraints in the making of a film are already in place. The structure of the industry, the prevailing cultural weather and the technological base, the other personnel associated with a given film, the impact of identity politics, even the vicissitudes of chance—each of these may condition the resultant film. (233)

I argue the role of the auteur is significant in this project in part because of a more famous director's ability to create films which feature environmental messages with Christian framing. Each of the films featured in this project are written *and* directed by auteurs, male directors with illustrious careers that allow them the freedom to delve into the less commercially successful realm of "Christian climate change cinema". While some Christian slated cinema and media is quite lucrative, these specific films failed to gross significant figures. The films analyzed in this dissertation do not feature directly Christian messaging or perspective, however, but instead utilize familiar Christian forms in order to craft narratives about climate change. More notably, however, utilizing auteur theory in the study of these films allows for a reflection upon the artists broader oeuvre; allowing for space to analyze a film alongside a director's previous work to attend to recurring themes and forms. Braudy and Cohen argue "the true marks of an *auteur* will appear in all of them, despite any differences in writers, cinematographers, or stars" (556). As Van der Pol summarizes, "the common practice by film scholars, based on half a century of theorizing the auteur, would be to look for certain features in the oeuvre of these filmmakers" (19). While Sarris makes a note that "*auteur* theory emphasizes the body of a director's work rather than isolated masterpieces" I argue that the concept of an auteur can be utilized in this dissertation to discuss the significance of these three films without doing a complete analysis of each of the director's other works. This project will discuss each of the auteur's previous works for recurring accents, idiosyncrasies and tensions as argued by Goss: "auteurs are elaborately wired into their culture; they channel society's deeply rooted assumptions onto the screen as filtered through their artistic accents, idiosyncrasies, and resultant tensions with convention" (233). Finally, in response to

Ivakhiv's call for the "emergence of a more full-fledged and mature ecological cinema criticism" (24) Willoquet-Maricondi proposes that "an auteur studies approach informed by ecocriticism" (11).

### **Environmental Film**

There is also within environmental communication a consistent interest among some environmental communication scholars in "how the spectacle of popular culture also holds promise as a sign of the times and a terrain of struggle over values and practices on this planet that is our home" (Pezzullo "Hello" 805). It is important to address films and other popular media which depict climate change for their propensity to influence an audience. As Lowe et al. argue, "the role of the media is significant in the public's cognition and perception of climate change issues" (436). Their research regarding the influence of *The Day After Tomorrow* found that the film "raised awareness of climate change and triggered anxiety among some viewers about the possible impacts as well as about other environmental risks" (453). Similarly, Thevenin, writing of environmental films targeted at children, argues, "given the importance of issues like global warming, there is particular concern as to whether these recent films are framing environmental issues in ways that will facilitate informed, effective participation among rising generations" (150). Due to the cultural influence of film, Rust, proposing a reframing of Jameson's "cultural logics of late capitalism" argues, "the cultural logic of ecology—as evidenced by these films and how they shape and are shaped by the world around them—describes society's dominant perceptions of the relationships between humans, other organisms, and their shared environments" (Rust 204).

Ecocinema is a common approach to the study of environmental messages in both films and literature because it has an investment with environmental collapse. Glotfelty writes of this major tenet as,

a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways and face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. (xx)

There are several things of note in this passage. First, Glotfelty demonstrates here a common anxiety which has been ever present in environmental studies since its inception: we are hurtling headlong into the abyss of human induced planetary destruction, and something must be done. Further, ecocriticism exists in a unique location of critiquing calls to action while simultaneously demanding action be taken, or else. Similar to arguments made previously, films must be addressed for their attempts to address climate change and the effectiveness of those attempts. Meaning, ecocriticism as a methodology allows for space to critique the consequences of human action, as well as the framing of solutions to those actions simultaneously. This emphasis is commensurate with the critical turn in rhetorical studies, in which moral readings of rhetoric became more normalized (e.g. McKerrow; Ono & Sloop; Wander). Finally, it is no mistake that Glotfelty uses the word "apocalypse", it is an important rhetorical choice that has been made by many environmentalists since attention to climate change first entered the common vernacular.

However, ecocriticism does not exist only to critique messages of climate destruction, but also the representation of nature and the human relationship with nature. Garrad argues, "The challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which 'nature' is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists" (Garrad 10). Not only should good ecocriticism bring into question the presentation of issues such as pollution and



climate change, the very presentation of these environments and the natural world should also be attended to.

Of course, *ecocinema* criticism utilizes all of the above tenets. As Ingram argues, “An important aim of eco-film criticism has been to promote a better and more urgent understanding of environmental issues in the culture of the arts and humanities” (43). Further, “The job of an *ecocinema* is to provide *new kinds of film experience* that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset” (Macdonald “*Ecocinema*” 20). It is not enough to simply analyze clearly environmental films for their messaging, other types of media should be analyzed. Cubitt elaborates,

The challenge for ecocriticism is not simply to identify and resolve a genre of ecological film, or to analyze explicit ecological themes as they arise in film culture. We need to understand the functioning of ecocriticism beyond the obviously eco-themed: to use its power to explain the *absence* of environmental issues, much as feminist critique did the structuring absence women in certain films. (279)

I argue this project links analyzing ecologically centered films with Cubitt and other scholars’ calls for analyzing other types of media by attending to the auteur’s oeuvre rather than simply the individual films. For instance, allowing for the analysis of both Schrader’s clearly environmentally focused *First Reformed* alongside his less ecologically focused *Taxi Driver* allows for more layered insight into the meaning of each of these films as well as Schrader as an auteur. Further, this layered analysis allows for greater insight into the ways Christian tropes intrinsically address the problems of environmental catastrophe.

There are several questions which guide ecocriticism that should be considered as well. Glotfelty provides a slew of possible points of inquiry, most of which are explicitly literary, but can be applied to film as well, “Are the values expressed ... consistent with ecological wisdom? ... In addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category? ... In what

ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?” (xix). These are only a few examples of the questions that can guide ecocriticism. Hageman offers, more specifically for ecocinema critics, “What can film, given its ideological constraints and contradictions, do to advance ecological knowledge, attitudes, and behavior?” (65).

Finally, to best understand ecocriticism and ecocinema, it is essential to review some of the more prominent and influential pieces of criticism within the field. Perhaps the most prolific of any subgenre of ecocriticism would be that which focuses on the influence and implication of nature documentaries (see Aguayo; Bagust; Bousé; MacDonald “Up”; Mitman). However, also of note are those documentaries and narrative films which focus on environmental messages. Perhaps the most commonly discussed documentary is Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, which is essentially a lecture given by Al Gore in front of a slideshow. This film is usually discussed in relation to the fictional Hollywood blockbuster disaster film, *The Day After Tomorrow* (*TDAT*). In fact, “When *An Inconvenient Truth* was released two years after *TDAT*, it used actual footage taken from the fictional disaster movie, and the two films were often linked in media discussions of climate change” (Salvador & Norton 58). And while research shows that following the release of the film *TDAT* there was a distinct rise in awareness of climate change (Lowe et al.), it also featured such hyperbolic imagery and situations that it is seen at times as humorous (Murray). Despite its straddling of disaster and comedy, *TDAT* represents an important moment in cinema, a representation of the anxiety of climate change, specifically. Rust argues, “climate change films also deserve sustained ecocritical analysis because over the coming decades the phenomenon is expected to exacerbate existing environmental problems and to present new challenges” (192).

While *TDAT* ends with perhaps the most pessimistic outcome possible, another major ecologically centered film, *Avatar* represents a rather optimistic conclusion. MacDonald writes “*Avatar* seems wildly optimistic in its predictions...setting the action in 2154—do we imagine that, at our present rate, it will take 145 more years to make our planet uninhabitable?” (“Panorama” 625). MacDonald’s pursuit of *Avatar* occurs through three heuristics: meta-film, polemic, and slow cinema. Important to note is MacDonald’s attention to the current environmental crisis which dominated the American imagination at the time of the film’s release: fracking. By discussing the films polemics, Macdonald argues that the film’s narrative is alluding to the troubles of fracking and then works through comparison and discussion of major fracking documentaries that followed. Similar to discussions of *TDAT* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, ecocritics sometimes develop further arguments by comparing popular fiction to popular documentaries.

As with all types of film, ecocinema reflects the concerns and anxieties of current culture. *TDAT* functions as demonstrative of a myriad of films which focus on one specific environmental issue (water rights, clean air, food, over population) and specific outcomes. The films suggested for study in this project express a more general anxiety about the future of the planet. The films proposed here are more symptomatic of a current culture which has a more general terror about the future of the planet. While films such as *Erin Brockovich* or *Avatar* reflect anxiety regarding water pollution or fracking, *mother!* and *First Reformed* represent a more vague and all-encompassing doom. Take for example a scene from *First Reformed* in which the primary environmental activist is describing the plethora of deadly problems facing the inhabitants of Earth. The problems range from species extinction to planetary collapse; however, he also concerns himself with EPA Superfund Sites. All of this to say, I believe this

project provides space to investigate the trends in environmental fear and cultural preoccupation which fluctuate over time and express themselves in popular cinema.

Therefore, attending to how environmental activism and destruction is portrayed in film can help illuminate how audiences may perceive these problems. As Brereton argues, “The dream factory of Hollywood has and can continue to play its part also by foregrounding the increasing importance of ecological debates within a global cultural consciousness” (237). Rust, writing of *TDAT* argues that “these cinematic narratives...[call] for humanity to alter its deeply dysfunctional relationship with the planet before it is forced to do so by the planet itself” (204). Similar to Kelly’s argument that the visualization of toxic waste sites on television allowing viewers to “critique the effects of industrial pollution”, popular cinema can provide space for audiences to interrogate larger ecological problems.

However, there is a great deal of criticism applied to environmental cinema for not completely committing to an environmental message. Ellen Moore argues that the delicate relationship between a film studio’s desire to make an environmentally conscious film and continuing to exist as a capitalist entity are at odds. They argue, “for its representation invites consideration of the role of human activity—including consumption—in the formation and continuance of environmental problems. For an industry engaged primarily with the act of selling, the environment thus becomes both an alluring yet precarious topic to cover” (542). Kelly echoes this sentiment, “With their emphasis on individualism, legal reformism, and political moderation, the radical potential of such films is ultimately compromised through a reaffirmation of the core tenets of American liberal capitalism” (Kelly “Toxic” 45). Further problems with environmental cinema are exemplified in films such as *The Lorax*, which while over-all rather progressive in its message, ends with nothing more than a “symbolic gesture”

which condenses the environmental problem to an interpersonal moment and individual change (Wolfe 19). Additionally, a great deal of film and television which features an environmental message frame the problems as too mystical and/or significant for human intervention. As Kelly notes in the presentation of toxic waste sites in the television series *True Detective* “images that capture the magnitude of contamination often reframe toxins as something mysterious or beyond our collective understanding” (“Toxic” 42). Even *The Day After Tomorrow* which is often applauded for helping bring national attention to climate change “portrays the flood and its causes as certain and beyond the reach of human intervention” (Salvador & Norton 58). Pezzullo provides a guiding question here, “What explanations can we offer for the recalcitrant indifference, incoordination, or impotence some feel related to the ecological crisis?” (“No” 304). The potential influence on audiences to see climate change as an unstoppable force is another aspect of environmental film that makes this study particularly salient. Returning again to Lockwood’s pondering of the influence of affect in audience’s self-efficacy, this project attends to the cultural influence of environmental film on audiences to expand upon existing research regarding nonfiction influence. It is important to attend to these films as narrative with Christian form to better understand how Christian discourse may alter audience’s desire to act, especially when considering the complicated positioning of Christian discourse as it relates to environmental degradation.

### **Christian Discourse**

The role of Christianity in the United States has and perhaps always will be contentious. As Hart and Pauley argue in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, “the ship of the state will continue to pitch and roll because religious issues have always confounded a nation expected to be both a shining city on a hill and a diverse, secular society on the cutting edge of modernity” (11). I

argue this tension is displayed notably in the depiction of climate change and Christianity as morally opposed. Scholars have investigated the relationship between climate change and Christianity (Aranasova & Koteyko; Landrum, Tomaka, & McCarthy; Lundgren; Prelli & Winters). However, there is a bit of discrepancy on the strength of the accusation that Christian identifying Americans are less likely to believe in climate change. While Republican Representative Tim Walberg may believe that there is a God who “if there’s a real problem, he can take care of it” [sic] (Vox), this is not the dominating perception of religious people in the United States. Although 37% of Evangelicals do not feel there is “solid evidence that climate change is occurring” (Pew Research “Religion”), this particular denomination only represents about 25% of the population of the United States (Pew Research “America’s”). Pew Research data shows that “few adults described religion’s influence as most important in shaping their thinking on environmental protection” (“Religion”). Even so, Christianity remains the dominant religion in the United States as well as an important factor in American politics (Coe & Chenoweth). Additionally, Evangelical Christians have an overwhelming amount of political influence, as demonstrated, for example, in the presidencies of Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush (Hart & Pauley). Because of the prominence of Christian individuals in the United States, and its influence in political policy, it is important to question why Christians are consistently depicted as opposed to climate change when the empirical numbers are not as substantial as they are commonly presented in major news outlets. I argue that media which features both Judeo-Christian imagery and environmental messages should be investigated primarily because of the complicated relationship between Christian identifying individuals and climate change.

Christianity and the environment are regularly discussed in relation to each other, especially in popular media (see Bergman; Dann; Vox). The assumed relationship between the

two is also demonstrated in *A Climate for Change*, a book which provides factual information about the realities of climate change specifically for a Christian audience. The authors, Katherine Hayhoe, a climate scientist, and Andrew Farley, a pastor write “Even talking about climate change from a Christian perspective might seem suspect, because so many people associate global warming with a certain agenda” (xiv). The mere existence of a book specifically attempting to persuade Christians about the reality of climate change from the prospective that they are already suspicious alone illuminates the assumed relation. Further, the misattribution of Christian reasoning for denial of climate change<sup>2</sup> complicates popular conceptions about the connections between the two. Winslow urges, “we need to be wary of assuming a generic relationship between Christian fundamentalism and anti-environmentalism” (112). However, while these concepts are discussed commonly together, rhetorical scholarship has yet to critically address how this relationship is portrayed, especially in film.

In this project I hope to uncover why the relationship between environmentalism and Judeo-Christian forms is manifesting in the modern day by analyzing films which feature environmental discourse and religious imagery and narratives. The presence of Judeo-Christian themes and forms reflects various different reactions to the current environmental problem, each of which will be discussed in the sections that follow. While these three films only provide a glimpse into this subgenre, I believe they can provide insight into the fraught political and cultural relationship between the environment and Christianity, broadly. This relationship is often misunderstood and misrepresented. As Herndl and Brown note, “our relations to nature are

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<sup>2</sup> In several influential pieces on the environment and the apocalypse, such as Al Gore’s *Earth in the Balance* or Barry Brummett’s *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*, there is a misquote of previous Secretary of the Interior under President Ronald Reagan, James Watt, as saying that he was unconcerned with climate change or environmental destruction because of his belief in the impending apocalypse at the hands of God. This quotation has been proven untrue (Strupp). However, I make note of its ubiquitous nature precisely because it is often used, including in earlier drafts of this project, as proof of the connection between Christian individuals in the United States and an ambivalent attitude towards environmental catastrophe precisely because of the apocalypse.

not purely rational, not solely a matter of scientific knowledge, so our discourses must acknowledge the emotional and spiritual elements of our relation to nature” (19). By performing a generic analysis of these religious forms, I hope to fill a gap in the literature at the intersection of ecocinema and religious rhetoric, namely the areas of genesis, jeremiad, and apocalyptic. Previous literature which explores the relationship between religion and the environment, especially within the discipline of Communication Studies, focuses primarily on documenting empirical data, while failing to address critically the influence these beliefs can have upon one another, as well as how these themes are being presented in popular media. In this project, I will uncover how these popular representations, which I argue illuminate some of the public anxieties about the, at times assumed, fraught relationship between religion, namely Christianity, and climate change. Perhaps current concerns about the inevitable and fast approaching destruction of the world has led to media representations which work to challenge, in a variety of ways, the relationship between the two. As I argue above, the prominence of Christian individuals, as well as the influence Christianity on United States politics makes this relationship important for critique because of its possible influence on said climate policies and activism. By articulating the presence of genesis, jeremiad, and apocalypse in popular films about climate change, this project can expand and complicate current conceptions about this relationship. These films in particular are well suited to provide insight because of their auteurs as well as their clear use of Judeo-Christian forms. Genre criticism, I will elaborate later, provides a unique space to interrogate the text through the collective unconsciousness, and this project will also contribute to expanding generic criticism in the same vein as Gunn. Further, I agree with Gunn that religious *popular* rhetoric, rather than the rich tradition of observing the rhetoric of specific religious leaders, is oft understudied in rhetorical criticism, and therefore this project also acts as



an attempt to expand that area of study. Finally, this project will explore the use and expression of the ineffable in environmentalism and Christianity in modern film. Simply, this project complicates the previously perhaps overstated connection between environmentalism and Christianity while expanding upon the concept of generic criticism and religious rhetoric. Again, these films are uniquely suited to the job due to their relatively recent release dates. Rhetorical criticism provides a unique insight into this phenomenon through analyzing texts that operate more subliminally and providing a pathway to uncovering what audiences are constructed through a given text.

### **Preview of Chapters**

Chapter one will attend to the theoretical and methodological positioning of this project. To achieve the most nuanced understanding of how contemporary auteur cinema draws on Christian forms to give expression to the ineffability of environmental collapse, chapter one will focus primarily on theories of the sublime, ineffability, affect, and the use of psychoanalysis in the study of genre. Additionally, in order to best situate my project within broader conversations of new materialism, I will discuss radically reconceptualizing nature, as well as the foundations of new materialism and The Real.

Chapter two of this project will discuss form of Genesis as understood in the 2017 Paul Schrader film *First Reformed*. This discussion is based off the portrayal of the connection between formal Christianity and the current environmental crisis. This chapter will attend to criticisms raised by White and others regarding the theoretical arguments surrounding the Bible as a source of, at best environmental ambivalence and at worst, destruction. It is especially meaningful that there is tension between the institutionalized Christianity, which accepts money from a business that pollutes the environment, and the more intimate variation practiced and

preached by Reverend Toller. Several moments in the film depict the conflict between what is written in the Bible and what is enacted by Christians and the institutionalized church. This analysis provides space to critique the portrayed relationship between scripture, practice, and belief in relationship to environmental stewardship or dominion. Additionally, this chapter will attend to notions of masculinity, which are a source of importance in Schrader's other work, such as the screenplay for the 1976 Martin Scorsese film *Taxi Driver*, perhaps utilizing Kelly's theory of apocalyptic masculinity.

Chapter three proposes *Interstellar* as a modern ecological jeremiad as it illustrates the illustrious past of America in its defense of the Apollo space missions, while painstakingly detailing the dangers of environmental collapse and planetary food shortage. An analysis of *Interstellar* through the lens of an ecological jeremiad provides space to interrogate the function of the American Dream myth, and the complicated relationship of using futuristic settings to critique modern America. This is especially curious in its use of hyperobjects and the sublime in order to tell a story of saving Earth. As most jeremiads imply a bountiful past and a flourishing future, how does *Interstellar* complicate this notion through allusions to America's last Dust Bowl while also celebrating the history of the Apollo space missions? This provides space to scrutinize the use of the American Dream alongside promises of a more environmentally conscious future.

In Chapter four I argue for *mother!* as viewed through the concept of apocalypse for a number of reasons. First, the film is told through the story of the Bible from Genesis to the glorious, fiery Apocalypse. However, after the Apocalypse, the creator character (implied to be God) is unscathed, and a new woman is shown reenacting the first scene of the film, as if to imply the cycle of existence in this universe is predetermined, a key feature of apocalyptic

rhetoric as outlined by Brummett. Additionally, by building up to the apocalyptic scenes, I believe this is the most emphasis and richest text of the film. Finally, *mother!* provides a notable text for the reading of apocalyptic rhetoric because of it is the mother character that initiates the apocalypse due to her rage at human action throughout the film, which is depicted regularly as scenes from the Bible. This film depicts a direct, violent clash between traditional Judeo-Christian narratives and mother nature. This chapter will also speak to the implications of sexual violence enacted upon a character deemed to be mother nature through literature such as Buchanan, Stearney, and Clover. The use of the apocalypse as possible revenge for sexual assault provides additional insight into the jeremiad as a genre. The portrayal of mother nature as a white woman will also be analyzed through concepts of white femininity articulated by Shome.

All three of the analysis chapters are structured to suggest a one-to-one analysis, but this is not the intention. Instead, all three of the themes from the chapters, Genesis, jeremiad, apocalyptic, can be viewed across all three films, and that will be discussed. Further, all three of the directors of these films have previous bodies of work that impact both the audience's reception of the film as well as recalling any similarities throughout the body of their work. Finally, attention should be played in depth to the depictions of race, gender, and citizenship in all three of the films in order to produce the most insightful and responsible criticism. This is especially important given the prevalence in which communities of color are the victims of environmental pollution, and that white individuals are often depicted as the saviors of those communities in a variety of contexts. As Pellow explains, issues surrounding environmental racism/ justice are not only due to governmental or industrial contributions, "but also many times our own community leaders, our own neighbors, and even environmentalists are deeply implicated in creating these problems" (3). Extensive scholarship regarding environmental

justice and this disproportionate treatment of communities of color will be discussed within each of the three analysis chapters. The connection, for instance, between motherhood and environmental justice should be addressed in the context of these films (Peeples & DeLuca). The connection between motherhood and environmental justice is prevalent, not just in scholarly research, but in all three of the films discussed in this project. Overwhelmingly, environmental activism narratives surround feminine characters fighting primarily for the protection of their own children or acting as motherly figures to protect other people's children. The intersection between environmental justice and gender is also further complicated by the overemphasis on *white* mothers in these narratives (think *Erin Brockovich* as opposed to the thousands of black mothers who organize for their children's protection) (see Gomez, Shafiei & Johnson). This project will be sure to address the importance of white characters dominating an issue that, while definitely effecting all people everywhere, will disproportionately impact communities of color (Shepard & Corbin-Mark). It is salient that each of these films features a primarily white cast while ignoring important issues of race in climate disaster scenarios.

The final chapter of this project, chapter five, will investigate the complicated place of Christian themes in contemporary environmentalist film. After completing an exhaustive analysis of the three films, as well as providing additional popular culture examples where necessary, I wish to argue that these theories must be discussed in their religious context in order to fully appreciate and comprehend their impact and meaning. This chapter also will attend to the mysterious fantastical element featured in each of the films.

## CHAPTER ONE. INEFFABLE ECOLOGY

The primary theoretical components of this dissertation focus on the incomprehensible and the inexpressible. The ineffable, especially as it relates to climate change and environmental collapse is important for rhetorical critics, because, as Scarry argues, “the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be *verbally represented* also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be *politically represented*” (Scarry 12). I argue that the compounded inexpressibility of these particular issues, such as climate change and the experience of the sublime, constitute audiences which are relatively non-agentive— one that feels hopeless and lacks the ability to save the world. Western modernity, it should be noted, is distinctly unable to express the reality of climate change or the sublime. Other cultures, such as Indigenous populations within North America are better equipped for such expressions culturally. The arguments of this project are specific to Western conceptualizations and Western audiences as they attempt to combat and reconcile with global climate change. This dissertation looks at the ways in which contemporary auteur cinema draws on Christian forms to attempt to express the ineffability of environmental collapse.

This chapter parses through the major theoretical positions and methodologies of this project. As I discussed in the introduction, I argue for the study of several films through a generic criticism of the Christian tropes of genesis, jeremiad, and apocalypse. I attend the question of genre through Gunn’s utilization of affect and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Gunn argues for an approach to genre through the body and the feelings evoked by patterned repetitions. This dissertation further advances literature of genre and affect by analyzing these phenomena across various texts, by applying intertextual criticism discussed by Hoerl and Kelly. I position this project as an intertextual narrative approach “particularly interested in the ways in which

character types and narrative devices overlap across these three films to give social meaning...” and here where Hoerl and Kelly say “unplanned pregnancy” I say environmental activist films within a Judeo-Christian form (363). Additionally, I approach this dissertation with an ecological mindset and the foundation of new materialism. As Barnett argues, thinking ecologically argues “ecology is content *and* method” (205). Similarly, new materialism argues for the radical reconceptualization of nature as one of the foundations for ecologically grounded criticism. Finally, all of these methodological/theoretical positions share the emphasis on film as a unique medium requiring specific attentions, especially “how bodies are mobilized (called to action) at a material level” (Ott 49). Therefore, this chapter will first discuss radically reconceptualizing nature, with special attention paid to the relationship between Judeo-Christianity and the environment, especially the relationship between the metaphysical and the sublime. Next, I detail new materialism as the theoretical guidance of this project and any other rooted in the upheaval of the anthropocentric. Finally, I elaborate on my argument regarding the application of affect and Lacanian psychoanalysis in genre studies.

### **(Re)Conceptualizing Nature**

The dominant Western conceptualization of nature has a direct impact on the destruction of the planet. As Maxcy opens his essay in 1994,

The current environmental crisis is not simply the result of a series of scientific errors, or of a chronic misapplication of technology. It is a cultural crisis, the consequence of a whole way of living on the earth that has been characterized as the "domination of nature" (Leiss) (330).

The work Maxcy cites at the end, *The Domination of Nature*, published by Leiss in 1972 opens with a similar cautionary statement, “the possibility of grave crisis resulting from the failure to understand the destructive impact of industrial society and advanced technologies on the delicate balance of organic life in the global ecosystem” (vii). Human conceptualizations of nature must

be interrogated in order to truly address representations of climate change and understand the possibility of global planetary collapse. While oftentimes used interchangeably, nature and the environment may not be considered synonymous, especially among environmental scholars. As Glotfelty argues, the preface “enviro”—and by extension, the term environment—is “anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment” (xix).

The current cultural moment is often defined as anthropocentrism, the concept that centers the human. Plumwood elaborates,

an anthropocentric viewpoint treats nature as radically other and humans as hyperseparated from nature and from animals. It treats nature as lacking continuity with the human and stresses the features which make humans different from nature ... a nature which is conceived as lacking human qualities such as mind and agency, these being appropriated exclusively to the human. (340)

Therefore, Garrad argues “the challenge of ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists” (10).

This challenge is necessary for a number of reasons. First, it is important to interrogate the various impacts of the ways in which nature is framed in popular media. As Brereton argues, “most cultural critics generally begin with the premise that ‘our representations of nature’ usually reveals as much, if not more, about our inner fears and desires than about the environment” (16). Representations of nature reflect inner fears, while also shaping our understandings and expectations. Willoquet-Maricondi explains, “audiences’ expectations about nature are increasingly shaped by their own consumption of media images of nature more than personal experiences of nature settings or environmental threats” (8). These portrayals of nature are then taken as factual, as most viewers do not have evidence to the contrary (see Mitman).

Willoquet-Maricondi extends, “it is not that representations directly shape nature, but that they shape our perceptions of nature; our actions, in turn, shape nature by preserving ecosystems or by despoiling them” (7). Finally, representations of nature have the ability to impact our ability to conceptualize environmental policy. Sturgeon states, “But because ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ have such powerful and complex cultural resonances, the use of these concepts as tropes, metaphors, and dominant cultural narratives has the capacity to confuse and obscure our thinking about environmental policy” (17). Therefore, it becomes absolutely imperative to critique representations of nature, not just in environmental film, but beyond. This will be extended upon below in discussions of ecocriticism.

Continually, media representations and cultural conceptions of nature present nature as an entity that is not only separated from humans, but to be conquered. As Opie and Elliot detail, “American history thus could be a narrative of the gradual conquest of the American wilderness, a demonstration of civilization’s growing mastery of natural resources, a manifestation of built environments that celebrate their independence from nature” (18). Cubitt writes, “sociological environmentalists recognize that nature is constructed as what seems to stand over and/or against the human, either as a resource to exploit or a wilderness to protect” (282). This demonstrates an important argument that separative narratives of nature/human can lead to either exploitative or protectionist strategies.

This dichotomy is apparent in Christian perceptions of the environment. An array of scholars have attempted to demonstrate a dangerous connection between the domination of nature and Christianity or more specifically Judeo-Christian theological texts and practices. To simplify, an argument persists that there is a connection between Christianity and the modern-day degradation and exploitation of nature, “Christianity [...] has supported or acquiesced in this



project to subdue nature, and many scientists have drawn upon what they understand to be Christian or biblical teachings and themes to support their efforts” (Kinsley 141). This impact on civilization cannot be understated, according to Leiss,

The idea that man stands apart from nature and rightfully exercises a kind of authority over the natural world was thus a prominent feature of the doctrine that has dominated the ethical consciousness of Western civilization. There is no more important original source for the idea of mastery over nature... (32).

Leiss is not alone, Black too writes, “These verses [in Genesis] provide the essential clues to the way in which the relationship between man and nature developed in the western world-view, and their importance can scarcely be over-emphasized” (33). Further, Peifer, Ecklund, and Fullerton found that the hierarchy, explained above as God above man, man above nature helps to “generate narratives of environmental apathy” (373). It can be argued that the combined notions Christian theology and the general anthropogenic character of Christianity have contributed, at least partially, to contemporary notions of how to treat the environment/nature. There are numerous arguments made against the importance of the creation myth and its continued impact within human society (see Bullis; Kinsley), however, it should be noted that the validity, nor the prospects promised in Genesis need to be true for the argument that Judeo-Christian concepts of dominion impacted early understandings of man’s relationship to nature. Furthermore, it is not the validity, but the presence of these messages and the connections drawn in contemporary media that should be investigated.

It would be irresponsible to reduce Christianity’s role in contemporary understandings and treatment of the environment without also mentioning the reverence for nature held by many religious individuals as representations of their God’s magnificence (see Oravec). Take for instance the message of Jonathan Edwards, who argued “we see the natural environmental as a manifestation of the divinity of God” (quoted in Opie & Elliot 16). Further, a great deal of

literature concerned with the experience and philosophy of the sublime is rooted in concepts of metaphysics. The work of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant places a heavy emphasis on the metaphysical component of the sublime. As Brady writes, “certainly, spiritual experiences of the sublime in nature can underpin ways of valuing and respecting the environment” (191). Therefore, it is important to note the connection between conceptions of God in Judeo-Christian sense and sublime experiences with nature.

The sublime plays an important role in this project as another piece of the incomprehensible puzzle. As Brady explains, “In aesthetic situations marked by sublimity, imagination and the senses are challenged, and there are limits to what we can take in and grasp. Those limits, set by the sublime qualities, can give us a feeling of things as ‘ungraspable’” (197). This feeling of the ungraspable can be countered by scientific knowledge, but never totally overcome, similar to Morton’s conception of hyperobjects discussed briefly in chapter one. I agree with Brady’s argument that “construing the limiting power of the sublime in terms of the ungraspable is promising as a reply to the anthropocentric objection. It addresses our continuing need for sublimity and wonder in the face of massive appropriation and domination of nature by human beings” (197). Brady concludes that the sublime experience can reify “some of the ways we cannot place ourselves over and above nature” as something “beyond human control and thereby teach us humility and respect” (197, 202). The concept of the sublime, this body/mind reaction one experiences upon being faced with a “natural” scene such as the Grand Canyon demonstrates a possibility for respect for nature through experiences of affect. Connecting these concepts back to the foundations of psychoanalysis, Eagleton writes,

In the presence of beauty, we experience an exquisite sense of adaptation of the mind to reality; but in turbulent presence of the sublime we are forcibly reminded of the limits of our dwarfish imaginations and admonished that the world as infinite totality is not ours to know. It is as though in the sublime the ‘real’ itself – the eternal, ungraspable totality of

things – inscribes itself as the cautionary limit of all mere ideology, of all complacent subject-centeredness, causing us to feel the pain of incompleteness and unassuaged desire. (89)

When faced with the sublime, the incomprehensible real is exposed to the subject to the limit of their imagination, especially as that imagination is constricted by Western modernity and the confines of capitalism.

### **The Real and New Materialism**

While Lacan's conception of the Real is not that of a material existence, and instead is an epistemological question of the limits of language and the symbolic, the real as material is also important for this project. Lacan's interpretation of the Real provides a space for interrogating the representations of climate change and environmental collapse. Affect theory and theories of new materialism account for the presumption of a real material body and environment which allows for radical reconceptualizations of nature. This section argues for the integration of new materialism theories in order to best account for both the Real as incomprehensible, and the real existence of climate change and the "natural" environment being affected by humans.

As demonstrated above, current conceptualizations of nature can be problematic for the continued existence of Planet Earth. I argue in this project that because these representations of nature, and what may be perceived as natural, is so essential to human efficacy over climate change and other environmental problems, specific care must be taken to the criticism of these films. Therefore, this project is rooted in concepts of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is first and foremost a project rooted in materialism. Glotfelty argues, "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty xix). This is aligned with theories of new materialism, which attempts to bring attention to material existence and consequences, especially when considering human

interaction with nature/environment. New materialism focuses on a repositioning of both human and nonhuman agents, as Conty explains, “that seek to show that rather than an autonomous creature somehow standing apart from material conditions and relations, the human being is part of and dependent upon a web of material relations” (74). New materialism is rooted in theories developed from Latour’s *We Were Never Modern*, which opens with a discussion of the hole in the o-zone layer, situating a connection between theories of agency and the impacts humans have on the environment. Conty states, new materialists “share a common enemy with Bruno Latour: the dualities set up in modernity to avoid the implications of the relationality and interdependence of all of matter (subject/object, nature/culture, matter/mind, human/nonhuman)” (74). Theories and conceptions of new materialism are grounded in discussion and complication of theories which place an overwhelming emphasis on the power of language. As Barad argues, “Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing”—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation” (120).

An important distinction should be made between historical materialism and new materialism. While I have noted above that new materialism is rooted in theories of Latour’s concepts of reorienting agency to disrupt anthropocentric attitudes and reemphasize the material reality of the world, historical materialism is concerned with interrogations of the influence of class relations in society. Cloud first attempts to properly integrate historical materialism in her work “The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron” and provides the following conception of materialism, “the idea that the mode of production, or the way in which goods are made and distributed in society, determines the social relations and forms of consciousness in any given

epoch” (144). Therefore, Cloud continues, “the task of a critique of culture is to unmask the shared illusions of a society as ideas promulgated by and serving the interests of the ruling class, or those who control the production and distribution of material goods” (145). Greene’s critique of this attempted introduction of materialism claims that “an essentialist reading of the ruling class limits the complex possibilities of a materialist rhetoric” (21). However, Cloud, Macek, and Aune retort that Greene portrays “a crude caricature of Marxist epistemology that obscures the complexity of theories of representation and ideology in the historical materialist tradition” (72). I provide this brief foray into historical materialism in order to illuminate the primary differences between materialism and *new* materialism. Rekret maintains, “New materialist theorists have maintained at most an ambiguous relationship with the historical materialist tradition” (52). While the influence of class relations on society and the environment cannot be overstated, new materialism reorients conceptions of human centered thinking in order to radically reconceptualize nature.

This project, aligned with other similar projects in new materialism, calls for a radical reconceptualization of nature, which allows for a reading of nature as having agency separate from human consciousness. As Elaine Kelly elaborates, “In the extension of agency to the more-than-human, we can thoroughly discard the human arrogance assumed in models of intentionality dominant for so long now” (754). Therefore, new materialism is concerned with the destruction of the anthropocentric conception of existence, while simultaneously accounting for the materiality of bodies as they exist and enact agency. New materialism informs the act of rhetorical criticism in a number of ways. First, these theories allow for an analysis that grants greater agency to nonhuman actors in a given text, this is rooted in the radical reconceptualization of nature. This is a distinct shift in attention from traditional rhetorical

scholarship which more commonly attributes agency to only human actors or centers the human existence as separate from nature. Further, as Conty explains, new materialism is “scholarship devoted to studying this modern unconscious and celebrating what modernity had repressed” (74). This attention to the unconscious aligns with the arguments I adopt from Gunn regarding addressing the unconscious in order to best interpret and critique genre. I expand upon these notions further in the discussion of thinking ecologically as method.

There are several challenges with the reconceptualization of nature. First, it forces a reconciliation with the hegemonic perception of nature/environment in Western society, anthropocentrism. Second, Alaimo writes,

How to conceive of nature’s agency (in ways that are neither anthropomorphic, nor reductive, nor silly-seeming) has been a central problem for the dismantling of discourses that define nature as a *terra nullius*, an empty ground, evacuated of all that culture would claim for its own self-definition. (245)

Alaimo does not leave us in the lurch but provides trans-corporeality as a way to offer nature its agency while simultaneously destroying the nature/human divide. This theory is rooted in “a place where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle in productive ways...It makes it difficult to pose nature as mere background for the exploits of the human, since ‘nature’ is always as close as one’s own skin” (238). This reconceptualization of nature and nonhuman animals with agency and as more than something to exploit allows for radical analysis.

### **Genre, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, and Affect**

Often misunderstood, genre criticism provides an opportunity to investigate the relationship between the choice of the rhetors and the exigence of which the artifact came into being. Of course, exigence is at the root of all rhetorical criticism, but genre takes a unique approach by attending to the forms *repeated* in discourse as it arises in response to a particular

event. In this study, the event is climate change and the forms to be analyzed are Judeo-Christian in nature. As Campbell and Jamieson note, “genre exists in dynamic responsiveness to situational demands” (24). Opie and Elliot echo this sentiment, writing, “we can understand genre as a manifestation of the social and psychological aspects of culture” (33). Miller elaborates that genre “is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves” (155). Genre criticism is rooted in categorizing, though again not rigidly, social action. The concept of genre as a heuristic is rooted in several rhetorical theories, most notably Bitzer’s framing of the rhetorical situation. Bitzer argued that rhetoric is called into existence by an exigence which impacts the words that are chosen by the rhetor. In order for a generic criticism to function, it must take into account the exigence. One of the most important distinctions regarding generic criticism is that it does not exist solely to provide definition or characteristics of a suggested grouping. As Campbell and Jamieson remark, “classification is justified by the critical illumination it produces, not its neatness of the classificatory schema” (18). Gunn argues, “this charge of ‘formulaic’ representation is an essentialist misunderstanding of genre” (“Exorcism” 6). Instead, genre is an approach to rhetorical criticism which allows critics to discuss a grouping of artifacts for formal homologies in responding to an exigence, and as a social reflection of their time. Again turning to Gunn, “Genres do not predetermine texts in a strong sense; they bind what is rhetorically possible in terms of precedent and memory” (“Exorcism” 6). Miller argues as well, “genre serves as the substance of forms at higher levels; as current patterns of language use, genre helps constitute the substance of our cultural life” (163). As Claire Cisco King simplifies, “genres are constructed through imitative practices” (“Acting” 125). Several rhetorical theorists have argued for various expansions to the study of genre. Olson offerFs to expand genre theory through rehistoricizing in

order to better understand the impact of a genre on other rhetorical factors. Additionally, “a generic perspective can make a further important contribution to the understanding of how the rhetoric of public and social life develops ‘in time and through time’” (Olson 300). In general, genre theory is utilized by rhetorical critics to interrogate formal repetitions in response to an exigence.

As noted above, this dissertation is interested in the expansion of generic criticism to include theories of psychoanalysis and affect. Gunn proposes for the integration of psychoanalysis in several distinct ways, adding to the theories of psychoanalytic film proposed by Lundberg, Mulvey, Rushing and Frenzt, among others. One important aspect of psychoanalysis argued by both Lundberg and Mulvey is that of the gaze. As Lundberg argues, “The gaze is a metaphor for the idea that the subject is neither pre-given nor self-possessed, but is instead constituted through others’ acts of looking in an imagined social field” (406). Lacan argues the self is constituted as a subject through language and the desire to be recognized by the other. Mulvey explains, “cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut of the measure of desire” (25). The gaze embodies castration anxiety, which should be seen not as the literal penis but as “the subject’s conception of its own potency and self-sufficient intention” (Lundberg 406). Thus, one aspect of psychoanalysis is the gaze and the creation of the self through the language and desire of others. Gunn illuminates another possibility, “by focusing on the shared consciousness of a community, and in particular, those elements of communal consciousness that are often repressed or only available as *traces* in texts, a critic can better capture the goal of generic criticism and explain the dynamic features of genres” (“Exorcism” 6). It is important to note that the expansion of genre criticism with Lacan’s conceptions of the collective un/conscious is more so a way to emphasize the goals of genre



criticism originally argued by those such as Campbell and Jamieson. The collective unconscious, according to Jung is a dimension of the unconscious which is not the result of the personal or even the cultural, which “accounts for the phenomenon that certain symbolic motifs from dreams, myths, and legends repeat themselves all over the world” (Rushing & Frenzt 389). As Gunn and Treat argue, “In the adjectival sense, all rhetorical criticism trucks in the unconscious insofar as the point of criticism is to bring latent rhetorical elements into the conscious awareness of readers and hearers” (161). The collective un/conscious allows for critics to attend to the traces in a text much the same way previously argued by other scholars, but with a richer language and theoretical underpinning.

Another major aspect of the integration of psychoanalysis is the role of the body in genre. This is argued extensively by Gunn, and I extend that scholarship in this project. Gunn argues, “genre criticism is a powerful tool for understanding cultural expressions if we attend more assiduously to the centrality of bodily excitation or affect” which is best understood through Lacan’s conception of *jouissance* (“Maranatha” 368). Lacan writes of *jouissance* as the compulsive repetition, “which would imply that the pleasures of form—insofar as they are recognized as such—are a kind of substitution or limit on human enjoyment; pleasure is actually a frustration of, or a form of prohibition against, unbridled *jouissance*” (Gunn “Maranatha” 367). The concept of pleasure in form has also been argued by Campbell and Jamieson as well as Miller, that audiences derive pleasure from anticipating and then experiencing a pattern. Oftentimes, Gunn argues, cinematic criticism with a focus on *jouissance*, or psychoanalysis and genre more broadly, are more focused on perversion (“Maranatha” 368). Instead, *jouissance* can be expressed in cinema and discussed in genre studies through “patterns in bodily excitations” beyond perversion (366). However, “ultimately, form eludes (and resists) capture; one feels it,

but she cannot say it. Genre emerges at the point at which the symbolic meets the body; genre, in other words, is form delivered to language, form succumbing to the insistence of languaging” (Gunn 369). Genre provides an outlet for “*naming the ineffable* in order to cope with social realities” (“Exorcism” 5). As form alludes definition, genre operates to capture the pleasure of repetition and recurrence and prescribe meaning. Genre theory is expanded in this project through its naming of the recurrence of Judeo-Christian forms as a response to the exigence of climate change catastrophe. Gunn argues that the primary way of attending to these forms is through the body, affect.

Affect plays an essential role in the psychoanalytic criticism of genre and film. Affect, first and foremost, is not to be conflated with emotion: “where emotion describes a subjectively felt state, affect describes the set of forces, investments, logics, relations, and practices of subjectivization that are the conditions of possibility for emotion” (Lundberg “Enjoying” 390). Joining with a multitude of other concepts for this dissertation, affect is “inarticulable and felt and must therefore be understood as a social and corporeal phenomenon, emerging from encounters between bodies and social life” (Mack & McCann 3). Gibbs writes “bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear” (1). Affect is one expression of the collective un/conscious. Massumi writes, “It is the perception of this self-perception, its naming and making conscious, that allows affect to be effectively analyzed—as long as a vocabulary can be found for that which is imperceptible but whose escape from perception cannot but be perceived, as long as one is alive” (36). Kwek and Seyfert define affect in its duality, “as a change or transition in a thing...caused by some other thing(s). This change involves both body and mind and is always at once corporeal and imaginary or symbolic” (37-38). These bodily reactions do

“not necessarily emerge at the level of signification” (Rice “New” 201). Affect is in part related to expectation, as Massumi argues, “depends on consciously positioning oneself in a line of narrative continuity” (25). The connection between affect and narrative anticipation allows space to explore affective responses in genre. This dissertation probes affect studies potential to explore genre with respect to the material existence of both the human body and the material world it occupies.

While questions of affect have been posed throughout the entire history of the field of Communication Studies, how it should be approached remains unclear. As Rice writes, “where affect has been concerned in Rhetorical Studies, one of the questions so many of us are left with is: what can we do once descriptive gestures have been made?” (“Pathologia” 43). Rice pivots to Hawhee, who in her detailed history of the presence of sensation in rhetorical studies writes, “For theorists and critics alike finding the places where rhetoric and sensation converge is less challenging than knowing what to do from there” (13). Hawhee questions also, “how to write about sensation without positing an individual as opposed to a collective, or of thinking in terms of communal sensation, without presuming sameness?” (12). Of course, this is a problem that plagues not just affect but all of rhetorical criticism, to categorize without overgeneralizing is the goal of all quality criticism.

The role of sensation or affect in rhetorical studies is not completely novel (see Hawhee). Most important in this discussion of the history of affect is the white washing of its history. Affect, as with other facets of Communication Studies as a discipline, has been co-opted as a white theory, ignoring the voices of women of color feminists who laid the foundation. Garcia-Rojas argues, “White affect studies prioritizes White histories of affect that inform and are informed by Western-European forms of knowledge, while eliding how women of color

feminism prefigure White affects and White affect studies” (256). Women of color feminists argued for embodied feelings as modes of knowledge before White affect studies and were rejected from the conversation (Garcia-Rojas). It is imperative to move away from white-only narratives of the history of affect and its theories in order to respect the work of women of color feminists who have argued for decades “beyond what can be discursively known” (Garcia-Rojas 259). Therefore, in this project I wish to be mindful of the threat of environmental calamity induces affective responses in different kinds of bodies. This is especially important when considering the consistent racial disparity in the environmental movement and the persistence of environmental racism in America. Environmental racism manifests in a multitude of important ways within America, such as the building of hazardous waste facilities or lack of proper waste disposal primarily within communities of color (Bullard; Church of Christ). Environmental racism becomes only one additional piece of why precarity of living on the precipice is not a new experience. In this project I will attend to the ways race, as well as gender, are both addressed and not addressed within these films. Each of the films discussed is directed by a white man and the cast in each is overwhelming white, leaving little space to address environmental injustice and the affective responses of these communities. The incorrectly assumed whiteness of the environmental movement must be addressed when we consider that the ways climate change will impact, and indeed already have impacted communities of color disproportionality. Due to the overwhelmingly whiteness of these films, audiences may be affectively divested from the impacts of global ecological collapse on Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. Affective divestment “is the consequence of affective mobilization away from specific bodies and communities” (Mack & McCann 2). Rather than emphasizing the experiences of communities most disproportionately affected by climate change, these films direct attention toward the

suffering of whiteness. Again, turning to Mack and McCann, “But while the paths that lead us to states of affective divestment vary from indifference to hopelessness, the structures of intimacy that govern such responses are firmly rooted in distinct material interests” (5). This project will work to decenter whiteness from the discussion of affect and environmental collapse.

As mentioned above, this study is rooted in theories of new materialism, which regard nature and other nonhuman objects and animals as having agency and meaning beyond discourse. Affect is one such modality of moving away from postmodernism and the overamplification of the significance of discourse. As Kwek and Seyfert explain,

The study of affect complements the material turn, because affect analysis does not limit sociopolitical life to human capacities, such as cognition, language, and symbolism. Affect analysis explores all channels through which actors (human and nonhuman) communicate and interact, without reducing communication and interaction to the mere transmission of information. (38)

Other theorists also emphasize the importance of affect in expanding the concept of new materialism as well as the significance of new materialism in altering rhetorical criticism and the world (Massumi; Rickert). As Massumi writes, “the concept of nature and culture need serious reworking, in a way that expresses the irreducible alterity of the nonhuman in and through its active connection to the human and vice versa. Let matter be matter, brains be brains, jellyfish be jellyfish, and culture be nature in irreducible alterity and infinite connection” (39). Affect provides the space to interrogate human relations to nonhuman animals and objects without an overreliance on the importance of discourse and theories of postmodernism. As Massumi and others involved in the new materialist movement, this theoretical positioning is important when considering global warming and environmental catastrophe in particular. Kwek and Seyfert argue, “affect analysis may be used to establish a common frame of reference for conservation, one that can take indigenous practices and modes of sense making into account” (53). Affect also

acts as one form of dismantling catastrophic anthropocentrism, “affect analysis can help translate the insights of heterological societies, so that we may use these to dismantle the current anthropocentrism” (36). This work, as I have argued above, is guided by theories of new materialism in order to best dismantle dangerous anthropocentric concepts of human existence.

Hawhee argues for “using cinema to reaffirm the importance of the sensorium” (11). Other scholars have argued for the integration of affect into the study of film as well, arguing, “in experiencing a film, one’s body both (1) responds to the discursive and figural elements of the film and (2) recalls previous cinematic and non-cinematic experiences, which in combination evoke affective responses” (Ott 49). The argument about the importance of bodily reaction to film is important additionally in how it should be studied differently than other rhetorical forms. Extending arguments from the introduction, film requires special attention from rhetorical critics. Barnett insists,

Films not only attract visual attention but they also submerge audiences in sound, all while demanding that the spectator/auditor remain relatively stationary. Cinematic mediation involves the whole body. While narrative is central to most films, all films exceed narrative meaning to the extent that they invoke synesthetic forms of attention and attunement. (209)

As Gunn argues, narrative is less important than the plot, “or the manner in which the narrative is deployed and the vehicles of that deployment vis-à-vis the affect evoked in the spectator” (Gunn 369). By attending more to the body and affect, the distinctions between film and traditional oratory can be explored and appreciated. Macdougall explains, “films appeal in an even more direct way to the human sensorium, in part because of the senses they address and the fact that they address them simultaneously” (57). Further, turning again to Ott, “since it is the medium that makes rhetoric material, it is vital that critics examine not just the symbolic and sensory aspects of messages, but the very technologies of communication that underlie them” (41).

Hence, this project looks to extend upon previous literature weaving affect into cinema studies by attending more directly to the question of genre and form. In addition, because this study operates with the conceptions of new materialism, which focuses to disrupt typical anthropocentric views by reconceptualizing nature and reorienting experience, it alters previous notions of genre as centered primarily in discourse (see Miller). Instead, I situate genre more in the material, sentient body, both human and otherwise, in order to better understand how films give expression to the ineffable and the sublime of environmental collapse.

## CHAPTER TWO. *FIRST REFORMED* AND THE BATTLE BETWEEN DOMINION AND STEWARDSHIP

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground”

-- *Genesis* 1:26

Unlike the other films featured in this dissertation, *First Reformed* is situated in the here and now. Referred to as a “masterpiece” and “epiphany” (Collins; Bradshaw; Wilkinson; Scott “Review”), *First Reformed* is a brooding, less commercially successful piece of cinema as well. Despite different theatrical releases, both *First Reformed* and the focus of another film in this project, *mother!*, premiered at the 74<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival (Hornaday). *The Washington Post* published a piece titled “This New Movie Gets Everything Right That ‘Mother!’ Got Wrong”, which argues “Whereas that film [*mother!*] veered fatally out of control, Schrader never loses his grip on a character whose search for meaning is appropriately echoed by a passage from Job at a funeral” (Hornaday). However, Hornaday fails to provide any further insight into the differences of the films. What *First Reformed* does have in common with *mother!* is a clear desire to bring the audience out of their comfort zone, a trait Schrader seems “have a knack for” (Travers). Though, making audiences uncomfortable varies drastically between the two films. In *mother!* a baby is murdered onscreen and then consumed, while *First Reformed* brings audience face-to-face with their own morality through subtle depictions of the realities of climate change. Perhaps all that really needs to be said about the film is “it’s a movie that matters” (Travers). *First Reformed* is of note not only for its narrative, but also, it’s production. The movie was filmed in Poland in only twenty days for \$2.5 million, a fact which gave Schrader significantly more creative control than his recent previous films (Lincoln).



After heavy criticism for his 2014 film *Dying of the Light*, Paul Schrader was, in a sense, looking for redemption himself. During production of *Dying*, studio executives forced Schrader to alter the movie significantly to include more action shots in order to make the film more profitable. Schrader's shame over losing a film to the whims of film executives made him desperate to make what could have been his last film truly matter (*Lincoln*). In the making of *First Reformed*, and his interim film *Dog Eat Dog*, Schrader retained final cut rights and wrote and directed two films with significantly less studio intervention and in *First Reformed's* case, less funding. As noted in chapter one, the significance of Paul Schrader as a writer / director auteur lies in part in his power in Hollywood to make a film like *First Reformed*. Not only does Schrader have such an impressive catalogue of previous films, he was able to fund the film himself before receiving the backing of several independent film studios (Nam). Of course, as Braudy and Cohen have summarized, auteur theory may be too generous in its framing of auteur's power in having a film made. Most importantly, attending to *First Reformed* by first attending to Paul Schrader as a writer / director auteur allows for space to discuss the significance of broader themes and forms, as well as how those themes impact the message of the film.

This chapter, in its pursuit of demonstrating the connection between Genesis / dominion as a form of expressing the ineffability of climate change as well as the contentious connections between Christianity and climate change, will first discuss Schrader's and other's works concerning the Transcendental style. I argue that the Transcendental style, as it is first argued by Schrader and is then elaborated on by others, functions similarly to Genesis as form. Once this connection has been established, I discuss common themes of Schrader's work as it relates to Transcendental style and beyond, especially psychological disorientation and White masculinity.

Finally, this will set up the analysis of *First Reformed*, which will attend to several major themes, especially White masculinity, hope/lessness, the vastness and dangers of environmental activism, as well as the body's role in interpreting and bearing the weight of the end of human civilization.

### **Transcendence, Genesis, and Dominion as Form and Genre**

Paul Schrader occupies a unique positionality within film studies by not only utilizing a particular form but by writing the literal book on the subject. Transcendental style as theory was brought to American film studies by Schrader's 1972 publication *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, which has become the definitive text on the film form. Schrader's conceptions of the Transcendent in film are less concerned with depictions of Transcendence but more so "the proper function of transcendental art is, therefore, to express the Holy itself (the Transcendent), and not to express or illustrate holy feelings" (6). He elaborates, "Human works, accordingly, cannot *inform* one about the Transcendent, they can only be *expressive* of the Transcendent" (6). Additionally, Transcendental as *style*, in Schrader's view, not concerned with a particular culture or religion, but instead with more general concept of the transcendent as immanence and ineffable experience. Schrader argues, "although transcendental style, like any form of transcendental art, strives toward the ineffable and the invisible, it is neither ineffable nor invisible itself" (3). Therefore, while the film is attempting to discuss the ineffable, the style itself is easily expressed in language. The transcendental style allows for discussion of the ineffability of not just the environment and climate change, but also of Christianity and religion.

Transcendental form, according to Schrader, has three primary steps which are rooted in repetition. It is important to note that for Schrader, form is essential to the function of Transcendental Style, as form is "the universal element" which "has the unique ability to express

the Transcendent for large and varied numbers of people” (60-61). The first step of Transcendental form depicts the quotidian, “a meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living” (Schrader 39). Next disparity arises, which is “an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action” (42). Here, “the viewer suspects there may be more to life than the day-to-day existence” (42). Arguably, this is where the concept of dominion interacts with Schrader’s conceptions of Transcendental film style. It is the question and the challenge of man to overcome his environment in which he is no longer in perfect unity. While Schrader attempts to establish Transcendental style as detached from culture and specific religious institutions, Schrader’s work as a writer and director is clearly situated within the realms of Christian expression, and so Transcendental form is demonstrated as concerned with Christianity at least in his writing and directorial choices. I will return to the connection between the Christian form of Genesis and the Transcendental form shortly.

The final step of the Transcendental Style is stasis, “a frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity but transcends it” (49). It is within this stasis that the ineffable may be confronted (49). Schrader elaborates, “complete stasis, or frozen motion, is the trademark of religious art in every culture. It establishes an image of a second reality which can stand beside the ordinary reality; it represents the Wholly Other” (49). It is essential to understand that this moment of stasis exists to express “the inner unity of all things” is rooted in form, *not* experience; Transcendental style is concerned not with the audience sharing the tears of a given character, but instead the larger form, something beyond emotion (51). Schrader’s insistence on the influence of form in expressing and, for the viewer, experiencing the Transcendent coincides

with the arguments of this project which find that genre and form work best to give expression to the ineffability of both Christianity and climate change.

I will now return to my argument regarding the connection between Transcendental style and the form of Genesis and dominion. As stated above, Schrader's theory of the concept of disparity as an essential aspect of the form of Transcendence and the narrative of Genesis both discuss man's disunity with nature or the environment. Scholars have written extensively about the connection of the story of Genesis and the continued destruction and domination of the environment. As Bergant notes,

Very few biblical passages have influenced Western thinking as deeply as have the first three chapters of Genesis. Our view of humankind's place in the world of nature and the character of the interactions that this entails as well as our perception of gender relations are often grounded in our view of these stories.

Genesis 1:26, the epigraph for this chapter, states that after God created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden, He then gave man the power of dominion over all creatures in His creation. Summarized by Leiss, "The creation story in the Book of Genesis announces the sovereignty of God over the universe and the derivative authority of man over the living creatures on the earth" (30). It is through this domination that man is created in God's image, Asselin writes, "In other words, man is God's image because he shares God's power and dominion over creation" (282). There is also extreme importance on the power of naming within Israelite traditions (Asselin). He explains, "Hence, the fact that *Adham* is given the power of naming the animals shows his "knowledge" of them, i.e. the sovereign authority over lower creation which Yahweh has conferred upon him. Thus he remains subordinate to their Creator, but assumes mastery of the work of His hands" (289). The mastery man inherits over nature from God is only one aspect of domination.

The development of Christianity versus nature does not end simply with the heavenly blessing to rule over it and name it but continues and becomes more fraught once man is cast out of the Garden of Eden. Leiss writes,

The existence of wild animals was regarded as evidence that there had been a partial loss of authority on account of sin, for it was assumed that in the Garden of Eden all animals obeyed man's bidding. The domestication or destruction of the wild animals would be a sign that the earthly paradise had been restored. (31)

Additionally, it is through the destruction and denouncing of pagan religions that Christianity was further able to justify the destruction of the planet. First, (hu)man was able to argue for the monopoly of spirit and denounce any religions which advocate otherwise. White writes, "By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (86). White demonstrates this objection of paganism further "For nearly two millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature" (90). Kinsley writes, "In this hierarchy of being, the most important division is not between the creator and his or her creatures (as in the Bible, for example) but between spiritual and nonspiritual beings" (107). All of these arguments for hierarchy can be summarized by White, "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen" (86). Genesis, then, is concerned with man's interaction with the natural world and his need to overcome his environment regarding disunity, similar to the disparity of Transcendental form. For Schrader's conceptions of Transcendence and for Christianity's conceptions of dominion through the stories of Genesis, nature and disparity with the environment is rectified, in a sense, through decisive action and Transcendence. As Schrader describes, "The decisive action does not resolve disparity, but freezes it into stasis. To the transcending mind, man and nature may be perpetually locked into conflict, but they are paradoxically one and the same" (49).

Considering Christianity's role in the conceptualization and treatment of the environment is of substantial importance in the United States given the predominance of Christian-identifying individuals. However, as discussed in the introduction of this work, it would be disingenuous to depict Christianity's conception of dominion as only displayed through acts of destruction and disinterest. Instead, it can be argued that the theme of dominion and genesis places a responsibility for caring stewardship and respect for the planet and its other inhabitants. This tension is represented through *First Reformed* and will be discussed at length. I argue for viewing dominion/Genesis as a genre, whose reading and interpretation is influenced significantly by other works which establish similar themes and conceptions. Primarily, the concept of dominion/Genesis as a genre is situated in explicit discussions of the role of Christianity in the care of the planet.

Finally, several extensions to Transcendental style have been argued. While some rhetoricians have utilized the concept of transcendence as a form of rhetoric both in film criticism (Daughton; Foust & Soukup; Rushing "E.T."), others have argued for transcendence as a form of rhetoric in public address and other forms of rhetoric (Burke; Doss & Jensen). Lindvall, Williams, and Terry provide an important criticism of Schrader's interpretation of Transcendental style as always concerned with sparse-means as ignoring the African American experience. The authors posit, "In the cultural hegemony that permeates the critical Hollywood apparatus, it is in the bias of the dominant definitions of transcendence that the African American experience is slighted" (206). This is compounded by Hollywood's continued racist expression of the Black religious experience as one of spectacle and humor. Through their argument of an African American experience of Christianity in particular, the authors argue for a reconceptualization of Transcendental style as rooted at times in the body, stating,

We contend in this article that a transcendental style delimited by a sparse-means aesthetic is unduly weighted toward denial of the sensate. As such, it devalues the *abundant means* that are indicative of the transcendental impulse as depicted in many African American films. We further posit that the sympathetic response to an ascetic cinematic quality is perhaps more demonstrative of an Eurocentric, post-Reformation religious world view. (Lindvall et al. 206).

In providing an alternative to the transcendental style, which is more centered in conceptions of the body, Lindvall et al. provide an opportunity to reexamine transcendental style films with attention to affect, but also the use of the body within the film to express the Transcendent. The authors' critique is also leveled against the style presupposing the white masculine body, which resonates with Claudia Garcia Roja's critiques of affect studies more broadly. Lindvall et al. argue, "The crux of the orthodox Christian faith is the celebration of the Body, the incarnation, in both its created and resurrected forms. And within the real presence of the human flesh, we find the divine transcendence" (218). Finally, better attending to the differences of Transcendence in regard to race and culture are important especially in the study of *First Reformed*, which places a white and black pastor at odds, especially in their expression of Christianity and responses to climate change.

### **Paul Schrader as Auteur**

The purpose of auteur theory in film criticism is to return to, typically, a director's oeuvre to analyze repeated themes and idiosyncrasies in order to make broader arguments about the body of work. However, as I argue in the introduction, I believe auteur theory is useful in analyzing the repetition of a writer/director in order to best understand the framing of the current cultural anxiety, in this case the intersection of Christianity, both as a religion and an institution, with global warming. Again, Goss notes, "auteurs are elaborately wired into their culture..." and therefore can offer greater introspection into current cultural anxieties (233). Paul Schrader began his career in the creation of films as a writer; first cowriting *Yakuza* (1974)

before collaborating for the first of several films with director/auteur Martin Scorsese with *Taxi Driver* (1976). Schrader wrote and directed his first film *Blue Collar* only two years later. In total, Schrader had written, directed, or written and directed 30 films before the release of *First Reformed*. Nam, in an interview with Schrader before the release of the film approached Schrader about his role as an auteur, noting that while Schrader has several themes he repeatedly returns to, he lacks the “cult of personality” of other auteurs, who he argues have “stylistic consistency that helps establish the filmmaker as author” (20). Schrader responds with his own perspective of auteur theory, “For me, the auteur type of film director was more like Kubrick than like Hitchcock, where every time Kubrick stepped out he wanted to try something new. So the idea of making a film that was a totally new experience was very attractive” (in Nam, 20). However, Sarris notes that Schrader’s defining characteristic as auteur is the focus on “psychological disorientation”. Fraser frames Schrader’s use of *film noir* motifs as defining in the exemplar film *American Gigolo*, arguing, “*Noir* claustrophobia and neurosis are present in the film through lighting and camera work creating vertical planes, brooding shadows, and compositional tension” (92). Aspects of film noir are often present in films which attempt to work within the Transcendental style (Desser). This chapter, most notably, reflects Lincoln’s argument, that *First Reformed* serves as “the culmination of career-spanning obsessions” (84).

Several themes dominate Schrader’s work as both a writer and director. The Transcendental style has already been outlined as a theoretical focus of Schrader’s, but it is also present as a form for his films. While Schrader himself positions *First Reformed* as his first true attempt at Transcendental form, the aspects are repeated throughout his oeuvre. Fraser best makes this argument in his analysis of *American Gigolo*. All three stages are demonstrated clearly: first the audience is introduced to the repetitive everyday existence of gigolo Julian,



watching him drive, buy suits, and do crunches while hanging from the ceiling. The disparity for Julian, and all of Schrader's leading men, occurs due to their outside status: Julian as a male sex worker in *American Gigolo*, *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle as a Vietnam veteran, and even Jesus Christ himself in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The stasis of *American Gigolo* comes as the lasting image of Julian inside the jail, his last words remarking the transcendence of his person to a different understanding of his place in the world. Fraser writes "it is thus a Christian ideal that Schrader has evoked" (97) through Julian's destruction of the material things surrounding him. Thus, the transcendental style is one trace of Schrader's career-spanning obsession with the depiction of Christian redemption.

While some argue that *First Reformed* is Schrader's first outrightly religious film, it is important to consider "that religion has long occupied a conspicuous, if conflicted, place in his constellation" (Nam 18). Setting aside his role as screenwriter for *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Schrader often grapples with the influence of strict Calvinism from his early life in less explicit terms. Hardly an article can be written about the auteur without at least a note about his unconventional film experience, having not seen a movie until he was seventeen years old (Lincoln). As Fraser frames it, "it would seem that Paul Schrader has not been able to free himself from the religious system that informed his early years; nor has he been able to accept it" (99). It can be argued that Schrader's preoccupation with his Calvinist youth is ever-present in his films through the use of transcendental style and the continuous representation of lonely white men who believe themselves capable of redemption, either for themselves most commonly through acts of violence and a personally conceived moral standard, or for society in general. One of Calvin's basic principles is "a belief in the total depravity of the human person. Without the direct influence of God, all are under bondage to sin, but God has chosen some as his 'elect'

from the beginning of time” (Blake 145). Taking for example *Taxi Driver*, protagonist Travis is not a likely member of the chosen few of God. However, he may think of himself as such, which is demonstrated in his constant voiceover disavowals of New York City as a place of filth, and his own work to clean himself metaphorically and literally through acts of exercise and amassing his arsenal. Travis’s desire to better New York City reaches its crescendo in a (most likely) imagined scenario of killing several violent pimps and returning Iris to her proper home with her parents, removing her entirely from the carnal world. Blake argues that as “his imagined heroic efforts to save himself, Iris, and the streets of New York are futile in the real world since the depravity is ‘total’. But in his imagination, he relentlessly concocts elaborate plans to overcome his destiny” (145). The role of God as the sole transcendent escape from the brutal reality of the world as full of irreversible sin becomes a prevalent theme throughout Schrader’s oeuvre.

Schrader often grapples with his religious upbringing through motifs of white male loneliness and psychological realism. Nam writes of Schrader as “well-known for brooding male figures” and the “European Existential Hero” (18). Most all of Schrader’s films feature a white male protagonist suffering alone under the psychological weight of human existence, though the expression of this weight varies. In *American Gigolo*, for instance, Schrader puts an overemphasis on suffering in materialism and sexual exploitation, while in *The Last Temptation of Christ* “Jesus remains set apart as a lonely man. He has no peer he can turn to for an explanation of his strange experiences. He will have to solve the mysteries on his own” (148). Each leading white man is suffering *alone* and must carry the burden of saving the world *alone*, whether it be from pimps, drug dealers, or themselves. This concept, as expressed in Schrader’s films, is not a particularly novel concept. Indeed, the concept of white masculinity in crisis is

articulated in a large swatch of cinema and is a focus of a large variety of interdisciplinary scholarship.

It is important to argue these points as white masculinity as “without specifically addressing white ethnicity there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other” (Carroll 23). Indeed, most of the authors discussing white masculinity also make note of it as “hegemonic masculinity” which “has come to capture the socially constructed, institutionalized yet shifting form of masculinist identity that systematically dominates femininities and alternative masculinities” (Ashcraft & Flores 3). The crisis of white hegemonic masculinity in American culture has its roots primarily in the rise of the fight for racial and gender equality. As Robinson notes, “a dominant or master narrative of white male decline in post-sixties America has developed to account for the historical, social, and political decentering of what was once considered the norm” (2). As identity politics began to rise in America, white men had a crisis in masculinity and therefore attempted to reestablish dominance through the assertion of whiteness as an identity rather than the default. As Kelly argues, “popular articulations of wounded masculinity reflect the rise of a reactionary politics of white male resentment that seizes tropes of victimhood and marginalization even as it celebrates white male primacy” (“Apocalypse” 2). White masculinity in crisis saw significant representation in American media in several definitive cultural moments: the Vietnam War, the 1980s, the 1990s, and post-9/11 America. *Taxi Driver* and *American Gigolo* represent two of these major cultural moments for the crisis of white masculinity.

Trauma, victimhood, sacrifice, and the abject all feature heavily in white masculinity scholarship. As King explains, “so pervasive is Hollywood’s fixation on the traumatic suffering and ritualized destruction of (mostly) white male bodies that *The Passion [of the Christ]*

represents an example of an overlooked body of American films: the sacrificial film” (“Washed” 2). Schrader’s use of the transcendental style as well as focus on white masculinity converge in sacrificial films, which King argues, “trauma and sacrifice enable the vicimhero to earn transcendent authority” (“Washed” 165). While Schrader’s main characters are not typically shown to actually die, many face a metaphorical death (e.g. Julian in *American Gigolo*) or at the very least a psychologically disorienting ending which could be death, but is unclear (e.g. Travis in *Taxi Driver*). King argues, “operating somewhere between the registers of cultural didacticism and “pure Hollywood spectacle,” popular sacrificial films cast national identity and civic duty as dependent on the traumatic heroism of men” (“Washed” 165).

Struggles over white masculinity are typically depicted in the physical body. Perhaps the most popular film for scholarly discussion of the crisis of white masculinity is *Fight Club*; which features the bloody destruction of white men as their escape from emasculation through materialism (Brookey & Westerfelhaus; Gunn & Frenztz). As Kelly writes, “bearing one’s wounds—physical or emotional, real or perceived—has become a powerful way of articulating white masculinity in American culture” (“Apocalypse” 7). As Robinson states,

Displaying wounded bodies materializes the crisis of white masculinity, makes it more real, like other bloody battles over race and gender in American history; but such a materialization, in turn, threatens to expose the lie of disembodied normativity so often attached to white masculinity. (9)

White masculinity is often expressed as the abject, “whose internal fissures, contradictions, and impossibilities allow it to accommodate a multitude of incarnations of what the “white” and the “masculine” can be” (“Cuts” 370). King writes of the display of white masculinity in *Fight Club*, “abject male bodies function not only as chief objects of (troubled) desire and (uneasy) identification but also operate as synecdoches for the abject nature of white masculinity as it is imagined and performed in American culture” (“Cuts” 367). Through the use of blood and other

bodily fluids, subjectivity is exposed and challenged. Davis writes of the use of the abject to explore masculinity in horror films “suggests the ever-present possibility that the masculine body might regress, decay and dissolve, in the process becoming more femininely abject” (138). The destruction of the white male body in film echoes the perceived destruction of white masculinity in American society.

As discussed above, these suffering white male characters utilize a moral compass of their own making. Often this revolves around the protection of a woman, who operates also as a metaphor the Transcendent, and a reassertion of masculine power, especially after it has been lost previously in the film. In exemplar, in *American Gigolo*, Julian loses his masculine power in an encounter when he goes to a trick orchestrated by Leon, a pimp who he typically does not work for. When Julian arrives to the couple’s home, he immediately asserts that he does not have sex with men, asserting his masculinity through homophobia. As Julian initiates sex with the man’s wife, demonstrating his sexual prowess and dominance explicitly to the audience for the first time, the husband interrupts several times to direct Julian how to have sex with his wife. This interaction becomes Julian’s downfall, as he is later framed for the wife’s murder. Julian’s redemption and reassertion of his masculine power comes through his affair with Michelle, a prominent politician’s wife, through shots of their body’s in pleasure and her awkward assertions throughout the film that she “always wants to fuck” him. In the conclusion, Julian is transcended through Michelle’s love and devotion, and also through his repositioning as a moral figure who denounces both sex work and materialism.

The final theme of Schrader’s to be discussed here is his focus on both mental and physical health and their decline. Throughout his works, Schrader repeatedly depicts images of physical and mental care and subsequent deterioration. For instance, while Travis of *Taxi Driver*

makes an overt statement about changing his health, “in fact, he doesn’t seem to change his diet or reliance on pills... Did he actually go through these preliminary steps for his murderous rampage, or is it rather a daydream scenario for what he’d really like to do some day?” (Blake 142). In *American Gigolo*, Julian is at first seen giving extravagant care to his body, reflecting the 1980s obsession with working out and physical fitness, by hanging upside-down from the ceiling to do his daily ab-exercises. As his mental state deteriorates and his paranoia grows, Julian’s physical appearance becomes disheveled and ragged. Just as both men become ravaged physically, their mental state becomes precarious. However, the characters ability to overcome their illness, be it physical or mental, is illustrative again of the power of masculinity; “capacity to heal seems to be bound up in a complex way with their masculinity and heterosexuality, which are affirmed even from the grave” (Eberwein 1). Schrader has been noted for his focus on “psychological disorientation”, with films veering into a space where the audience is unsure of what actually occurs, or if monumental moments are simply delusions of grandeur for white men on the brink of losing all their power and moral superiority. Arguably, psychological realism allows for the transcendental ending of retribution through God.

### **Transcendence and Environmental Doom in *First Reformed***

*First Reformed* begins with an ode to the slow cinema Paul Schrader admires, fading from the black title screen to the image of the titular church, its steeple prominent in front of a gray sky. As we slowly zoom in on the nearly 200-year-old church, birds chirp, and the camera switches to the bronze sign of a historical marker, naming Abundant Life as the sponsor. The role of the megachurch is alluded to several times within the opening moments of the film, asserting its place as the financial benefactor of First Reformed. With the opening voiceover of Reverend Toller, played by Ethan Hawke, the audience is introduced to the theme of Toller’s journal,

which appears in several dark and distressing voice over entries throughout the film. Hawke, it should be noted, is an actor known for his cerebral, sensitive portrayals of white masculinity and therefore fits comfortably into this role as well. *First Reformed* follows Toller in his quotidian existence, a key aspect of the transcendental style Schrader emulates, as he tends to the aging and dwindling church, negotiates with his benefactors at Abundant Life, and counsels a young man, Michael Mansana, whose wife Mary is concerned about him due to his radical environmental beliefs.

When Toller is introduced to Michael, he is invigorated by a discussion about climate change and its impending apocalypse. Toller takes up Michael's environmental activism after his suicide, attempting to rectify the connection between organized Christianity, God, and the environment, which serves as the disparity stage of Transcendental style. As Toller plans a celebration for the 200 year anniversary of his church, he becomes increasingly incensed and fatalistic about the realities of global warming. He is forced to acquiesce to Ed Balq, a business owner and, according to a news article within the film, one of the worst polluters globally, whose significant donations to Abundant Life help to pay for the re-consecration service. It is at the celebration that Reverend Toller appears to face the decision of his own making to either act in violence or commit suicide under the immense weight of environmental collapse and church corruption. This in part is a reflection of King's conceptions of white male sacrifice as the solution to crisis. Toller stands before a suicide vest, contemplating the mass murder of Ed Balq and other significant players in industrial politics, feeling powerless and emasculated in the face of their power over the environment. When Toller realizes that Mary has decided to attend the service, he turns toward self-harm as another form of male sacrifice. The final moments leave the

fate of Toller unclear, the third element of transcendental film and in the arms of a woman, a Schrader trademark.

As this chapter begins to move through the themes of *First Reformed*, it is important perhaps to note several other defining auteur characteristics which appear throughout the film. As previously noted, Schrader nods to slow cinema, several shots in the scene linger for several moments both before and after characters enter and exit. Take for instance a scene in which the front of Mary and Michael's house is shown long enough for a woman to enter from the left, walk her dog across the entirety of the screen, and exit before Toller's car appears. The camera remains stationary as Toller slowly parks, exits his car, walks to the front door, and waits patiently for Mary to answer, and enters her home. Other marks of Schrader also appear in the film, as we are shown Toller's view through the windshield and as he drives, as seen in *Taxi Driver* and *American Gigolo*. This provides the audience with an opportunity to see the world, briefly, through the perspective of the white male protagonist, especially in order to witness excess filth, materialism, and human suffering. Schrader's preoccupation with psychological torment and concepts of transcendence are made visible as well. Carew writes, "this often-bleak film inflects hopelessness with moments of transcendence" (17). The feeling of hopelessness which Schrader often burdens his characters with is perhaps one of the most influential marks on the film, for what it implies about the environmental movement. I argue that Schrader's injection of hopelessness mobilizes an audience to feel equally bleak regarding the current environmental movement.

### *Dominion & Genesis*

In his first meeting with Michael, Reverend Toller receives a barrage of information concerning the current environmental crisis. After listing statistics and presenting the most



realistic image for the future of the planet, Michael asks Toller the most important question of the film, “Can God forgive us? For what we’ve, uh, done to this world?”. After the Reverend attempts to reply with “I don’t know. Who can know the mind of God? But we can choose a righteous life. Belief, forgiveness, grace, governs us all. I believe that”, he sets up another meeting with Michael. As Lincoln notes of this exchange, “For Schrader and his reverend, this idea becomes a movie-length confrontation between the nature of faith, capitalism’s role in organized religion, and man’s responsibility to nature” (84). It is these aspects which I argue constitute *dominion/Genesis* as genre. While this exchange guides Toller and Schrader through the remainder of the film, it is more than this bit of dialogue that substantiates my claim as *First Reformed* as a piece of this genre.

After Toller discovers Michael’s suicide and takes possession of his computer, he begins to research the environmental causes which Michael had dedicated his life to. In a diner following the funeral service for Michael, Ed Balq and the pastor of Abundant Life, Jeffers, meet with Toller to discuss the re-consecration service and Toller is admonished for participating in the funeral which they deem as too political. Here, Toller asks the pair, but mostly Balq, “Will God forgive us? Will God forgive us for what we’re doing to his creation? That’s what Mensana asked me when I visited him”. As the trio bicker about the realities of climate change, Toller finally states, “What God wants is for...” but Balq interrupts to ask, visibly frustrated, “Oh, you, you, you, you know the mind of God? You spoke to him personally? He told you his plans for Earth?”. Balq and Jeffers toe the line of the mind of God, asserting that God’s plan is unknowable and incomprehensible, while Toller presses that *Genesis* provides the groundwork for protecting the planet. Even the seating arrangement further alludes to this division, as Toller sits alone across from Jeffers and Balq. Here lies the tension of *Genesis*, probing at the intention

of dominion and how these concepts interact with environmental destruction. Balq represents the free market, Jeffers represents the megachurch, and Reverend Toller is left to represent those who fight for environmental protection. Toller's lack of agency against Ed Balq and Jeffers, both in this conversation and in the context of the reconsecration service, not only due to their financial power but also his job position, further establishes the environmental activist as powerless in the face of corporate interests.

Later, when Toller approaches the subject alone with Jeffers in his office, he is openly mocked again. As Toller states, "And what of his creation? The heavens declare the glory of God. God is present everywhere. In every plant, every river, every tiny insect", Jeffers rolls his eyes. I argue in this brief line, Toller allows space for an alternative to anthropocentric understandings of Christianity, but Toller represents again the more mainstream representations of Christianity. When he continues on, "The whole world is a manifestation of his holy presence. I think this is an issue where the church can lead" Jeffers turns away from him and sighs. But Toller continues on, stammering slightly and leaning to the side to try to catch Jeffers eye, arguing, "But they say nothing. The US Congress still denies climate change? Where were we when these people were elected? We know who speaks for big business, but who speaks for God?". The pair begin a battle of verses, as Jeffers recites Romans 8:23, "the Creation waits in eager expectation of liberation from bondage" and Toller rebuttals "So, we should pollute so God can restore? We should sin so God can forgive? I don't think that's what the Apostle meant". The audience is privy to the contestations of modern Christianity and its stance on the destruction of the planet. As Jeffers posits, "well, what if this is His plan? What if we just can't see it?" Toller is visibly surprised, asking if God wants his creation destroyed, to which Jeffers replies rather sternly, "He did once. Forty days and forty nights".

An important aspect of this discussion, and the overall tone of the film, is the contention between Toller representing the small, more personal Christianity while Jeffers and Abundant Life represent what is known in American culture as the mega-church. Abundant life as a structure and place is massive, with a sanctuary that can hold 5,000 people, a cafeteria, and a recording studio which features a large plaque baring Balq Industries as its sponsor. Jeffers sits behind a massive solid wood desk, in an office with plush leather furniture and a personal assistant. Additionally, Jeffers being played by the comedian Cedric the Entertainer plays on the concept of a mega-church as a place of entertainment. Schrader states,

the reason I cast Cedric the Entertainer was because he is a really likable guy. You see him and you smile. He makes you feel good. I just felt that if I cast one of these white pricks, like Pat Robertson, I would have no sympathy for the large congregation. I didn't want it to be weighted one way or the other. (in Nam 23)

While Schrader utilizes Cedric the Entertainer's likeability to soften the depiction of mega-churches, the casting also works to highlight these institutions as less focused on scripture and more focused on image, success, and perhaps profit. However, casting the only Black character of the film as a preacher of a mega-church who bows to big business positions Black Christianity in potentially problematic ways. As Lindvall et al. argue,

Religious or spiritual scenes are too often part of a racist world view presented by a Hollywood commercial system. The religious practices, preaching, and rhetorical of Black ministers provides fodder for ethnic stereotypes, including hypocritical church deacon, the money-grubbing, high-living preacher, or the holly roller sister. (206-207)

Reverend Jeffers then may not function entirely for likability, but instead his casting as a Black man further demonizes his positionality for white audiences.

The positioning of white Reverend Toller and Michael Mensana as the voices of environmental stewardship against a Black reverend also works to illuminate the incorrect assumptions made about environmental activism. Black and Indigenous individuals, and other

people of color are significantly more likely to experience the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, but the environmental movement continues to be seen as a white cause to white audiences. In part, “Environmentalism is white not because it is irrelevant to nonwhites. It is white because its primary considerations reflect the interests of mostly white and wealthier people -- to the literal exclusion of nonwhites” (Purifoy 8). Environmental justice and racism are ignored largely by a significant proportion of environmental activists, and environmental organizations continue to under-employ people of color (Taylor). However, make no mistake, people of color have stood at the forefront of massive environmental movements, especially those concerning hazardous waste. Purifoy argues, “Advocacy and scholarship about protecting communities of color are rarely called environmentalism because those communities are still largely not considered places worthy of protection by environmentalists” (para. 4). The positioning of Toller as a white savior to a disinterested Black man reinforces these misunderstandings of environmentalism as a white concern. As environmental groups are just beginning to realize the error of past racist beliefs and policies (see Jones), in part due to the research of Dorceta Taylor, it is important to note the racial politics that lie between Toller and Jeffers in who cares about environmental destruction, and who does not.

Returning to the argument of Abundant Life as the megachurch, early in the film, when Mary seeks out Toller to counsel Michael, he asks if they would rather turn to Abundant Life because they have greater resources for counseling, Mary reacts, “I know, but he doesn’t want to. He thinks it’s more of a company than a church”. As Carew argues, “Modern-day all-American religion seems to have seamlessly merged with late-period capitalism, there is no evangelical zeal in the modern-day USA quite like that of conservative pundits prostelytising the ‘free-market’” (23). This is exemplified in Balq’s involvement in the re-consecration of First

Reformed and the amenities of Abundant Life. The church is therefore seen as a pawn of capitalist investments. Balq's insistence that the re-consecration feature no political messages, and Jeffers quick agreement demonstrates the role of industry in modern day Christianity.

In these pivotal scenes, and the general diegesis of the film, the place of modern Christianity in United States politics and policy regarding global warming is explicitly questioned and challenged. I argue that a facet of the dominion genre is less allegory and more direct discussion of scripture and the environment. How exactly these two concepts are directly related or at odds is essential to understanding the role of modern Christian peoples in the environmental movement.

#### *A Crisis of White Masculinity & Climate*

Paul Schrader is known for his depiction of white masculinity in crisis, and Reverend Toller and Michael Mensana exemplify this career-long obsession. Kelly, writing of the representation of white masculinity in American film, argues,

These wounded white men have outlived their social utility and are, therefore, aggrieved without recourse. Estranged from their families, broke, suffering from addiction, and unable to sustain healthy relationships, these melancholic men are exemplars of the men's rights movement's dark portrait of the state of American masculinity. (Kelly 163)

Toller is an exemplar of these features. He is the pastor of an arguably useless church, divorced from his wife after the death of his son, alcoholic to the point of serious illness, and hurtful to a woman in the congregation with whom he once had an affair. This "wounded white man of contemporary cinema presents a strategically incoherent version of manhood" (174). These wounded men and their crisis as expressed through climate terror work to reify notions of dominion and man's connection to nature. Hemming argues in her writing on *Fight Club* and several other masculine films of the late 1990s, "an unstable masculinity seems to have reached a

critical stage. Surprisingly, nature has become man's biggest ally in this rage against the cultural machine" (148). In these films, as in *First Reformed*, masculinity and ecology are intertwined,

At the same time that these films articulate male bodies in crisis, the "body" of nature is also articulated as threatened by technology and modernization. In fact, these films rely on images of ecological calamity, apocalypse, and urban decay. Ecological crisis, in other words, provides an important backdrop to the masculine crises on which the films focus. (Hemming 149)

This alignment between masculinity and nature provides a contrast to the previously assumed binaries of man/culture, woman/nature detailed in chapter one. Man's return to nature as a source of masculinity can be demonstrated as dominion; a return to control and mastery over the natural environment, only now not as a resource but as something to be protected by *man*.

Toller and Mensana's white masculinity as entangled with the environmental crisis is further complicated by American perceptions of the environmental movement as an inherently feminine concern. Research has shown that men will avoid environmentally conscious behaviors such as carrying a reusable shopping bag in order to not appear feminine or gay (Bain; Hunt). Toller's response to the loss of his masculinity is then predictably violent. Instead of organizing clean ups, protesting, or other environmental acts, Toller plots an act of radical violence through the use of a suicide vest he confiscated from Michael. This choice of action is reflected also in Schrader's *American Gigolo* or *Taxi Driver*; Travis Bickle spends his days ruminating on the decline of New York City, but does not participate in activism which would help to solve the city's myriad of problems. Instead, all leading white men in these films choose to act in violent aggression towards the perceived evil. King and Gunn argue, "a less reckoned way in which rhetoric is implicated in cultural expressions of violence: the fantasy of male self-sacrifice as misogynistic" (201). Toller and Michael's violence as self-sacrifice for the betterment of the planet is a misogynistic response to the more prominent feminine expression of

environmentalism. Both Michael's suicide and Toller's near use of the suicide vest, and extreme self-flagellation are reassertions of their own personal masculinity and attempts to reorient the environmental movement as masculine.

The environmental movement for both Toller and Michael is depicted as violent and dangerous. Early in the film, Mary says of her husband Michael, "I'm worried about him, he's involved in the Green Planet Movement. It's an activist group". This immediately positions activism as worrisome. She continues on, "He thinks it's wrong to bring a child into this world. He wants to kill our baby." Mensana's invitation of infanticide invokes a fundamental cultural anxiety about children and their innocence. When Mary discovers a suicide vest in the garage, she says with tears in her eyes "I'm so frightened," though she insists not for her own safety. Later, Mary emphasizes the difference between feminine and masculine action for climate change, stating first, "I share Michael's beliefs, but not his despair. I mean, I wanna live. I wanna be a mother. I wanna have this child" and later, "He'd been a part of some nonviolent protests. We both had. He'd been put in jail. He had a temper. I mean, he'd start yelling at police. But, no, I don't think he was... no... I don't think he was violent." Mary asserting Michael as nonviolent after the discovery of the suicide vest and his own suicide is clearly at odds, but her separation between her own participation in nonviolent protests and Michael's temper and escalation again works to show the differences in environmental activism. Schrader's use of white male characters' violence as the extreme solution to society's major problems address a masculinity in constant crisis since the Civil Rights Movement, which is now reestablishing itself as having dominion over the environment and the environmental movement. Now that culture has been deemed the problem, associated with horrors of labor and materialism, and nature the solution, men are reoriented as aligned with nature and women with culture. Therefore, the crisis of

environment is tied to the crisis of the masculine, and both can be alleviated through acts of violent sacrifice on the white male body. This violence enacted upon their own bodies is reflective also of the transcendent and Christian forms. Both Michael and Toller come to represent Jesus in moments of what they perceive as sacrificial good, absorbing the sins of humanity. Their bodies bear the burden of this sacrifice, and they become Christ figures for Earth.

After Michael questions the validity of martyrdom, he commits suicide in a park. His actions can be seen as a final sacrifice for the betterment of the planet or a response to the bleak future he details in the same conversation. Michael sends a text message to Toller before a planned meeting that he would like to meet at a park rather than his home. Again exemplifying slow cinema, Toller begins his walk into the snowy forest and the camera is positioned presumably over Michael's body. As Toller approaches the camera, he begins to notice something that is not yet clear to the audience. Once he is perhaps a foot from the camera, the angle changes for the first time and Michael's body is shown face down in the snow, the red blood an explosion of color in sharp contrast to the surroundings. The camera lingers on the carnage for several moments, long enough to take in the shotgun at his side. Even when the shot changes, Michael's body remains on screen as Toller approaches, trying desperately to look away. He turns in a circle, takes several labored breaths, squints his eyes, and calls emergency services. The choice to display Michael's body rather than allude to his death emphasizes suicide as a violent act while also positioning the body as a crucial element of environmentalism. Here is the first example of the white male body expressing the violence of both environmental destruction and the crisis of white masculinity. As Hemming argues, "privileging the body over the mind, masochism becomes the means by which men are able to seek out their true selves that



reside not in culture, but in nature” (150). The existential threat of human extinction is depicted and made immediate via an abject body. As Mensana lays lifeless and blood-strewn, the male audience sees its vulnerability on full display, with all the violence of white masculine power turned against itself. As mentioned previously, the display of physical wounds on a white masculine body works to make the crisis of white masculinity more *real*, and in this film the crisis of environmentalism becomes more real as well. Instead of an abstract concept, environmental collapse becomes directly observable through the display of Michael Mensana’s suicide. Additionally, Michael’s suicide also re-emphasizes the hopelessness of environmental activism and white masculinity. No alternative is presented and the weight of the future of the planet is perhaps too much. While Michael’s suicide also acts as a catalyst for competing understandings of the future of the planet and hope more generally, Schrader has been candid about his complete lack of hope for the alleviation of climate change.

Each man’s masculinity is also emphasized by his extreme loneliness, again another idiosyncrasy of the auteur. Returning to Kelly’s argument that white men in American cinema are often estranged from their families, Toller’s backstory emphasizes his estrangement from his wife following the death of their son. Toller writes in his journal, “My wife could no longer live with me”. He relishes in his loneliness, arguing that some are called to serve the church because of their loneliness. Toller pushes away a woman who cares deeply about him with harsh words, saying directly to her, “I despise you. I despise what you bring out in me. Your concerns are petty. You are a stumbling block”. Michael, too, is depicted as struggling with human relationships, as having no friends, and of course his decision to commit suicide could be seen as an expression of his loneliness.

While the expression of white masculinity in *First Reformed* works to reposition environmentalism as a masculine endeavor, Schrader's emphasis of women as the salvation of a lonely man is evident. Similar to Iris in *Taxi Driver* or Michelle in *American Gigolo*, the crisis of masculinity and acts of violence are done in the name of a fragile white woman, and ultimately, she acts as his salvation. Indeed, *First Reformed* elevates this further, stopping Toller from utilizing the suicide vest so that he does not harm Mary directly. Toller is shown preparing for the event by first shaving, combing his hair, and finally donning Michael's suicide vest, now featuring several patches sewn by the reverend himself. His face is serious as he puts on his robes over the vest, but becomes incredibly angry once he sees Mary entering the church after he explicitly told her not to attend. He paces for a moment around his barren living space, before finally disrobing and screaming into the religious garments. His solution is violence upon his own body. After removing the suicide vest and his shirt, Toller reappears with drain cleaner in one hand and a large piece of barbed wire in the other, both items shown in banal moments of Toller's life as reverend of First Reformed. Carew writes,

he instead wraps himself in barbed wire, in a body-horror-inflected scene that echoes the self-flagellation of early zealots. If we're to accept that these Christian martyrs died for a greater cause, what more pressing contemporary crusade is there than for the environment? (Carew 20)

Additionally, this moment of self-abuse and the attempted suicide vest moment that precedes it also represent the self-sacrifice described by King. Toller's civic duty, as made doubly apparent through his display of his military patches and stance, toward solving climate change can only be actualized by his own self-sacrifice. Before he can drink the drain cleaner mixed into his ever-present whiskey glass, Mary appears inside the room. This ending is miraculous in part because Toller's door was shown to be locked moments earlier when Jeffers shook the handle in frustration at Toller's tardiness. She says simply, "Ernst," before embracing him in a passionate

kiss that lasts 51 seconds until the film ends abruptly in a cut to black. Mary, and her feminine sexuality, exist as the salvation for Toller. This ending follows the transcendent features of Schrader's other work, as well as creating a space for questioning the reality and mental stability of the main character. As seen in *Taxi Driver* especially, the audience is left unsure if Toller committed suicide through the drain cleaner or the vest, or if he was truly redeemed by Mary. Instead, audiences can project onto the final moments of the film their anxieties about the end of the world.

### *Multiple Catastrophes*

As noted in the opening words of this chapter, one of the notable aspects of *First Reformed* is its contemporary emphasis of environmental destruction. Unlike the other works discussed in this project, *First Reformed* places an emphasis on the vast array of environmental problems rather than a general malaise, as seen in *mother!* or a singular issue such as the second Dust Bowl in *Interstellar*. By listing and discussing a variety of issues that face the planet, from general concerns about warming to the more specific instances of EPA Superfund sites, Schrader's film again offers a rather bleak outlook on the future. In an interview, Schrader stated

I don't have a very optimistic view. When you're dealing with eschatology—the discussion of the final things—Christianity and Judaism have been talking about it from the very beginning. What is our purpose on earth? What is the goal? We have now entered a moment in time where we can actually see, if we stand on our tippy-toes, the end of our duration as a species. What was for thousands of years a highly hypothetical discussion—what happens when mankind no longer exists?—has now become an actual discussion. It gives a different shading to the search for meaning or purpose. (in Nam 22)

Schrader is rather clear in the interview, and in the film, that he has little hope. In fact, he clarifies later in the interview, “But now we also have a threat that we can't do anything about, or at least that we've decided we don't want to do anything about. It's probably too late to reverse that. In fact, I do think that it is too late—too late to save human life on this planet” (22). Later in

this work, I will discuss the implications of each of these films as depicting the apocalypse as inevitable. Schrader chooses a rather direct position throughout the film, telling the audience through several distinct scenes the calamity that awaits the human race due to climate change.

In Reverend Toller's first meeting with Michael Mensana the two quickly begin discussing the current crisis of global warming. While Michael argues his position that it is wrong to bring children into this world because of the future conditions of the planet he lists an immense assortment of ecological problems scientists expect by the year 2050; in a voice-over Toller lists them:

He went on for some time like that. By 2050 sea levels two feet higher on the East Coast. Low lying areas underwater across the world. Bangladesh, twenty percent loss of land mass. Central Africa, fifty percent reduction in crops due to drought. The western reservoirs dried up. Climate change refugees. Epidemics. Extreme weather.

Michael emphasizes the timeframe of 2050 multiple times, reminding the audience that they will all live to see these impacts. Michael finishes his speech with "This isn't some distant future. You will live to see this. My children will experience this...unlivability [sic]." Here, the audience is mobilized to care about climate change and its vast impacts, but they are given no reasonable response, no escape. As mentioned previously, Schrader has been straight-forward in his perception of the climate crisis as too far gone, especially when considering the immense number of problems and the government's resistance to action. Instead, environmental apocalypse becomes inevitable in their lifetimes without any possible resolution. Both Toller and Michael collapse under the weight of the knowledge of the current state of the climate crisis, and the only possible alleviation of these ills is in the arms of the same pregnant woman: whom Michael abandons through suicide and Toller is perhaps rescued by in the film's final moments. This is exemplified when Michael states, "you know I'm sorry. I thought things could change, you know? I thought people would listen." *First Reformed* leaves no room for optimism, and the

scope of the environmental crisis is emphasized repeatedly as Toller conducts research on Michael's computer: observing EPA Superfund sites, the world's top polluters, polar bears starved on floating blocks of ice, birds stomachs filled with plastic, and other photographs of the state of our natural world. After Toller's first meeting with Michael, as he is alone in his empty home, he writes in his journal, "I know that nothing can change and I know there is no hope... Thomas Merton wrote that." As Carew writes, "Is there a greater feeling of powerlessness than being one of 7 billion humans, attempting to combat corporate oligarchy and entrenched institutions?" (21). *First Reformed* would say no.

### *The Sublime and the Sickening*

While *First Reformed* utilizes language, sounds, and images in an attempt to express the realities of climate change, the use of the sublime is also important for the inexpressibility of human extinction. As noted in chapter one, I argue that the sublime demonstrates a possibility for greater care for the environment through affect. It is through the experience of the sublime that the real is made possible to us, as well as an opportunity to face the immense reality of our planet. Typically, the sublime is understood as images of the natural world, untainted by humans, such as the feeling one experiences upon seeing the Grand Canyon. Within *First Reformed*, the sublime is juxtaposed with the reality of pollution through a rather surreal experience shared between Toller and Mary.

After Mary surprises Toller with a visit to his home, the two have a brief discussion about her healing after Michael's death. Mary describes an activity the two used to do together which she called "The Magical Mystery Tour" where they would lay on top of each other, fully clothed, and attempt to get as much "body-to-body contact as possible". Toller offers to try it with her, and the two assume a position with Mary laying on top of Toller with their arms stretched out,

palms touching, noses inches away from one another. As the two begin breathing deeply, background music begins playing for the first noticeable time in the film, and the film takes on a fantasy tone for several minutes. The camera begins to spin around Mary and Toller and the bodies appear to float above the floor and the room fades away into a galaxy complete with ethereal score. The galaxy slowly fades into a mountain peak, and the two then float above a lush green forest, ocean waves, and yet another forest. As Toller gently pushes Mary's hair away from his face, the audience sees his awe turn to terror as the scene below them changes from the sublime natural world to a massive freeway with traffic noises. The music takes on an ominous tone as Mary and Toller are removed from the screen as piles of black tires occupy the screen, followed by a massive factory with several smoke stacks, a forest being logged, a massive river full of plastic trash, a land destroyed by a presumed forest fire, and finally the Superfund site of Michael's funeral, complete with a man atop the boat. Again, this scene serves as a reminder of the complexity of climate change and planetary destruction by utilizing current day imagery of the planet to evoke feelings of terror following an experience of the sublime. Two incomprehensible experiences sandwiched together to mobilize an audience into genuine concern.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter is an exploration into the concept of dominion/Genesis as genre through analysis of the film *First Reformed*. While Christianity holds a prominent place in American culture and politics, how modern-day Christians and theology theorize and interact with environmental issues remains fraught and misunderstood. Through an exploration of Genesis as form, the complicated relationship between God bestowing dominion upon humans while also placing a responsibility for stewardship unto them can be better understood. Transcendence and white

masculinity figure heavily into Schrader's expression of the dominion/Genesis form. The experience and expression of the transcendent in film, at least in the ways described by Schrader, is connected to the ineffable within the study of environmental film. White masculinity plays a significant part in expressing current cultural anxieties regarding global warming, especially as Reverend Toller's white masculine body is placed at odds with the only prominent Black character of the film. The disagreement between Toller and Jeffers works to reinforce white assumptions about environmentalism as well as continued affective divestment of Black and Indigenous suffering due to climate change. Further, *First Reformed* depicts environmental activism as extreme, violent, and hopeless; an obsession for white men who are struggling with their own white masculinity. Self-sacrifice in the name of the planet transforms these characters into Jesus-like martyrs, acting on behalf of innocent white women. *First Reformed* demonstrates the importance of utilizing Christian form to express complex connections between modern Christianity and climate change. Further the film provides a better understanding of the ineffable in modern environmental cinema through analyzing Schrader's use of the transcendental style and the ineffable.

### CHAPTER THREE. *INTERSTELLAR* AND THE ECOLOGICAL JEREMIAD OF THE HOPELESS PLANET EARTH

No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more"

-- *Jeremiah*, 34:34

*Interstellar* is a visual masterpiece situated in the distant future with a vague environmental crisis threatening the entire planet. Controversial in its reception, Christopher Nolan's film has been referred to as "an impressive, at times astonishing movie" (Seitz), while others write of "toenail-extracting dialogue" (Bradshaw). The most commercially successful of the three films discussed in this dissertation (by over \$600 million), *Interstellar* features outstanding visuals and an emotional "formidable consideration of what makes us human" (Foundas). *Interstellar* is the complicated narrative of two separate families attempting to save the human race from extinction after what appears to be the second Dust Bowl. As Scott writes, "What our planet and species need saving from is a slow-motion environmental catastrophe". Christopher Nolan, known for being something of a "Blockbuster auteur" pushes against the more cataclysmic catastrophes of big budget disaster films. Instead of depicting environmental collapse in one astounding moment, such as in *The Day After Tomorrow*, Nolan guides the audience through a decades long struggle for the health of the planet. Finally, "The whole movie can be seen as a plea for forgiveness on behalf of our foolish, dreamy species. We messed everything up, and we feel really bad about it. Can you please give us another chance?" (Scott "Off"). Essentially, what Scott highlights here is the core of the jeremiad form. Nolan's ninth feature film leaves the environmental collapse quite vague while painstakingly attempting to accurately portray theoretical physics with the help of physicist Kip Thorne. Furby writes that Nolan,

sought scientific accuracy, along with some educated guesses and outright speculation when the current understanding of science had been exhausted, and has therefore touched



on some very complex theories of space-time, five-dimensional artefacts, gravity, relativity and time-travel. Despite this, and quite possibly because of it, the film may actually have a less complicated relationship with the past than other Nolan films. (253)

Furby is referencing Nolan's previous films, such as *Inception* and *Memento*, which predate *Interstellar* and focus heavily on concepts of time and deception. Nolan's dedication to an accurate depiction of physics leaves audiences with "a film that depicts a sort of promethean promise of human genius, saving itself through scientific and technological means" (Andersen & Nielsen 628). Much like present-day concepts of neoliberalism and green capitalism as the solution to the global ecological crisis, Nolan emphasizes the role of science and technology in the future of saving the planet, rather than large-scale policy changes to significantly decrease major companies' pollution rates.

Beyond its emphasis on science and space travel, *Interstellar* at its center is a film about the planet in ecological crisis. As Podgajna notes,

Blending generic conventions of space-travel, science-fiction and moral fable, the film, with its bleak vision of ecological disaster, social unrest, and economic decline, clearly evokes the dystopian paradigm in which the projected reality is perceived as significantly worse than the here and now. (52)

As noted throughout this dissertation, "The dream factory of Hollywood has and can continue to play its part also by foregrounding the increasing importance of ecological debates within a global cultural consciousness" (Brereton 237). While some scholarship has noted the religious motifs present in Nolan's *Interstellar*, none highlight the significance of the ecological jeremiad (Nir).

I propose *Interstellar* as a modern ecological jeremiad as it illustrates the illustrious past of America in its defense of the Apollo space missions, while detailing the dangers of environmental collapse and planetary food shortage. An analysis of *Interstellar* through the lens of an ecological jeremiad provides space to interrogate the function of the frontier myth, and the

complicated relationship of using futuristic settings to critique modern America. As most jeremiads imply a bountiful past and a flourishing future, I am interested in the ways in which *Interstellar* complicates this notion through allusions to America's last Dust Bowl while also celebrating the history of the Apollo space missions. Analyzing *Interstellar* through the form of the jeremiad provides space to scrutinize the use of the frontier myth alongside promises of a more environmentally conscious future through space colonization.

### **Jeremiad and the Final Frontier**

Scholars have written extensively about the jeremiad in popular discourse. The jeremiad as a rhetorical device has developed extensively from Puritan roots to an often-times secular message about redemption and the "American Dream". The jeremiad has been a tool of the conservative right, the Civil Rights movement, and the environmental movement. While the jeremiad has been utilized by a variety of social movements, like other genres, it does not have an essential political/ethical character. According to Johannesen, the Puritan jeremiad evolved in early colonial America with "a key assumption ... that American Puritans, as God's chosen people, had a unique mission and destiny" and eventually included all American citizens as the chosen people "in the errand or mission to fulfill God's plan" (158). By the 18th century, the jeremiad utilized a four-part pattern which is typically discussed in jeremiad research in rhetorical studies,

- (1) The people had sinned through failure in faith and action to keep their covenant with God.
  - (2) In vivid imagery the people saw how the warnings of the prophet presently were coming true through the evils that God was inflicting on his chosen people as punishment.
  - (3) The people were exhorted to repair the broken covenant by repenting their errors and by returning to the true principles of the church.
  - (4) Predictions were presented that God would fulfill his promise through cessation of the punishments and through restoration of progress for his chosen people under divine protection.
- (Johannesen 158)

As Carpenter puts it, “a sense of urgency and impending doom is suggested at the very outset” (pp. 104-105), however, Johannesen is clear that the overall message of the jeremiad is intended to be optimistic, “with affirmation or redemption, promise, and progress... their aim was correction more than simply destruction” (159). Further, “Each of the Jeremiads suggested a means by which the audience could insure its continued well-being and ultimate salvation. Because chosen peoples sensed an impending doom, they also anticipated the alternative courses of action recommended by each discourse” (Carpenter 110). Again, a contradiction is ever-present in the jeremiad, as “the Puritan jeremiad frequently became a substitute for action” (159). An audience could consider simply hearing the jeremiad as substitution for an actual change in piety.

Arising in a similar time in American history was the concept of dispensational premillennialism. While Chapter Four of this project will discuss apocalyptic rhetoric at length, it is important to note the connections between the concept of the jeremiad and the rapture especially as they relate to the text of *Interstellar*. While the jeremiad emphasizes changes in behavior in the present in order to make for a better future on Earth, dispensational premillennialism focuses on the importance of the literalness of the Book of Revelations and the importance of being a true believer in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven in the afterlife. John Nelson Darby popularized the idea in the United States in the nineteenth century which “believed that at the end of the Church Age, all true believers would be taken up to heaven in a ‘secret rapture.’ Called by Christ, they would rise through the clouds, leaving behind a world soon to be plunged into chaos” (Frykholm 15). As noted in the introduction of this project, millennialism is not a widely held belief among contemporary American Christians, however, in Frykholm’s study of the popular Evangelical fictional series *Left Behind* notes, “the place of dispensational

premillennialism in American culture... must be understood as a fluid part of the broader culture not as a realm of isolated belief” (4). Monahan echoes this sentiment, writing, “It may be tempting to dismiss those who follow the series and adopt its brand of millennial prophecy as a fringe element in US religious circles. This would be a mistake that seriously underestimates the sheer numbers and influence of the followers” (816). The rise of millennialism, and especially dispensational premillennialism, correlates to the Protestant loss of control in American culture and politics, again turning to Frykholm, “the doctrine of the rapture became a way for these Christians to reject a disorienting social terrain. The Antichrist, the suffering of the tribulation, and the battle at Armageddon were all the just desserts of a corrupt modern world and the logical end of modernity’s godless ways” (19). Monahan, writing of contemporary portrayals of rapture fiction, such as *Left Behind* writes that it “responds to and reproduces the crises and instabilities of modernity. It enacts a politics of consumerist and technological engagement alongside one of social disengagement” (814-815).

The *Left Behind* series is no fringe movement. The twelve-part book series, as well as the films, comics, and video games have sold spectacularly, rivaling franchises by legal novelist Jon Grisham and Harry Potter creator J.K. Rowling. While Woods et al. make note that a majority of those who identify as Christian do not share the views of the apocalypse/rapture as expressed by the series, they also find that “the appeal of reading *Left Behind* books as a way to closely identify with the Christian faith is evident in the data” (74). Further, Woods et al. found that “regardless of their denominational affiliation, believed *Left Behind* to be a highly accurate portrayal of the biblical end times” (73). However, resistance and rejection of the series can be found from Catholics to Wesleyans; the 2001 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church made an official statement regarding the books as not aligned with the church and church leaders

were urged to speak to their congregations in order to quell confusion (Dart). The book series, as with all pieces of American culture, is inundated with ideology. Serazio and Hardy note, “*Left Behind* remains fiction, but the emotional and existential intensity of its prophetic message could encourage readers to be more receptive to the politics exercised within” (5). These politics, Serazio and Hardy find, “correlates with an increase in unilateral, hawkish, and conservative tendencies” (23). My discussion of the *Left Behind* series is to bring light to the intersection of the rapture and the jeremiad as it relates to contemporary American religious culture. While almost all writing on the series emphasizes that most Christian identifying Americans do not believe in millennialism, the intense popularity of the series as well as the quantitative and qualitative research regarding motivations for reading the books, it is clear that the concepts of the rapture are at least relatively accepted.

Since its inception, the jeremiad has become associated less with religion but instead the American Dream (Mitchell & Phipps). Ritter argues,

The Puritan’s carefully proscribed religion has been replaced by the ambiguities of a civil religion—the American Dream. Its sacred texts are no longer the words of Jeremiah and Isaiah, but those of Jefferson, Lincoln, and even Harry Truman. In short, the scriptures have been replaced by a rendering of the national past. (158).

The American Dream functions in America as a myth similar to that of the frontier, and ever evolving and manipulating conception of success. The American Dream promises success to any that choose to work hard and persevere through any and all hardships. The frontier and the understanding of America as a part of a large, divine “last best hope” as Ritter puts it, is folded into the mythos of the American Dream. Again, turning to Johannessen, the secular jeremiad features an optimistic tone which “fosters a sense of community and national unity. Lamentation of present ills is balanced with depiction of America’s glorious past and potentially bright future” (161). Ritter says simply, “the most significant function of the jeremiad is that it helps to define

(and redefine) the meaning of the American past” (164). This thematic can be seen in a swath of American popular culture and political rhetoric.

The conservative construction of American exceptionalism is “largely jeremiadic in nature” (Edwards 43). Contemporary examples of conservative use of the jeremiad abound. For instance, Bostdorff argues of Bush’s post-9/11 rhetoric, “the president’s discourse had much in common with the Puritan rhetoric of covenant renewal through which reform ministers of the late 1600s attempted to bring second- and third-generation Puritans into the church and to revitalize the commitments of first-generation members” (293). Sayer & Mills write, “a right-wing jeremiad has been created that attempted to explain the dangers we faced and, simultaneously, exhorted us to “get right” with God and our basic beliefs so that we might be preserved” (64). Another example is Marco Rubio’s use of the jeremiad alongside traditional eulogy rhetoric at the funeral for baseball player José Fernández “imploing the audience to return to the optimistic vision of Reaganism” (30). Even the four-word slogan of the current President of the United States, “Make America Great Again”, could be argued to be jeremiadic.

On the other end of the political spectrum is the use of the jeremiad in Civil Rights discourse. Terrill argues, “The voice of prophecy has dominated African American protest for centuries” (26). This voice primarily presents through the jeremiad and the apocalyptic. Terrill provides several examples. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech has “elements [that] make clear the jeremiad’s utility to rhetors who desire to be included in the dominant culture” (Terrill 27). Conversely, rhetors such as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois focus less on the white majority and more on the black minority, “because the emphasis is upon the need for African Americans to concentrate on changing their own values and behaviors to align them with a history and culture that is disentangled from white hegemony” (Terrill 27). To

simplify, the jeremiad functions two-fold: for Civil Rights rhetors wishing to gain access to the majority the jeremiad functions as an appeal to the potential greatness of America. On the opposite end, the jeremiad functions as an argument that African Americans must return to their own culture and values (and for Garvey, country) in order to remove themselves from an oppressive culture. Similar to arguments provided by Terrill, Wilson presents the oratory of Frederick Douglas as the jeremiad of “African Americans are given unique social function; they act as the nation’s moral conscience and the mechanism for its political and social redemption” (245). The mobilization of the jeremiad in various arguments establishes the form as a useful tool for social activists, regardless of partisan politics, reinforcing popular conceptions of the United States as a great nation, both in the past and in the future.

The ecological jeremiad is not at all a new concept, though it is used as a term earliest by Wolfe. Ellis notes that the rhetoric of many activist groups refers to both “impending catastrophe and future redemption” discourse (171). The depiction of splendor and the allure of an optimistic future makes the jeremiad an attractive rhetorical device for environmental activists almost since the inception of such activists. Salvador writes, “In separate comprehensive reviews of American speakers and writers, both apocalyptic discourse and jeremiad narratives have been identified as central to the history of environmental advocacy” (47). Some of the earliest nature writing, especially with any political leaning, features the jeremiad. Take for instance Slovic’s detailed discussion of the use of the jeremiad in political nature writing from 1928 onward, considering writers such as Beston, Leopold, and Carson. Often seen as the beginning of the contemporary environmentalist movement, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* is often written about as an exemplar of the jeremiad tradition. The pinnacle literature in environmentalism discusses a bountiful past and an equally flourishing future, but only if the reader can help to enact the proper righteous

change. Typical writing about the jeremiad in terms of its environmental usage focus on sermons or non-fictional political writings or speeches.

Of course, contemporary examples of the jeremiad are written about in film criticism. Owen, for example, posits “the secular American jeremiad emerges prominently in Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*... to the post-Vietnam crisis of national identity” (250). Again, functioning similarly to an argument made throughout this essay and rhetorical studies that media often reflects the anxieties of the times it is produced, war films such as *Saving Private Ryan* could act as “a reclamation process in which noble sacrifice is once again articulated earnestly” at a time when America was still reeling from the tragedy of Vietnam (pp. 250-251). In this iteration, the jeremiad continues to function as a “mirror image of possibilities for restored democratic ethos” (Owen 260). Further, the reproduction of what is referred to as the “Platoon Movie” works to reinforce American mythos regarding both the military and the frontier. Slotkin presents the Platoon Movie as an expansion on the frontier myth, especially as this myth “defines itself by destroying or subjugating non-White enemies” (para 11). Owen provides an excellent example of how film can be evaluated for its jeremiad possibilities. First, Owen articulates that cinema offers a way “to work through issues that may be too volatile or ineffectual for official formal discourse” (250). In Owen’s research, this is the discomfort of Vietnam and the restoration of the military, while in the example of this chapter it is the failure of the government to prevent global ecological collapse. Next, Owen writes, “to read *Ryan* as jeremiad, I look for resonances of conventional rhetorical forms in cinematic translation...As cinematic jeremiad *Ryan* offers the audience a mirror image of possibilities for restored democratic ethos” (260). This chapter will attend to the ways that *Interstellar* attempts to restore democratic ethos in a way that is unique to the rhetorical devices of cinema.



In terms of the ecological jeremiad in contemporary popular culture, perhaps the most notable example is children's book turned major motion picture Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax*. Though intended for an obviously different audience, *The Lorax* follows the jeremiad presentation similarly to *Saving Private Ryan*. *The Lorax* differs also in its deviation from a secular tone, as Wolfe argues its view is more reverent. The main narration of the story comes from a character referred to as the Once-ler, who "begins by describing an idyllic, Eden-like past" which is quickly destroyed by capitalistic greed and the story ends with a bright optimism that if the child of the story plants trees the land may return to its former glory. Wolfe uses this narration to formulate the term "ecological jeremiad" which follows the same basic premise but instead of a chosen people there is a "chosen land—a pristine wilderness in ecological balance" (11). Additionally, "the environmental principles have not been followed—the ecological covenant has been broken. Ultimately the covenant must be restored by adhering to the environmental principles of the past" (Wolfe 11). The primary difference between the ecological and the traditional jeremiad is the use of environmental terms and focus. Further, Wolfe writes, "As a jeremiad, *The Lorax*, makes use of a sacred theme to develop its message, as opposed to the scientific form used more regularly in early environmentalism as in *Silent Spring*" (12).

Depictions of the jeremiad in contemporary green writing is not always anti-capitalistic, however. Singer writes of Thomas Friedman's *Code Green*, which is "a distinctly neoliberal form of ecological jeremiad that re-envision[s] American progress in terms of a sustainable free market frontier" while "urging the creation of greener paths to peace, national defense, and prosperity" through the continuation of the myth of the American Dream (136, 142). Friedman's rhetoric represents the fusion of two different strains of the jeremiadic, the conservative political right and the environmental in order to form his neoliberal pro-militaristic thesis. To conclude on

the jeremiad, “As a rhetorical genre, the jeremiad has left its mark on environmental discourse, especially in the use of evocative strategies to persuade people to act in certain ways by means of apocalyptic predictions designed to mobilize emotions” (Rosteck & Frenz 3). Friedman’s utilization of the jeremiad form further exemplifies its moral neutrality, it exists only as a genre and not as a moral ethic.

Important to *Nolan’s* interpretation and implementation of the ecological jeremiad is its connections to the frontier myth. As discussed above, the jeremiad is rooted in conceptions of American exceptionalism and the myth of the American Dream. Similarly, as Stuckey argues, “Whatever else one can say about the nature and development of American national identity, the idea of expansion is central to it” (229). The idea of American expansion has been present since the beginnings of colonization on the continent of North America, and “the ever-enduring frontier myth is an imaginative record of America’s continuous outward expansion. It charts our enthusiasm for spreading out to subjugate the earth and its native inhabitants” (Rushing “Frontierism” 243). Rushing writes elsewhere, “From its birth to maturity, America has drawn upon the frontier for its mythic identity. Whether fixed upon Columbus sailing the ocean blue or Buffalo Bill conquering the Wild, Wild West, the American imagination remains fascinated by new and unknown *places*” (“Mythic” 265). While Rushing places the emphasis on place, it is clear that the American identity of frontierism is focused on the act of conquering nature and the human and nonhuman animals that occupy that place. As Dorsey elaborates, “the most characteristic expression of American culture, this myth tells the origin of how brave individuals contend with an unknown and hostile frontier, coming together as a community to forge a social covenant reflecting its cherished ideals” (4). The evolution of the frontier myth is pertinent for further establishing the connection between the myth and the ecological jeremiad.

Originally, the frontier myth was situated in both the origin story of the “founding” of America by white colonialists and continued to evolve through the times of manifest destiny. As Americans continue to expand westward, the idea of powerful frontiersmen became attached to American identity. As Kelly and Neville-Shepard note, “the frontier myth is an American origin story set in the dramatic struggle between pioneer heroes, untamed lands, and hostile enemies that helped transform the United States into a transcontinental empire” (4). Additionally, “American popular culture is saturated with icons such as cowboys, pioneers, and other masculine heroes who, according to mythology, embody the rugged attributes that explain America’s success” (Kelly & Neville-Shepard 4). Evil in the form of both a hostile environment and a hostile people is essential to the success of the frontier myth in American culture, especially as it relates to white masculinity. As Kelly and Neville-Shepard argue it “underwrites white hegemonic masculinity by assigning white men dominant roles as protectors, adventurers, and hunters” which also encourages a return to the nuclear family (4). The essentialism of white masculinity is only further entrenched by the myth’s perpetual use of Indigenous enemies in popular culture depictions.

The frontier myth continues to hold an important place in American identity in part because of its continual evolution. Rushing writes,

A frontier is a place that at first seems infinite and unknown, but eventually becomes confining and familiar. Like desire, it vanishes in its fulfillment. Thus, America has constantly sought new frontiers as the old are tamed, and as long as it has found them, has preserved the backdrop of its identity even as the drama has evolved. The frontier narrative, as we now know, has not remained static, but has changed with its scenes. (“Mythic” 266)

Butterworth and Shuck echo this sentiment, “In other words, even as U.S. national identity consistently features the frontier myth, the specific dynamics that actualize the myth are subject to continuous contestation and revision” (Butterworth 95). Stuckey presents several key features

of the frontier myth: “erasure, civilization, community, and democracy” (231). Finally, and perhaps most importantly for considering the frontier myth for this project, Rushing argues that one form of this evolution was from the American cowboy to astronaut (“Mythic”). Now that Americans have exhausted all possible Earthly exploration, it must turn to the stars to quench its thirst.

The frontier myth, as I just outlined, is concerned with new “wild” places, at least to a white colonial perspective. In part the frontier myth functions powerfully within American culture because of its return to a “natural” environment and a rugged, masculine way of controlling the world. Little work has been done thus far to connect the concept of the frontier myth with the ecological jeremiad. Singer, writing of the ecological jeremiad present in *Code Green* argues that Friedman’s rhetoric is “a distinctly neoliberal form of ecological jeremiad that re-envision American progress in terms of the sustainable free market frontier” (136) which is “symptomatic of the ideological evolution of neoliberalism in the myth of American success” (147). The concept of neoliberalism has at its heart both the concept of the jeremiad and the frontier for its emphasis on the individual while also operating through continued flexibility and manipulation which endures over time. While Singer is clearly using the frontier as a euphemism for the free market of American capitalism, the connections between the ecological jeremiad and American exceptionalism in the form of the untamed is partially introduced. If the form of the jeremiad is concerned with, in some regards, the rejection of modernity, a return to the frontier can be seen as the most prominent American example of the genre. Both forms are also clearly interested in the divine power of the United States, through a specific covenant with God. Further scholarship drawing connections between these two prominent narratives is limited, and

this chapter will develop further arguments about how these two rhetorical forms work to reinforce American exceptionalism, especially as it related to white masculine figures.

In recent American cinema, one of the most prominent expressions of both the frontier myth and the jeremiad is science fiction. As argued throughout this project, film serves as a reflection of current cultural anxieties. Abbott says simply, “every finished film (regardless of the intentions of the filmmaker) possesses an inherent political textuality and thus inevitably transmits a political ideology” (21). Science fiction films are of course no different, as Faithful argues, “science fiction, along with other speculative fiction, communicates explicit and implicit claims about the ultimate nature of reality” (405). Lev writes, “the science fiction film, as a construction somewhat removed from everyday reality is a privileged vehicle for the presentation of ideology. Because it is less concerned than other genres with the surface structure of social reality, science fiction can pay more attention to the deep structure of what is and what ought to be” (30). Therefore, science fiction can be a vehicle of ideology and is uniquely equipped to make cultural commentary because of the nature of its genre.

Science fiction also creates space to create collective visions of the future; Ott and Aoki explain that the common dismissal of science fiction and other films which feature a “perennial obsession with the future as pure fantasy and mere escapism... fails to account for how science fiction films invite audiences to participate in collective visions of the future, how such appeals to “popular imagination”” (150). Therefore, Ott and Aoki argue for “a resistive reading of representations of the future” which “involves exposing the unspoken assumptions such images make about who and what we are in the present” (153). Tan argues, “science fiction’s ability to imagine a distinct future is often limited by the persistence of a cultural sense that perception is impossible to separate from our embodied selves” (411). Science fiction provides escapism and

an attempt to collectively imagine a future. However, while science fiction commonly takes place within an alternative future, it is still a reflection of current cultural anxieties. As Doll and Faller argues that, for example, *Blade Runner*, “concerns a search for the past (particularly an ideal past), as a means of escaping the anxieties that the present and future hold” (98).

One of the most common current cultural anxieties reflected in science fiction films from their inception are those concerning the environment. From the roots of science fiction in 1950s, ecological concerns have been a recurring theme. As Brereton argues, “science fiction appears to be the most amenable to ecological and social questions – both formally and within a historical context” (141). Dahms argues that science fiction films are, at their core, about how we interact with nature. Brereton again states the film genre “explicitly represents and problematizes notions concerning ‘nature’ and thereby addresses specific eco-fears and sensibilities, in particular environmental pollution and the potential risk of human extinction” (187).

Finally, science fiction films which integrate a focus of space have particular potential for interrogating humans’ relationships with their natural world and ecological collapse. Rushing argues of space’s rhetorical power,

“Space” as a narrative scene has metaphysical as well as physical dimensions—it’s very characteristics (or, more accurately, *lack of* characteristics) imply a more advanced consciousness in both psyche and culture than that represented in the land-based scene. Unlike land, for instance, space itself is featureless. It cannot be *sensed* or *acted upon*, for it is literally a void. (“Mythic” 283)

Human exploration of space provided an opportunity, for the first time in human history, to see the planet Earth as a singular place. Brereton explains,

A key metaphorical breakthrough that solidified a deep holistic approach to planet Earth occurred with the scientific actualisation of space travel and the ability to (re)present the whole planet for the first time using the perceptual tools of photography. (140).

This breakthrough allowed for human nature to be “scientifically visually codified and recognized as part of a planetary eco-system” (152). With a viewing of the Earth as a singular object within a larger solar system, audiences are able to conceptualize the interconnected nature of our planet. Science fiction films which feature a lingering shot of the planet earth from space provides audiences with a moment of reflection on the crisis of our planet as a global one, rather than a localized one.

### **Christopher Nolan’s Deep Blockbusters**

Christopher Nolan has been the focus of a vast array of scholarship spanning several academic disciplines. Nolan has been referred to as a blockbuster auteur: “a director who can stamp his singular vision on to every frame of a gargantuan team effort in the manner of Spielberg, Cameron, and Kubrick” (Kermode par. 11). Hill-Parks conducted a study of critics’ reviews of Nolan’s film which overwhelmingly suggested Nolan was a Blockbuster auteur. While a majority of Blockbuster films are brushed off by “serious” film critics as simply big budget money makers, Nolan is noted time and again as a unique specimen. Nolan routinely utilizes an outlandish budget to both make an outlandish profit but also to tell stories with a deeper and more complicated narrative. While other Blockbusters are typically reviewed without much mention of the director, Nolan is always featured seriously in review or discussion of his films. As noted in the introduction of this project, auteur studies allows for an investigation into the ways that a director has influence in both the general message of a film but also its production. Hill-Parks argues,

Critical reviews establish Nolan as the center of meaning within his texts and uses Nolan’s auteur persona to help create meaning around the similarities and differences within his films. Within reviews, generally Nolan’s independent status is stressed, through choices within the films and his outsider status, as well as his creativity and intellectual nature. These features and qualities are used to differentiate Nolan from other

contemporary Hollywood directors, increasing the validity and dissemination of a distinct auteur persona. (Hill-Parks 27)

As noted, Nolan's auteur persona creates an audience expectation for his films that more closely associates the director with the film in contrast to other major Hollywood projects. Joy echoes these sentiments, arguing that Nolan occupies a space in audience's perceptions between Hollywood and no-Hollywood, giving him "a reputation as a director able to work within the apparent confines of Hollywood while at the same time exercising sufficient creative control to retain a measure of independence and convey his own personal vision" (1-2). Nolan is perhaps one of the best known big-budget Hollywood auteurs who maintains a status as creating deeper cinema than his counterparts.

Like an auteur, Nolan has several preoccupations that dominate his oeuvre. In this section, I will review Nolan's attention to the concepts of memory, time, masculinity, and, perhaps most obsessively, deceit. Nolan is known, of course, for providing thought-provoking films, as Novak argues this attribute may be unique to other contemporary blockbusters, "with their convoluted plots, their false leads, and their scrambled chronologies, Nolan's movies not only invite but frequently require close attention" (29). This required attention calls upon audiences to "replay events, in mind if not in fact, and to reconsider—in a sense rewatch—what she has seen" (Novak 29). However, Faithful argues, "After providing us a clever plot twist or three and some dazzling special effects, Nolan produces an end result that serves primarily to entertain, saving us from the ordinary by virtue of his fictions" (414). Nolan is known as an auteur obsessed with the concept of control, which is reflected both in his films and his personal life. Joy writes, "his reluctance to embrace his own personal narrative is a choice that in an unexpected way actually emphasizes control, or rather a desire for control, as one of the central themes of his work" (3). The desire for control is evident in several of Nolan's films, and



exemplified in *Interstellar*, “his fascination with rules and control on perhaps the grandest scale by focusing on the laws of physics” (4).

One of the many ways Christopher Nolan attends to control in these psychological narratives is through the distortion of time and memory. Brislin writes of these manipulations, “a review of a selection of his films offers the opportunity to challenge our ethical theories against the “what if,” giving them new perspectives on application to the “what is”” (199). Brislin writes that these distortions also “shape character and plot to test those moral premises at the center of the film” (208). Nolan’s film *Inception* acts as an exemplar of the desire for power, which is demonstrated through the characters competition for control the technology which then controls the narrative (Tan). All of these idiosyncrasies resonate powerfully with environmental messages so that Nolan is well positioned to make a film which centers the climate crisis.

While Nolan clearly has an interest in control, time, and memory which is demonstrated in all of his films, the most overwhelming interest is deception. Entire epigraphs are dedicated to Nolan’s curiosity with deception in his films’ diegeses (McGowan). At the root of all cinema is untruth and a desire to trick the audience, as McGowan writes, “film is famous for untruth, and this untruth is in dissociable from its appeal” (7). This untruth is only furthered by Nolan’s use of special effects, which “add to the cinema’s appeal by multiplying its deception” (McGowan 8). Therefore, “In Nolan’s vision, illusion is both the object and means for redemption; that is, it is both the thing being redeemed and the thing by which redemption is possible” (Faithful 407). Essentially all of Nolan’s work features deception either as the primary plot focus or at least a portion of the twist of the film. This lie often works to deceive both the characters and the audience so that the twist of the film, as noted above, requires the audience to literally, or at least imagine, rewatching the films sequences to uncover the truth. As McGowan argues, “the

experience of Nolan's films reveals the importance for ethics of understanding the ontological priority of the lie" (3). In summation, Christopher Nolan's oeuvre is saturated with the typical characteristics of blockbuster Hollywood while simultaneously showcasing the auteur's more particular interests and eccentricities. Nolan's preoccupation with memory and American greatness, as demonstrated through narratives that continue to appeal to American concepts of violence and virtue (*The Dark Knight*, etc.) makes his use of the jeremiad and the frontier myth a natural combination in the film *Interstellar*.

### **The Final Frontier and Ecological Jeremiad in *Interstellar***

As dust slowly falls in front of a bookshelf adorned with a space shuttle model, the word *Interstellar* fades in and quickly fades to black. An old woman's voice is heard before her face is seen as she states, in a rather documentary-like set up, "well my dad was a farmer, um, like everybody else back then. Of course, he didn't start that way." The camera pans over and immense field of luscious green corn stalks, then changes quickly to show the outside of some sort of aircraft in flight, then switches again to the inside of the ship as Matthew McConaughey's character, Cooper, argues with a computer system and eventually begins to crash. Finally, the camera rests on Cooper again, this time awakening from an unsettling dream to the presence of his daughter. The documentary voice over begins again to introduce the environmental calamity that guides the film, "the wheat had died. The blight came and we had to burn it. But we still had corn. We had acres of corn. But mostly we had dust." The camera shows the same luscious field now swirling with dust as another woman begins to describe the assumed Dust Bowl of the future.

As the family begins to gather for breakfast, they discuss the importance of science and rationality. Cooper is depicted as a soft spoken father, farmer, and scientist. Cooper and his two

children, a 10-year-old daughter named Murphy and a 15-year-old son named Tom, make their way to the car, their grandfather informs Cooper that the family across the way is burning their crop. Cooper asks, “Blight?” and Donald replies, “They say it’s the last crop of okra. Ever.” Cooper replies “they should’ve planted corn like the rest of us,” leaving audiences to interpret the other farmers as irresponsible for planting any other source of food. Thus sets up the tone for *Interstellar*, a film about personal responsibility in the age of global ecological collapse. The rest of the film follows Cooper as he and his family negotiate the environmental crisis through an escape plan from Earth. Cooper eventually joins a space crew to travel intergalactically to far away planets in search of the next “home” of humans. Through a series of missteps, Cooper is kept away from his family for decades, instead of only several years. However, at the climax of the film, Cooper finds himself inside of a black hole, floating freely in the Tesseract and able to send messages to his young daughter through her bookshelf and wristwatch which are shown at the beginning of the film. Finally, Cooper and his daughter are reunited on a space station replicating Earth on its way to inhabit another planet. Cooper leaves Murph with her children as he embarks to reunite with another scientist on their future planet.

*Interstellar* is Christopher Nolan’s ninth film, and it features many of his defining characteristics as an auteur. For instance, Nolan’s obsession with time is demonstrated through Cooper’s ability to intercept the past by sending messages to himself and his daughter through the manipulation of gravity (e.g., the movement of books off of Murph’s shelf or the dust which falls through the window). Nolan replays Murph’s experience of these moments from various vantage points as Cooper watches hopelessly from the other side of time inside the Tesseract. The concept of time is crucial to successfully combating climate change, and Nolan’s use of time manipulations and a constant question of past, present, and future gives space for audiences to

reflect on this importance. Another idiosyncrasy of the auteur, the concept of deceit, is at the core of this film. Professor Brand, the man in charge of NASA's return to space, exposes himself to have lied to the entire space crew, as well as most likely all of NASA about the probability of getting all humans off of planet Earth. Each of these important elements will be discussed in detail in my analysis.

### *The Past and Future of the Frontier*

When Cooper arrives at his children's school early in the film, he attends a meeting with the principal and one of their teachers. The meeting begins by discussing Tom's "scores", the principal notes, "He's going to make an excellent farmer" to which Cooper replies, "Yeah, he's got a knack for it. What about college?" To which both the principal and teacher look uncomfortable and shift in their seats as they begin to explain that *the* university only takes a limited number of students. As the principal and Cooper argue about the necessity of college, the principal says, "Well right now we don't need more engineers. We didn't run out of television screens and planes. We ran out of food. The World needs farmers. Good farmers, like you. And Tom... We're a caretaker generation, Coop." Andersen and Nielsen, argue, "This notion of being caretakers is repeated a number of times in the film, and it suggests an explicit management (or eco-totalitarian) ideology on part of the regime, echoed by the two teachers" (629). Cooper's desire for his son to go to college aligns with contemporary audience's value of education and technological advancements. The jeremiad structure relies on a positive notion of the past, a negative current situation, and a positive future. This structuring of the past, which in the future setting of the film means *now* for the audience, is continued in the next exchange in the principal's office.

As the teacher begins to discuss Murph as a bright student, she notes that the current problem is that Murph brought in one of Cooper's old textbooks regarding the Lunar Landing to show other students. The teacher explains, "it's an old federal textbook. We've replaced them with the corrected versions...explaining how the Apollo missions were faked to bankrupt the Soviet Union." A shocked Cooper questions, "you don't believe we went to the moon?"

representing contemporary audiences' responses to conspiracy theories that continue to circulate in modern American society and aligning the teacher with these fringe groups. The teacher continues, "I believe it was a brilliant piece of propaganda. That the Soviets bankrupted themselves pouring resources into rockets and other useless machines." This conversation works to build a future in which technology and space travel are underappreciated and even portrayed as impossible. The concept of the future as depicted by Christopher Nolan serves as the perfect now of the jeremiad and its failure in faith and action, in this case towards science. The present day of the film presents the world as no longer believing in the value of science and space exploration, and this failure can also be understood as linked to the failure of all crops. The imagery of the crops dying as well as the dust destroying in the opening sequence work to establish the vivid imagery described by Johannesen as the second step of the jeremiad sequence.

Cooper's disdain for the concept of his generation as caretakers is exemplified throughout the film in several conversations. Shortly after the parent-teacher conference, Cooper says to Donald, "It's like we've forgotten who we are Donald. Explorers, pioneers. Not caretakers", to which Donald replies, "When I was a kid, it felt like they made something new every day. Some gadget or idea. Like every day was Christmas. But six billion people. Just try and imagine that. And every last one of them trying to have it all". Each man works to illustrate the struggles of the present day of the film, consistently speaking about the past as better off in part because of its

continuous technological improvement and space exploration. Cooper again reiterates the importance of the frontier in the American imagination when he states, “You know we used to look up to the sky and wonder about our place in the stars. Now we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt.” Part of the suffering of the present day is the discontinued exploration of the final frontier. As noted previously, the frontier myth continues as one of the most important aspects of American national identity. I argue that Nolan’s positioning of Cooper as not only the main character, but the one most concerned with “traditional” Western values such as family and America’s legacy, as well as the film’s overall resolution to explore space for the purpose of colonization reinforce the frontier myth as a crucial part of American culture.

After Nolan establishes the present crop failures as the evils inflicted on a people who have “forgotten who they are” and subsequently rejected their role as frontiersmen, he introduces the possibility of redemption through space travel. Cooper and his daughter arrive at hidden NASA headquarters through what they believe to be a magnetic gravitational anomaly (which is later explained to be Cooper himself communicating through the black hole). Upon arrival, Cooper is reunited with his previous mentor and head of NASA Professor Brand and introduced to the professor’s daughter, Dr. Brand. Professor Brand explains NASA has been funded in secret because “public opinion wouldn’t allow spending on space exploration. Not when you’re struggling to put food on the table.” When Cooper argues, “We’ll find a way professor. We always have” he reiterates the capabilities of the American mythos of the frontier and the bootstrap mentality that existed in the past and will help them regain a more illustrious future. Cooper is then told he is the only person capable of piloting the spaceship, establishing him as the frontiersman capable of redeeming Earth. Casting McConaughey in the role of Cooper works to emphasize the concept of the frontiersman as well due to his public perception as a cowboy.

McConaughey has been referred to as a cowboy in articles, with much emphasis placed on his home state of Texas; McConaughey has played cowboys in films and is often photographed for wearing a cowboy hat, both by the paparazzi and for published articles (Lee; Mandell; Martin; Myers; Snapp). Rushing makes a note that the concept of the American cowboy on the range has evolved over time in the frontier myth to be that of an astronaut in space.

Instead of situating Earth as a chosen land which must be treated properly in order to be restored to its former glory, as the ecological jeremiad proposed by Wolfe argues, Nolan situates the people as chosen and the environmental collapse as the crisis at hand for failing to continue space exploration and other technological advancements. This failing can only be reversed, and the human species allowed to continue through the reestablishment of NASA and the colonization of space. Again, unlike the ecological jeremiad of Wolfe and others, Nolan never positions the planet as possible for continuing onward as a home for its *human* inhabitants. This is made abundantly clear throughout the film. Professor Brand in his initial meeting with Cooper argues, “we’re not meant to save the world. We’re meant to leave it.” Cooper, in justifying his decision to pilot the spacecraft says to Donald, “This world’s a treasure, Donald. And it’s been telling us to leave for a while now. Mankind was born on Earth, but it was never meant to die here”; this specific line also serves as one of the taglines for the film. The group of astronauts aboard *Endurance* even discuss the perfectness of Earth alongside humankind’s inevitable exit:

Cooper [looking out the window to a view of the planet Earth]: So alone.

Dr. Brand: We have each other. Dr. Mann had it worse.

Cooper: No, I mean them. It’s a perfect planet. We are not gonna find another one like her.

Dr. Brand: No, it’s not like looking for a new condo. The human race is going to be adrift. Desperate for a rock to cling to while it catches its breath. We need to find that rock. Our three prospects are at the edge of what might sustain human life.

Through this exchange, and the other quotations above, Nolan works to establish the Earth as both a perfect home for sustaining human life while simultaneously portraying it as a place not worth saving. Brislin writes, of the tagline cited above, “Could this be true? Should we be looking for other worlds out in the universe in an effort to perpetuate the human species? Is it morally permissible to colonize another planet? Is it morally obligatory?” (207). Dahms situates this alternative future well within the concept of the jeremiad, writing that *Interstellar* as well as other films,

suggest, nay, insist, that humankind has the capacity to move beyond the present state of affairs, the present mode of collective human coexistence, and coexistence with nature (that is, Earth), and that it must be focused on this capacity, if it is to not sink back to earlier states of affairs, which in all likelihood will be characterized by more suffering, more violence, less justice, and less reason. (149)

This ecological collapse as unavoidable and irreversible sets up the only logical solution as escape through continuation of the frontier mindset and the colonization of another galaxy.

While the ecological jeremiad is, at the end of the film, realized through the expansion of America onto another planet, the film also advances understandings of millennialism or The Rapture. As mentioned above, Cooper makes note that “we’re not meant to save the world. We’re meant to leave it,” which enacts the form of dispensational premillennialism. The deception aspect of *Interstellar*, again a feature common in the work of Nolan, involves Professor Brand misleading Cooper about whether or not the embryos aboard the ship *Endurance* destined for implantation in order to continue the (American) human race are Plan A or Plan B. The embryos and the crew represent the chosen few similar to those of the *Left Behind* series. The sinless embryos and the devoted crew are rewarded by escaping Earth before it plunges into a horrible state of affairs. When Cooper, his daughter, and the remaining crew members realize that the embryos are indeed the professor’s Plan A, all involved are extremely



distraught. Murph says tearfully into the camera, addressing Dr. Brand, the professor's daughter, "You left us here. To suffocate. To starve. Did my dad know? Dad? I just want to know... if you left me here to die?" Murph's line seems to work to also address the present film's audience by imploring their level of responsibility in advancing global ecological collapse, invoking notions of neoliberalism. Nolan's choice to vilify the senior Professor Brand in his choice to plan first to simply leave all of Earth's inhabitants to die seems to critique notions of evangelicalism. I argue that Nolan's depiction of the solution to climate crisis as colonization demobilizes audiences to feel almost entirely powerless to the catastrophe that lies ahead, and his rejection of leaving all human beings to simply perish works to balance the plan of all people leaving Earth as a more reasonable alternative.

#### *The Unavoidable Death of Planet Earth*

The assumption that the Earth is not worth saving is perpetuated as a nonissue in the reviews of the film. For instance, Furby uses the phrase "The Earth has failed to sustain human life" to describe the narrative of the film (253). Nolan's climate change epic distances human responsibility from environmental collapse in a number of ways that are important to the audience's conception of their place in preventing the apocalypse. *Interstellar* utilizes an allusion to the American catastrophe of the Dust Bowl as its primary understanding of the ecological collapse of the future. Notably, the Dust Bowl that ravaged the American Midwest during the 1930s was caused primarily by "farmers...ignoring the ecological realities and, in the process, causing ruin" (Ivakhiv 12-13). Inaccurate understandings of farming techniques were directly correlated to concepts of Manifest Destiny which led people into the Midwest region with little experience or knowledge of the land they were attempting to cultivate ("Dust Bowl"). Finally,

extreme drought beginning in 1931 exposed the over-plowed land and caused massive dust storms throughout the region.

While Nolan's future apocalypse may look similar to the Dust Bowl of 1930s, his explanation for the disaster is vaguer and more pointed towards widespread unstoppable disease. Characters in the film routinely mention a blight which ravages wheat, then okra, until finally it is assumed it will ravage corn as well. Although Nolan takes great care to emphasize and explain the realistic possibilities of physics and time travel, little is done to explain the ecological collapse of the entire planet. Blight is described in the film "like the potatoes in Ireland and the wheat in the Dust Bowl. The corn will die. Soon." While the Potato Famine in Ireland was partially caused by a disease which ravaged potato crops, it was exacerbated by the British colonization and exploitation of Ireland. Nolan's inaccurate depiction of these historical events and the vague description of the end of the world creates an audience that can feel distanced from their responsibility in climate change. Additionally, introducing space colonization as the only possible answer for a dying planet pardons any audience from taking action in the present day to prevent these environmental catastrophes.

The unavoidable colonization of space is reinforced by referencing failed previous attempts to solve the crisis of the blight. When Cooper first reunites with Professor Brand and learns of NASA's underground operation, he remarks, "I heard they shut you down, sir. For refusing to drop bombs from the stratosphere on starving people" to which Professor Brand replies, "When they realized that killing other people was not a long-term solution, then they needed us back... in secret." This interaction has implications beyond establishing that previous measures to right this ecological imbalance were even more brutal. Andersen and Neilsen argue,

This exchange illustrates the reaction of the political regime to ecological collapse by turning to thanatopolitics. The starving masses of an already overpopulated planet (one

can only imagine large scale food riots) have seemingly pressed the question of who gets what into an extreme that, in the end, transitions to Foucaultian biopolitical regulations into a thanatopolitical decision made by the political elite. (629)

The question of starvation and food is also important to address. Jameson argues, “Systems and cycles of mass processed food presented in recent science fiction films not only address questions of hunger, pleasure or civility but also consumption as a process of ruin through which the populace unwittingly destroys itself” (43-44).

One important note about Nolan’s escape from planet Earth is the vagueness in which it discusses the human race. While the film makes clear that the entire planet has become inhospitable to human life, left unanswered is the question of whether other nations get to participate in this grand exodus, or if only American citizens populate the space station of Murph and Coopers reuniting. At no point in the film are other countries discussed in terms of space exploration. Early on in the film is the only example of other nations or peoples being mentioned: when Cooper apprehends an Indian drone for use on his farm, asserting that there are no more armies globally. In the final shot of the film, when Dr. Brand stands alone on the surface of the new planet, referred to by Murph as “our new home”, and turns teary eyed back to her base camp, a large American flag is shown waving in the breeze. American colonization and the frontier mindset are reinforced through the image of the flag in a deserted landscape. After establishing the collapse of the military, the film still works to establish American dominance through the use of the flag.

#### *The Collapse of the Military and Individuality*

During the aforementioned parent-teacher conference, Cooper challenges his son’s inability to attend university because of his compliance to pay his taxes. He stresses, “I still pay my taxes. Where’s that money go? There’s no more armies.” This line of thinking implies that

taxes are primarily for the continuation of global dominance through military force and any other action with taxes should be clearly demonstrated and made accessible to the public. When the principal replies that the money saved on the military does not go to university funding, the argument for the collapse of the military is left unjustified. I argue that Cooper's assertion about the cessation of the military is done to illuminate the collapse of the planet not only on an ecological but also on a societal level.

Before Cooper arrives at the meeting regarding his daughter's behavior his family commandeers a rouge Indian surveillance military drone which is said to be soaring aimlessly without a purpose since the collapse of the global armies. Klotz writes, "that decade-old drone offers a hint to what happened to this society; it is a relic from a global war that apparently depleted global resources such that the grand visions of scientific discovery and space exploration have been abandoned" (282). Cooper's recycling of the drone to be a part of his farm reinforces the agriculture / military and space dichotomy that continues throughout the film.

However, the military and space are not exactly seen as cooperative entities. As mentioned previously, Professor Brand explains that NASA was brought back in secret after refusing to participate in the annihilation of starving peoples with bombs. NASA is depicted as existing because of the folding of the military, not only through this but also in its utilization of other military technologies. For example, when Cooper and Murph first arrive at the base, before the audience is made aware it is NASA, Cooper yells at a menacing-looking robot "Oh you still think you're a Marine, pal? Marines don't exist anymore." This robot then becomes a critical part of the team sent into the wormhole and the essential component to Cooper's translation of data inside the blackhole. Finally, while the space station is being forged inside the NASA headquarters, an adult Murph remarks, "Every rivet they strike could have been a bullet. We've

done well here.” Therefore, the cessation of the military is depicted as both a failure on the part of global society but also a key component of the saving of the human race.

Also teetering on its axis between collapse and restoration is the tension between individuality and community. Dorsey writes of the frontier myth, “the Myth offers an account of how the constant challenge of an unknown and limitless frontier turns some individuals into martial heroes who, because of their epic struggles, come to symbolize American values such as progress and prosperity” (2). Dorsey continues, “paradoxically, these rugged individualists had to conform to some degree to the needs of the community” (4). Writing of Theodore Roosevelt and the frontier myth, Kelly and Neville-Shepard echo this sentiment, “this protective elaboration on manhood reintroduced family and religious obligations to mediate the tension between individuality and community” (6). This tension between individuality and community is exemplified in Cooper’s motivations and decision making throughout the film. Though Cooper must be, at least to some extent, a rugged individualist in order to go into space in the first place, he must also have a desire for the continuation of the human race. When the plans for interplanetary travel become complicated by relativity and time distortion, Cooper argues for a return to Earth in order to see his children again (an individualist approach) while others argue for the travel to another planet (a community approach). Eventually, a compromise is reached later in the film with Cooper going alone to the black hole in search of the data that can help “solve the problem of gravity” and Dr. Brand going alone to the next planet. Each rugged individual is guided by concepts of love while also acting on behalf of the larger community. Some scholarship regarding *Interstellar* focuses on the importance of love in the film (Brislin; Dahms). Primarily, Cooper represents traditional notions of the frontier myth as struggling to balance between individualism, a major facet of American identity, and community.

## Conclusion

Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* works to build a future in which the American people have forgotten their role in the exploration of the planets and the stars, and only through reasserting this role can they continue on as a species. Nolan's vague notion of environmental collapse and overemphasis on science invites audience to create distance between themselves and the apocalypse. Through the weaving of the ecological jeremiad and the frontier myth, Nolan makes an argument for the colonization of space as America's only hope to return to its industrious past and regain its national identity. This is problematic for several reasons, most notably that America's foundation as frontiersman is a significant reason behind the genocide committed against the Native peoples of North and South America. Additionally, by placing all hope for humanity on the escape to a second, ideal planet in a distant solar system, Nolan's film leaves audiences powerless in the fight against global ecological collapse. The vague nature of this fictional collapse, and even perhaps scientific inaccuracy, as opposed to the complicated and deeply researched physics of the film leaves audiences with little knowledge about how climate change will actually come to fruition. *Interstellar* also fails to discuss the future of the entire planet, instead depicting the future only for Americans, with continued use of the American flag and lack of discussion of other nations escaping planet Earth. By only reckoning with the future of the United States of America, *Interstellar* makes an argument that the end of the world may be every nation for themselves.

## CHAPTER FOUR. *MOTHER!*'S MOTHER NATURE AND THE WHITE FEMININE APOCALYPSE

The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.

-- *Revelations* 11:18

If *First Reformed* represents the present day, and *Interstellar* the future, *mother!* is a film absent of time. Director Darren Aronofsky's seventh feature-length film *mother!* left audiences with, to put it lightly, a deeply mixed response. At the 74<sup>th</sup> annual Venice Film Festival the film's premier was met "a mix of boos and wild applause" (Loughrey). Originally advertised before its release as a horror film, one reviewer wrote of how Aronofsky "impishly cackled about how goddamn miserable we would all be feeling about 90 minutes later. He was not wrong" (Meslow). Review after review has poured over the symbolism, the violence, and the misogyny of the film (Meslow; James; Sims; Anderson). James, writing for *BBC Culture* goes as far as to call the film a "pretentious mess...full of vapid characters and overwrought imagery". Unlike a great deal of films which are wrought with symbolism and subjected to multiple think pieces, Darren Aronofsky is pretty clear with the meaning of his work. The director as well as the star, Jennifer Lawrence, have both said directly that the story is an allegory for mother earth and anthropogenic climate change (Anderson). Aronofsky, in an interview with *Time* stated, "I wanted to tell a movie from Mother Nature's point of view and talk about her love and her gifts and the way people ultimately cause her pain" (Dockterman).

Aronofsky's film has been the focus of a deluge of scholarly and popular press articles. Some critics are quick to dismiss the film as "grandiose and self-aggrandizing. It puts Jennifer Lawrence through the mill for no purpose except nurturing a strain of masochism which has been blessedly free" (Edelstein 91). The criticism of the treatment of Jennifer Lawrence is repeated

again by Balcazar, who states plainly, “*Mother!* is two hours of watching Jennifer Lawrence suffer” (para 16). While Johnston notes that “it’s barreling sense of surprise will undoubtedly be more portent the less you know beforehand,” other reviewers credit this misleading marketing as part of the film’s downfall (30; Maio 189). Catholic publications in particular have written about the film in surprisingly positive tones. While reviewers are quick to posit that “Aronofsky takes [Biblical narratives] to laughable extremes,” they are also quick to highlight aspects of the films they find particularly poignant (Griffith 38). For instance, Griffith celebrates Aronofsky’s depiction of motherhood as destructive. LaCouter writes about the director’s complication of the source material in order to make significant arguments about the role of Christian manipulation in its reception: “the film seems a haunting (because plausible) reminder of how easily the Christian narrative can be redeployed to new and destabilizing uses” (22). Finally, “Far from your usual multiplex fodder, it’s firmly in the category of what studios call the ‘passion project’ – difficult-to-market properties that auteur filmmakers simply have to get out of their system” (32). *mother!* functions, much like the other cinema studied in this project, as an exploration of all the passions of Aronofsky made apparent in his other films: religion, psychological confusion, pain, and the environment.

Several academic studies have focused on *mother!* in a variety of ways. Hauke writes of the film through the concept of “gothic nature as both the divine Paradise and the wilderness of at the American frontier, while simultaneously drawing a connection to current understandings of earthly ecologies and human exploitations thereof” (8). Hauke continues, “the film develops into an exploration of the patriarchal logic at the core of Christian theology, American History, female suffering, and environmental crisis” (8). Some critics applaud Aronofsky for his attempts to provide a critique of patriarchy, Johnston writes, “Aronofsky seemingly urges closer attention



to the women's voices, and the emotional wisdom of maternity" (33). However, Maio writes that while the director consulted feminist philosopher Susan Griffin, "his movie doesn't seem at all informed by feminism. It seemed to revel in the patriarch's will to exploit and destroy a female life-force that wants nothing more than to love and nurture him" (191). Griffin herself argues that viewers who fail to grasp the film "don't understand what's happening—they still don't. We're on the verge of destroying Earth's capacity to support human life" (Kilkenny para 17). Griffin's insistence that audience members fail to fully conceptualize the reality of climate change returns to arguments made earlier in this project regarding climate change as a hyperobject.

Aronofsky has said, "outside of filmmaking, my work is all to do with the environment, and we're not progressing too far along that road" (Johnston 33). The director has not been shy about the meaning behind his film, making statements in multiple interviews about the meaning of the character of Mother Nature. This feature of the film has probably garnered the most criticism towards Aronofsky; as mentioned previously, many find the film to be an exercise in abusing actress Jennifer Lawrence and reinforcing gender stereotypes about women's connections to nature. Aronofsky's comments about the character work to underpin these problematic associations, depicting Mother Earth as "very much about loving and giving...she's given us life on this planet. All she does is give us life" (Thompson 16). As Balcazar writes, "I also didn't need another pop culture artifact about the innate selflessness and nurturing qualities of women as they give and give and give until everything, including their hearts, has been taken from them" (17).

In this chapter I examine the ways *mother!* employs apocalyptic form through the use of the white Mother Nature trope to once again demobilize audience's actions against climate change. Through the lens of feminist critique I am able to best attend to the ways in which

Aronofsky dangerously utilizes the Mother Nature myth and sexual violence in order to reinforce traditional patriarchal values. The ongoing repetition of white women as Mother Nature, both within this film and popular culture more broadly, necessitates a feminist critique of how women, and specifically white women, are portrayed in relation to the natural world and the unspoken Other. The apocalypse in *mother!* is implied to be a cyclical event in which the cycle of existence in this universe is predetermined, a key feature of apocalyptic rhetoric as outlined by Brummett. This chapter will begin with a discussion of apocalyptic rhetoric. Next, I will discuss Aronofsky's auteur status and previous works as they relate to the film *mother!*. Finally, I will provide an analysis of the film focusing on the concepts of Mother Nature, the apocalypse, and the cycle of environmental destruction as expressed by Aronofsky.

### **Apocalyptic Rhetoric**

Following the environmentalist movements success after the widespread circulation of *Silent Spring* and a successful initial Earth Day in 1970, apocalyptic rhetoric was eschewed for less extreme rhetorical choices by environmentalists (Killingsworth & Palmer). Instead, apocalyptic rhetoric was conjured by conservatives, oftentimes as “a sanction for ignoring environmental restraints” (p. 35). Conservatives in positions of power began to use apocalyptic rhetoric to refer to economic problems that could arise and the threat to ‘progress’ implied by environmental activists (Killingsworth & Palmer). Again, “Environmental crisis serves modern American conservative evangelists just as natural disasters served mediaeval millenarians: as a sign of the coming End, but not as a warning to avert it” (Garrad 88).

Apocalyptic rhetoric has been studied considerably. Barry Brummett's extensive work on the subject, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*, details the recurrent characteristics of the genre. First, “scholars are agreed that apocalyptic stems from a sense of unexplained and

inexplicable change or crisis, from a sense that received systems of explanation have failed, and from a resulting sense of anomie, disorientation, lawlessness, and impending chaos” (23). Apocalyptic rhetoric “articulates an overwhelming sense of problems experienced by the audience” (Brummett 26) and in turn “Apocalyptists’ fear of change is expressed by forecasting even worse disasters in the future” (27). Apocalyptic rhetoric has two key features in its relation to history: history is linear and telic, and history is determined. Brummett writes, “The assumption that God has determined history runs throughout all contemporary religious apocalyptic. This determination leads to a dogmatic insistence that history must unfold as God has planned it” (36). This determined history helps to resolve the anxiety and feeling of lost control often felt by apocalyptic believers, “To an audience that thought that it was adrift amidst chaos, apocalyptic reveals a grand plan underlying all of history, a plan that was in place all along” (Brummett 31). This can provide apocalyptic rhetoric as a feeling of reprieve from problems felt to be uncontrollable. However, there is an important note that the apocalyptic creates a known paradox for the Christians and others who chose to believe in apocalyptic: “How can the movement embrace a pessimistic doctrine of God-willed world decline while optimistically advocating political action?” (Daniels, Jensen, & Lichtenstein 249).

There is a great deal written about the framing of climate change as apocalyptic (Keller). While the field of environmental rhetorical criticism has approached millennial ecology, typically these essays tend to focus on nonfictional sources, especially Rachel Carson’s seminal *Silent Spring* and Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (Garad; Killingsworth & Palmer). Similar to the discussion above regarding how current environmental anxieties may be expressed, apocalyptic rhetoric also represents specific time-sensitive desires. According to Killingsworth and Palmer, “In the environmental movement, the apocalyptic narrative has appeared in those

moments of history when the movement is seeking to expand, to appeal to new segments of the general public, to annex new territories in a kind of rhetorical imperialism” (41). They continue, “The hyperbole with which the impending doom is presented—the image of total ruin and destruction—implies the need for an ideological shift” (Killingsworth 41). In other contemporary examples, “it has become very difficult to distinguish between a legitimate discourse of emergency, and escapist movements which monger fear and misplace hope. In the meantime, the greenhouse skeptics and their conservative allies use ‘apocalypse’ as the privileged term of denigration, while scientists try to dissociate themselves from its onus of religion and inevitability” (Keller 49).

Foust and Murphy identify two variants of the apocalyptic frame following O’Leary’s dramatistic apocalyptic frame, “a tragic apocalypse, which constitutes global warming as a matter of cosmic Fate; and a comic apocalypse, which suggest that mistaken humans have a capacity to influence (within limits) the end of the global warming narrative” (152). Clearly, audiences subjected to more tragic frames are less likely to feel any efficacy in enacting change toward the end of the world. Due to this, Foust and Murphy write, “By interrogating the apocalyptic frame, we hope to inspire the public to overcome barriers to individual and collective agency, enabling them to become advocates for and participants in, global warming mitigation” (152). Simplified, Mills-Knutsen states, “the rhetoric of evil convinces us to replace human efficacy with faith in apocalyptic divine judgement” (293). This project exists precisely because of these competing interpretations of the meaning of the apocalypse in environmental contexts. While environmentalists may hope to evoke feelings of fear and a desire for action, conservative evangelists can use nearly identical rhetoric to rebuke the need for any action.

However, it is important to emphasize that this is not reflective of all Christian identifying individuals in the United States. I have made a point of emphasizing throughout this project that it is an uncommon belief among Christian individuals in the United States to believe that climate change is inconsequential because of the apocalypse, or even to believe in the inevitability of the rapture at all. For instance, the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication found that only a small percentage of those polled believed that global warming was a sign of the end times (14%) or that God controls the climate and therefore people are not responsible for global warming (15%). Writing for *The Washington Post*, Lisa Vox argues “Confidence that God will intervene to prevent people from destroying the world is one of the strongest barriers to gaining conservative evangelical support for environmental pacts like the Paris agreement”. This is echoed by statements from Representative Tim Walberg (R-Mich), “As a Christian, I believe there is a creator in God who is much bigger than us. And I’m confident that, if there’s a real problem, he can take care of it” (Vox). These arguments are significant in particular because they connect the notion of the apocalypse as the solution to climate change instead of any human-led initiatives, or perhaps as a reason to ignore the issue entirely. While these are only a few examples, they work together to illustrate the possible connection between environmental apathy, to use the language of Peifer, Ecklund, and Fullerton, and Christian beliefs. In summary, the apocalypse remains a controversial rhetorical tactic of Christians, environmentalists, and scientists.

Most apocalyptic research in recent years has focused on the depiction of the apocalypse in modern film and television. An especially large amount of research has focused on the television series *The Walking Dead*, which is the most watched subscription television show of all time (see Harper, Attwell, & Dolphin; Murphy). Films such as the adaptation of *The Road*

(McSweeney) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Fletcher & Primack) are discussed for their environmental themes as they relate to the apocalypse. Climate change is the general cultural stressor which most critics argue is the catalyst for an increase in apocalyptic film. Branston argues,

“Apocalyptic “end of days” cinematic and games imagery has arguably habituated its audiences to imagining some of the highly refracted consequences of such developments. For some, we are said to be into climate changes which we cannot hope to affect. For others, apocalyptic imaginings have long been their friend. (807)

Gieseler simplifies, “Ultimately, one may find that apocalyptic language and images offer society the possibility of catharsis” (20). Apocalyptic film is on the continued rise in American film, most likely because of the continually increasing threat of climate change to end the human existence. As stated above, apocalyptic rhetoric is uniquely suited for expressing cultural anxieties about massive threats to human existence, and its rise in American culture can be traced alongside major events such as the Cold War. Apocalyptic rhetoric provides some relief in the form of viewing major world-wide collapse as God-ordained plan, which can complicate attempts of solving climate change.

### **The White Mother Nature**

The role of Mother Nature portrayed as a white woman is established in the opening scenes of the film and speaks to and perpetuates notions of white femininity in popular culture. For a brief moment, the audience sees a white woman engulfed in flames, she is indistinguishable from the white woman protagonist of the film (Jennifer Lawrence) and the white woman who ends the film. So similar are these women in fact, that I had to research the different actresses in order to ensure they were in fact not the same person. I make note of this casting choice because it reinstates a conception of nature as a beautiful white woman *three separate times* in the film’s cyclical narrative.

White femininity is a cultural construct which permeates mass culture. Before adequately discussing the importance and influence of white femininity, a discussion of whiteness both as a focus of study in the Communication Studies discipline and in film broadly should be noted. Nakayama and Krizek, often credited with beginning the argument for the more direct study of whiteness in the discipline in the early 1990s, argue, “White is a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain” (291). Further, “the experiences and communication patterns of whites are taken as the norm from which Others are marked. If we take a critical perspective to whiteness, however, we can begin the process of particularizing white experience” (293). Therefore, this chapter is rooted in the idea that communication scholars have a responsibility for categorizing whiteness and its influence in order to break down the assumption that whiteness is without race, that whiteness is the “default”. However, it is important to note that Nakayama and others have made several important distinctions and extensions to arguments regarding whiteness in communication scholarship. Nakayama, in his 2020 National Communication Association Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture made a note of expressing that while whiteness “has an international claim that other racial ethnic groups do not” and “a normalization and a cultural logic in everyday life,” it is no longer as invisible as he once argued. The growing rise of White supremacy in the cultural mainstream has led to an increase in the visibility of whiteness. Nakayama argues elsewhere, “Yet it is also important for scholars to pay attention to the various ways that whiteness has reconfigured itself, as its dynamic nature is part of how it maintains its strategic position (“What’s Next” 72). Therefore, to study whiteness is to study the ways that it shifts to maintain power throughout cultural shifts over time.

Important work has been done in the exposing of whiteness as strategic in order to better understand how it maintains its own supremacy. As Griffin writes, “Media, as a social institution that is largely White owned and controlled, has historically been and remains rooted in oppressive racial ideology” (“*Pushing*” 183). LeBlanc echoes this sentiment, “we cannot understand racism without understanding how whiteness functions politically, culturally, and economically” (274). Some work focuses on unveiling whiteness through analysis of white characters and their actions, such as Campbell’s work on the coopting of hip hop dancing by white women or Griffin on problematic representations in *The Help*. Griffin writes, “this is vital to challenging unmarked [white] stories about racial histories, racial in/equality, and interracial coalitions that are presented and/or perceived as objective, neutral, innocent, universal, colorblind, raceless, and/or “post racial”” (“*The Help*” 150). Other scholars focus more specifically on Black characters and the ways that their narratives or depictions help to uphold white supremacy. For instance, Griffin provides an analysis of the film *Precious* via Black Feminist Thought, arguing, “*Precious* centers the interests of the White investors and spectators required for the film to be/ come a viable (White) mainstream success” (“*Pushing*” 190). LeBlanc provides a similar critique of problematic representations of Black characters in relation to white characters through *American Horror Story: Coven*. Further scholarship has investigated the relationship between whiteness and affect (Levina; McIntosh). This is only a glimpse at the important work done within the field to work to decenter whiteness as an assumed raceless base to better understand “the various ways that whiteness has reconfigured itself, as its dynamic nature is part of how it maintains its strategic position” (Nakayama “What’s Next” 72).

This seems an apt moment to note the continued strategic whiteness within the academy at large, but especially Communication Studies. Groundbreaking work such as the article



“#CommunicationSoWhite” have brought attention to the inability of the field to uplift minority voices, especially the voices of women of color. Other work, such as that by Calvente, Calafell, and Chávez continue this important discussion about the “suffocating” whiteness of Communication Studies. Flores writes, “it also seems fair to say that it is only relatively recently that rhetorical critics have paid consistent attention to race” (4). Calafell has worked for decades in highlighting the complicated positionality she occupies as a queer Latina, Chicana feminist within the academy, discussing her place as a “monstrous femininity”; she argues, “the uncritical centering of whiteness continues, particularly as autoethnography, a methodology with the potential to talk back to histories of colonizing ethnographic gazes, has been appropriated by White scholars” (“Monstrous”; “Notes” 242). While I am a White scholar in Communication Studies, I can promote the decentering of whiteness in my work and make a conscientious effort to decenter white academic voices as well.

Therefore, this chapter works to unveil the ways that white women’s bodies are assumed as the neutral and the impacts white femininity has on environmentalism. According to Shome, “whiteness acquires meaning today through constant mediated reproductions and repetitions of diverse images and logics of whiteness” (“Diana” 19). The ways in which white women are depicted in popular press, television, and film work

as symbols of motherhood, as markers of feminine beauty (a marker denied to other women, as translators (and hence preservers) of bloodlines, as signifiers of national domesticity, as sites for the reproduction of heterosexuality, as causes in the name of which narratives of national defense and protection are launched, as symbols of national unity, and as sites through which “otherness”—racial, sexual, classed, gendered, and nationalized—is negotiated, white femininity constitutes the locus through which borders or race, gender, sexuality, and nationality are guarded and secured. (Shome “White Femininity” 323)

It is essential to recognize white femininity not as a person or an identity, but instead as an ideological construct which is constantly reproduced as well as constantly shifting. Shome

emphasizes that while the term white women is used to represent individuals, white femininity “emphasizes an ideological construction through which meanings about white women and their place in society are naturalized, stabilized, and legitimized in national narratives” (“Diana” 20). Dubrofsky and Ryalls, writing of Jennifer Lawrence’s breakout role in *The Hunger Games* argue, “Whiteness in popular media functions through its seamless taken-for-grantedness, the mundane ways in which it gains salience. Katniss’s appearance operates according to conventional standards of white feminine beauty” (400). Depictions of white femininity work to naturalize white women in particular roles while simultaneously negating or Othering the existence of nonwhite women. This is true in films such as *The Hunger Games*, “Similar to how whiteness is confirmed as an authentic and heroic racial identity, Katniss is presented as naturally and unwittingly embodying conventional normative standards of heterosexual femininity” (Dubrofsky & Ryalls 404). Katniss’s whiteness is “constructed as normative in a particular context and providing a set of unacknowledged advantages” (Dubrofsky & Ryalls 397). White femininity functions, especially in medium of film, to naturalize positive and admirable characteristics to white women while routinely Othering all nonwhite women. Therefore, paying particular attention to the use of white femininity in *mother!* can reveal assumptions made about women and nature.

Finally, White femininity and white women possess a unique place in American culture as both privileged and not. Rowe argues, “Women of color who are disenchanted with the feminist movement in the U.S. point to a powerful and often overlooked paradox of White femininity: White women are racially privileged and gender subordinated” (64). This unique positionality only furthers the argument that whiteness needs to be strategically studied, “Thus ‘inverting’ the gaze to examine how Whiteness becomes universalized within particular feminist

contexts contributes to feminist renewal through antiracist theory and praxis” (Rowe 65). Shome argues, “White femininity, because of its discursive, relational, and spatial proximity to the structures of white patriarchy, and its role in their reproduction, functions as a site through which racialized patriarchal relations are organized--through mothers, wives, daughters, sisters” (“White Femininity” 323). White femininity is another reproduction of white male patriarchy.

The link between white femininity and patriarchal gender relations is so fundamental that historical violence against women is mapped onto the white, female body. The perception and recognition of sexual assault is tied to the concept of white femininity and white patriarchy. Wriggins writes from a legal perspective, “the history of rape in this country has focused on the rape of white women by Black men. From a feminist perspective, two of the most damaging consequences of this selective blindness are the denials that Black women are raped and that all women are subject to pervasive and harmful sexual coercion of all kinds” (103). Meaning, rape was institutionalized as crime in the United States in order to ensure criminal proceedings against black men who attacked white women. Rape was and is, for white men, disdainful because it infringes on their *property*. Corrigan furthers these complications of discussions of sexual assault in her opening to the *Women’s Studies in Communication* special issue on the #MeToo Movement. Besides its problematic beginnings in high-jacking the hashtag which was started by a Black woman, Tarana Burke, Corrigan makes note of the challenges of discussing sexual assault in terms of consent, when consent as a concept is inherently tied to hierarchies and, again, property ownership (which is itself relevant to the environment). The centering of white femininity and whiteness in general in the #MeToo Movement is a prime example of the problematic assumptions regarding sexual assault and rape that permeate American culture. Rape in American culture is further complicated by the undeniable rape culture which exists as “a

complex of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (Buchwald, Fletcher & Roth xi). It is essential to distinguish that rape culture is not limited to extreme violent action but instead includes “a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching and rape itself” (Buchwald et al. xi). Meier and Medjesky note, “theorists of rape culture emphasize the normalization of rape and violence against women, and the related social impacts including but not limited to victim blaming, slut-shaming, and trivializing or denying the personal and social impact of rape” (3).

The white-woman-washing of sexuality is not limited to gendered violence, but to the realm of domesticity and motherhood as well. Hallstein, in the introduction to a special issue on mothering rhetorics, notes that the discipline has “explored motherhood as a site of cultural and political struggle and as an important place to examine political, social, environmental, and/or reproductive justice” (1). Buchanan notes that the depiction of the mother “alludes to, masks, and sustains the network of power relations that undergird gender” (5). As Foucault details in *The History of Sexuality*, motherhood characteristics, such as empathy and domesticity, are framed as inherently natural in females in order to solidify gender norms. For one such example of how these norms function in modern Western society, Mack articulates the framing of motherhood and the birthing process in at-home birthing videos on YouTube, “To contend that all women have the innate “inner knowledge and wisdom” to perform “natural” home births or that all women have the ability to have an empowering, unmedicated vaginal birth denotes that there is something immovable, impenetrable, and innate about womanness and mothering” (56).

Characteristics such as these became associated with motherhood and eventually fuel the god-like veneration for mothers in society, according to Judith Warner “with quasi-ecclesiastical notions of Good and Evil” (706). There is a dichotomy between mother (god: children, home,

love, empathy, home, self-sacrifice) and woman (devil: childlessness, work, sex, self-centeredness, self-indulgence) (Buchanan 9).

As the economic and social position of women in society changes over time, so do conceptions of motherhood. Thornton argues, “Critical motherhood scholars, including those in the field of communication studies, generally concur that dominant cultural discourses reinvent historical ideals of the traditional mother via a rhetoric of choice” (273). Continuing, Thornton states, “mother who is at every turn obligated to choose... The emphasis on choice signals contemporary motherhood rhetorics’ alignment with a postfeminist sensibility” (276). Women now *choose* to be a mother and work away from the home, rather than not being able to choose before. Of course, women are still expected to make the *right* choice. These falsely displayed choices and expectations of motherhood are coded through displays of white motherhood. As Buchanan argues, “motherhood, then, is coded in ways that disregard intersectional differences, create institutional impediments for nontraditional women, and produce serious rhetorical consequences” (21). White women are displayed as the perfect mother that other women are expected to follow, this is especially true for black women (Collins). Patricia Hill Collins develops in detail the expectations of black mothers to serve as mothers to their own biological children, but also as mothers to community. As Rousseau argues,

Black women’s reproduction has a unique historical relationship to the political economy. Black reproduction has been periodically exploited for profit and socially, culturally, and economically problematized, leading to political policies that restrict, regulate, and control Black reproduction. Mass media representations of Black women, mothers, and motherhood often indicate the sentiment of a given policy period. (459)

Shome writes, “images of women of color as unfit mothers...marks their position as one of disruption to the morality of national identity—a morality that in the patriarchal national imaginary can only be located in white femininity” (“White Femininity” 328). Hartman notes

that Black femininity tropes, such as the mother or the jezebel, reify racialized and gendered subjection.

These complicated notions of motherhood and femininity are compounded through the use of the Mother Nature metaphor. Roach argues, “because mothering and motherhood function problematically in patriarchal culture, the metaphorical equation of Earth or nature with mother also becomes problematical and to a certain degree unhealthy, both for women and for the environment” (Roach 48). When western culture frames Earth as mother, the patriarchal association of motherhood are applied; namely the idea that mothers are those who provide endlessly “and without any cost to us” (Roach 49). Therefore, the film *mother!* already reinforces these assumptions and perceptions before the film even begins rolling. In several interviews, Aronofsky remarks on the importance of the Mother Nature metaphor as a woman who continually gives of herself. This compounded with capitalism creates an attitude towards Earth that there is an endless supply of materials to be exploited, as noted extensively by Alaimo and other new materialist scholars as well. The Earth is also “conflated with human motherhood and the biological process of reproduction” (Stearney 152). While the mother metaphor has been argued by some ecofeminists as a source of power, its use “returns women to a primary identification with as mothers, and reinforces the notion of women’s roles and natures as inextricably connected to their reproductive capacity” (Stearney 146). Meaning, negative perceptions of women and mothers are applied to the environment/nature/planet to create even more systemic problems, most notably through the expectation to produce and continue producing. Additionally, the earth is seen as something not entirely worthy of our concern or our respect. Finally, this chapter approaches the trope of Mother Nature particularly in its presentation as a young white woman and ideal white femininity in order to interrogate the ways

white supremacy is continually advanced. By attending to white femininity, ecofeminism, and the trouble of the Mother Nature trope, I describe how *mother!* continually advances white supremacy while simultaneously reifying the subordination of women and the continued destruction of our planet.

### **Darren Aronofsky's Dark Depressing Cinema**

Aronofsky is known for “working in an art-house mode of filmmaking that often eschews or responds to Hollywood” (Subramanian & Lagerwey 12). Unlike the other auteur’s discussed in this project, academic scholarship gives little attention to the director himself or his oeuvre. Aronofsky, while no doubt an auteur who leaves his mark on all his films, is by far the least researched of the directors. Even so, various themes carry across his work and those will be discussed in this section. Some of Aronofsky’s work has been written about for the use of specific film techniques, such as follow-shots (Barker) and cinematic diptych (Fleming). The director’s films have been analyzed via psychoanalysis (West-Leuer), affect (Moreno), and materialism (Balthasar). While few remarks have been made about Aronofsky’s oeuvre, two monographs have been devoted to his attention to psychological dramas and hope as well as the physical body in pain (Skorkin-Kapov; Laine).

Each of Aronofsky’s films features a character in some amount of psychological torment. Subramanian and Lagerwey make note of the director’s “patented vision of obsessive savants and melodramas spun out of control...Aronofsky’s framing of Portman’s body in the film [Black Swan] not only exacerbates her mental instability, but also performs a kind of queering of space and body” (12). *Black Swan* in particular is an exemplar of Aronofsky’s preoccupation with dark psychological narratives that offer little hope or resolve. The film depicts the mental decline of ballerina Nina as she attempts to perfect her performance in *Swan Lake*, which ultimately ends in

her own death, maybe. It certainly ends with Aronofsky screening the destruction of a woman's body. Similar to films of Paul Schrader, Aronofsky's films leave audience's questioning which events took place, and which were imagined by the characters due to mental instability. Interestingly, most of Aronofsky's films are devoid of hope in their resolutions, often ending with characters in an extremely dark or dire situations, if not dead, with no chance of redemption. For instance, *Requiem for a Dream* features the lives of several connected drug-addicted individuals who at the film's resolution have fully spiraled and lost complete control of their bodies and their lives. The characters lose limbs and are institutionalized both in state mental health facilities and prisons. Moreno argues, "Nihilism in *Requiem for a Dream* can be understood in the movements of each character into complete illness with no notion or conceptualization of the needs and forces of the body" (224). This nihilism is present in a number of Aronofsky's films, including *The Wrestler* and *Black Swan*.

In contrast, Laine's monograph focuses less on the emotional and psychological torment of the characters of these films and instead on the displays of physical pain. Laine argues, the director's film-bodies "speak through affect and not through language" (15). Films such as *Requiem* feature close up shots of bodies in pain which evoke affective responses and demonstrate affectiveless bodies (Moreno). Images of bodies in pain include a drug-addicted person's blackened arm, a woman undergoing electro-shock therapy, wrestlers covered in blood, a ballerina with a shard of a mirror imbedded in her stomach, and a man drilling a hole in his head.

Aronofsky's films have been imbued with religious motifs since his beginnings. Aronofsky's religious background is often dismissed from discussion of his films. Unlike Schrader, whose unique religious perspective is routinely highlighted in articles about his work,



Aronofsky's identification as a secular American Jew is often overlooked. Franz finds this omission critical, noting, "neither Laine nor Skorin-Kapov seem to have any interest in exploring that crucial facet of Aronofsky's approach to storytelling" (114). Most notably, Aronofsky's most religious film is *Noah*, the first feature length film retelling the Biblical story of The Flood in Genesis. While The Flood has been featured in a number of other films, *Noah* is the first to focus solely on the story from the book of Genesis. Shapiro and Moore write, "the filmmakers declare they continue the Jewish tradition of midrash, which, on one hand, clings to the biblical sources, and on the other, recreate the story by giving it a new interpretation" (147). Aronofsky's perspective is most likely impacted by his Jewish heritage and no doubt impacts his choices to engage in the midrash tradition and influences his depiction of Biblical stories. His earlier work, *Pi*, also features important references to New York Jews and Judaism more generally.

As mentioned previously, Aronofsky's work has focused on environmental motifs and he considers environmental activism to be his primary work outside of filmmaking. *Noah*, while being his most outrightly religious film, is also the most environmental prior to *mother!*. As Handley writes, the "film explicitly engages with the concerns of contemporary ecotheology in order to suggest that it is not enough for humankind to develop passion for the more-than-human world; we must also reinvigorate faith in humanity" (617). *Noah* functions as an example of the weaving of religious tradition while emphasizing an environmental message; similar to the message of *First Reformed*, "*Noah* as an attempt to portray the tension or even open conflict between dominion and stewardship, a tension he sees built into the two accounts of creation depicted in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2" (Handley 625). Edelstein writes that Aronofsky was "straightjacketed by a studio when he made *Noah*" and therefore "attempts to make up for it with a climactic deluge" (91). This limitation was most likely due to the fact that *Noah* was a big-

budget film and, similar to Schrader's experience with *The Dying of the Light*, producers took control over the direction of the film. Although Edelstein fails to detail how exactly Aronofsky was straightjacketed, it appears that the director did approach *mother!* with an intent to be even more explicit about environmental issues and their connection with the Judeo-Christian Bible.

### **The Inescapable Cycle of the White Woman's Apocalypse in *mother!***

*mother!* been described "as a fever dream", by critics, audiences, and Aronofsky himself (Dockterman). No names are given or spoken throughout the film, adding to its disorienting nature and the nagging feeling that the film cannot be properly described to those who have not seen it for themselves. Jennifer Lawrence's character is given the name "mother" in the end credits. Javier Bardem is credited, with the only capital letter of the film, as "Him," perhaps to align the character with God, whose pronouns are always capitalized in The Bible and other religious texts. To avoid an abundance of quotation marks, Lawrence's character will be referred to as the mother and Bardem's will be referred to as the poet, as the character gains a massive, dangerous following because of his poetry.

The film opens with a white woman, not Jennifer Lawrence, engulfed in flames. The camera focuses in on the woman's eyes as they slowly close and the screen fades to white and then black. The film's title is displayed briefly, and as the word "mother" fades, the exclamation mark lingers for several seconds alone on screen. Next, a man's hands, covered in soot, places a delicate piece of crystal onto a stand. The audience is shown the poet's sullen face and then back to the crystal which seems to rejuvenate the house which surrounds him from fire damaged to its former farmhouse-esque glory. In this montage of regeneration, the mother's body arises from the ashes onto a bed, where she awakens alone and begins searching for the poet. When she turns towards the camera her breasts are made visible through her nightgown, as she walks down more

stairs and the camera focuses on her back, and her butt is also made visible through the sheer material to the audience. I highlight this moment because the display of actress Jennifer Lawrence's naked body is important for the time of the film's release. In 2014, "the "Celebgate" hackers published nude photos of Lawrence online. Reflecting on this, she commented, "I would much prefer my whole house to have been invaded"" (Bardonis 2). This comment is made significantly more powerful when reflecting on the diegesis of the film,

This remark about home invasion as preferable to this hacking serves to illustrate the significance of on-screen mother's experience of both humiliations. Her home is invaded and her body becomes a site of public pleasure, against her will. The spectator is complicit: many audience members will have viewed these pictures before watching *mother!*. Here, the film holds a mirror up to the spectator's pleasure; we are confronted by our own role in engaging with these traditional forms of scopophilia. (Bandonis 2)

Aronofsky seems to make an argument here about the agency not just of the character of the mother but also for Jennifer Lawrence as a woman with bodily autonomy. Adding to this the character as representative of Mother Nature, and Aronofsky is also making an argument that the lack of agency granted to human women in regards to their bodies and privacy is akin to the lack of agency given to the environment, which is similar to arguments in ecofeminism and new materialism. While I have mentioned critics admonishing the director for his treatment of Lawrence in the film, it is apparent he is attempting to make arguments about women's bodies as sites of violence in a variety of ways.

Throughout the entirety of the film, the camera follows the mother as closely as possible, first as she renovates their home and later as she tries desperately to get her husband, the poet, to evict all the unwanted house guests. If the mother is representative of Mother Nature, then the house is planet Earth, complete with a throbbing organ seen only by the mother through her assumed deeper connection with the house (earth). This connection between a woman character and the "earth" is of course further reinforcement of the idea that women are closer to nature

than men. Eventually, the mother conceives and gives birth to the implied son of God/the poet, who is then brutally murdered within mere hours of being born. The mother, so enraged by grief, then queues the apocalypse, and the entire narrative is implied to regenerate anew, as another white woman is shown uttering the same first lines as the mother, in the exact same position.

This regeneration displays some of Aronofsky's disposition towards the nihilistic. However, it is important to note the differences between the implied meaning behind the never-ending cycle of the apocalypse as displayed in *mother!* and Aronofsky's comments about the meaning of the film. In one interview, he laments, "I've been very frustrated and filled with a certain amount of rage about how much inaction is happening on my other cause... which is how do we treat our home, our world" (Thompson 17). Further, Aronofsky has said, "There's an apocalyptic sense that the end is already pretty much written for us, but maybe there's still time to wake up and find another way" (Johnston 33). While the director may make a point of arguing for the ability to enact change and a raging against assumed inactivity in the fight against global ecological collapse, the film overall ends much like Aronofsky's other films: with little hope and no resolution. Maio writes, "Alas, it is one that doesn't offer much hope to those of us currently praying to our God (whatever he might be called) to deliver us from the floods, droughts, storms, famines, and rising sea levels that indicate that Gaia is none too pleased with her treatment at the hands of her children" (191). If the poet/God is left to continuously abuse and mistreat Mother Nature, and she will continue to sacrifice herself for him and for his obsession to human beings, what exactly is the audience's role in stopping this practice? A similar question was posed to Susan Griffin regarding the film, to which she responds,

think he's telling us that we just keep repeating the same scenario: We create destruction and then we just do it again, without learning from it. And the wisdom that comes from the grief of the loss—which is what that crystal is—is always destroyed because it's

treated like an object rather than understood for the illumination or the revelation that it gives you. (Kilkenny 18-19).

Again, this film as with the others in this project fail to provide resolutions for audiences facing the reality of anthropogenic climate change. Aronofsky's reputation as well as his other works helps to solidify a feeling of nihilism towards the climate crisis.

### *The Problem with Mother Nature*

Traditional problematic representations of women abound in Aronofsky's *mother!*. The mother character epitomizes preferred white femininity as a woman who exists solely to serve her husband. The mother is completely devoid of any personality characteristics outside of her partner: she is frantically searching for him whenever they are apart, immediately forgiving him for all his transgressions, and obsessed with his work as a poet. However, it would be a disservice to dismiss Lawrence's characterization as poor writing and development on Aronofsky's part without considering that perhaps this character reflects societal treatment of women / mothers / nature as serving and obedient muses for male consumption. I would argue that the film reinstates traditional gender norms even further by the mother's reconstruction of the home as her only apparent hobby or interest. When challenged by another woman why the couple did not simply buy a new house, the mother insists, "it's his home" as if it would be unthinkable to not devote her entire life to fixing the man's home from the ground up for his happiness. Aronofsky positions the mother as the perfect serving wife in order to form a broader critique about the understandings of ideal white femininity and nature as continually serving the needs of hu/man. The film also works to portray reframed expectations of white femininity in relationships in contrast to popular oversimplifications. The mother is routinely painted as a jealous woman, however, in contrast to popular media representations of jealous women, is constantly able to conceal or overcome her jealousy in order to continue her role as the loving,

devoted wife. This is exemplified in the scene in which the mother discovers that the poet had shown the finished poem, a point of contention throughout the film, to his publisher before she herself was able to read it and is noticeably and understandably upset. However, she immediately moves forward from the transgression, displaying yet again a perfect partner archetype as one who leaves petty disagreements behind instead of fighting.

Another important moment in the construction of the mother as ideal white femininity in the concluding moments between the mother and the poet, she says to him, “what hurts me the most is that I wasn’t enough” further cementing her place as an entity that serves no purpose beyond her love and devotion to him. The depiction of mother earth as a character who only wishes to serve, who is hurt the most by their inability to “be enough” rather than by the pain inflicted onto her, reinforces dangerous conceptions about the environment as an endless resource to be abused until it no longer exists. However, through her rebellion against the poet and the home invaders, the mother displays a rejection of these societal standards on behalf of herself and her child. This choice to rebel in the face of the death of her child may reinforce understandings of mothers as first and foremost concerned with their children, however, it also works as a rejection of male supremacy and the limitations placed upon her by the other characters of the film. It is in her rebellion and violence against the poet and the invaders that the mother enacts her own agency and therefore represents nature as reasserting its own needs and wants. The mother’s “outburst” and subsequent destruction of the house works as a rejection of patriarchal standards and environmental destruction. However, when the mother character is regenerated and the cycle is assumed to begin again, humanity is absolved from reflecting on their mistreatment of nature and women. Humanity’s relationship with the environment is always/already tenuous, As Rosteck and Frenzt argue,

Americans have always had a complicated relationship with the environment... On one side, the environment is revered as awe-inspiringly sublime, a synecdoche of our relation to the cosmos—and therefore inviolate; on the other, it is the resilient source of raw material, a wilderness to be mastered—the site of our manifest destiny. (1)

The mother as giving and resilient is a constant theme throughout the film, and again reinforces anthropocentric conceptions of the environment. Reinforcing notions of anthropocentrism have material impacts on the environment (see Milstein).

The mother's sexuality operates to further entrench notions of white femininity. The first words of the film are spoken by the mother, as she calls out "baby" to an empty bed. The phrase is called out for an adult man, rather than a child, solidifying her as a woman first and foremost concerned with her partner's existence and behavior. As the mother begins to search the house for her partner, the audience is given glimpses of her full nakedness. First, as previously mentioned, the mother faces the camera and through lighting choices, her breasts are fully visible in spite of her wearing a full nightgown. As she turns around to look in the other direction, her backside is also made visible. The mother as a sexual object is further highlighted through the film by the language of other characters regarding her sexuality. When Man, the character which represents the figure of Adam from the Bible, first hears of her renovating the house on her own, he comments, "so you're not just a pretty face". When Man's son arrives, he stares at her from behind and comments, "nice view". The mother character also moans and cries out throughout the entire second act of the film, and her heavy breathing is reminiscent of pornography.

Perhaps the most important scene in terms of the religious iconography is when the mother herself gives birth to an implied baby Christ who meets a gruesome, violent end only moments after his birth. So graphic is this scene that Meslow comments,

The closest analogue to *mother!* I can come up with is *The Passion of the Christ*: a massive hit that justified its bloody, torturous excesses by arguing that they needed to be depicted—in extended and exacting detail—to capture the immensity of Jesus's sacrifice.

*mother!* could make a similar justification for its litany of horrors. I do not think mainstream audiences will see it that way.

Gunn writes of *The Passion of the Christ* as melodrama and horror, but most interestingly as pornographic, arguing that mainly due to its bodily affect and utilization of the genre cum shot. Gunn writes, “*The Passion*, in other words, stimulates the bodies of spectators (affect) and delivers them to suggested emotions” (365). At the risk of doing a disservice to the large realm of affect studies, I will simply argue that both *The Passion of the Christ* and *mother!* rely on bodily affect from intense, overly gruesome violence in order to depict the death and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The use of affect to express religious motifs is important to note in *mother!*, as it echoes other religious films that precede it through its mixing of sexual desire and extreme violence in order to depict the death of Jesus Christ.

The fact that this hypersexualized breathing and moaning occurs through repeated acts of gendered violence works to fortify notions of rape culture in society. The mother is repeatedly sexually assaulted, and her ability to fight back is diminished throughout the second act of the film. While the sexual assault in the film may work to undermine the experiences of survivors and undermine the material reality of these actions, the violence also works to reinstate white femininity as an entity that is always in a state of threat and always in need of protection from men. Projansky, writing about the history of rape throughout cinema, writes of “two seemingly antithetical types of narratives [that] are common: those that depict women’s vulnerability as leading to rape and those that depict the rape of an independent woman as making her vulnerable” (30). I would argue that the rape of the mother character in film is that of a vulnerable woman. Projansky continues, “in the films that depict women as innocent, naïve, and vulnerable, and as facing rape as a result, the women may lack control over their own lives or bodies; hence, they lack agency and therefore logically must be rescued” (30).



Rape and sexual assault also function within horror film explicitly to establish the gender of a character. *mother!* has been criticized heavily for its choice to market itself as a traditional horror film, however, I find it useful to analyze the film from this perspective in order to fully realize how sexual assault and rape function in the film. Clover writes, “sex, in this universe, proceeds from gender, not the other way around. A figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers” (13). Therefore, it is through the mother’s sexual assault and her continuous moaning and screaming that she is established to be a *woman*. Clover writes extensively how rape is a tool of horror; “rape becomes a problem for women themselves to solve”, often through the rape revenge fantasy film. Just as Lana in *Ms. 45* kills not just for her rape but for the rape of all women, the mother kills for the murder of her child and also for the violence placed upon her body. This is due in part because rape, according to Clover, “is virtually always seen not just as an individual act, but as a social and political act as well” (144). Additionally, the analogy of environmental destruction as a raping of mother earth abounds in popular culture, including in films such as *Deliverance*. In the opening voiceover of *Deliverance*, characters lament that the landscape will be “raped” and subsequently one of the male characters is brutally raped “in a way that has captured and tormented the American male imagination more than any other” (Farmer 111). Similarly, *mother!* utilizes the Mother Nature/rape metaphor and subjects audiences to a brutally, unforgettable sexual assault that lingers for days after viewing. Perhaps Aronofsky utilizes rape and sexual assault as a way to make an argument about the treatment of nature and the environment; rather than endorsing sexual violence which seems to be the way most critics frame him and the film. Furthermore, *mother!* should be considered for how it works to push against traditional horror conceptualizations about the rural/city dichotomy. When considering the rural/city dichotomy of

traditional rape-revenge films, the city rapes nature and then nature rapes the city. But instead, with nature personified, she is raped twice, and thus the revenge takes an even more extreme form. Now it is the city that is barbarous and horrific, and the country which must rise to meet the same violence (Clover). Again, Aronofsky's placement of the home and the characters entirely within a rural setting works to reify the violence that humans enact onto natural environments.

### *Mother vs. Mother*

The mother character is placed under immediate scrutiny for her propensity and ability to mother even before conceiving. Aronofsky's film portrays women as in constant disagreement throughout the film, as the arrival of Woman, who is a representation of Eve from the Bible, is immediately a source of contention and frustration for the mother. Woman and the mother both exemplify good and bad motherhood throughout the film, best demonstrated through the God and Devil terms described by Buchanan noted earlier in the essay. God terms are associated with motherhood, such as empathy and self-sacrifice while devil terms such self-centeredness and immorality are associated with woman. The irony of course is that in the first act, the mother is the childless character and Woman (again, as named in the credits) is the mother character. The dichotomy of either childless and self-centered or mothering and self-sacrificing manifests in several key scenes between the two characters.

Woman immediately establishes the desire to have children as essential to a healthy marriage and long-term relationship, stating to the mother, "I know what it's like when you're just starting out and you think you have all the time in the world. But you know, you're not going to be young forever. Have kids. Then you'll be creating something together. That's what keeps a marriage going. [motions around to house] the rest is all just setting". This scene

attempts to identify Woman as a better life partner than the mother. Later, when the two characters are doing laundry, Woman sees the mother's plain underwear and asserts, "oh no. So, that's the problem... you're going to have to try a lot harder than this" and then displays a pair of her own underwear, chartreuse and lacey, indicating again that she is a better partner by consistently existing for her partner's desire in order to have children. This complicates Buchanan's notions of god and devil terms by flipping traditional readings of sex and sensuality as devil/woman into characteristics of good mothers/lovers. The very need for Woman to pressure the mother into attempting to have a baby is demonstrative of her status as bad mother, as women should naturally want to become mothers, once they are married. However, Woman also works to illuminate the complicated feelings women can experience after having children, stating earlier in the film that her two sons "came and screwed it all up". Additionally, Woman is portrayed as hyper-sexualized, going beyond preferred white femininity sexualization into the perverse when she engages in a sexual act with her husband immediately after breaking the poet's most prized possession. Woman is relegated again to bad motherhood when Man and Woman's oldest son commits fratricide against their younger child. Shome writes that "what is so interesting is that when white mothers are unable to produce 'successful' men who can serve the nation, then it is the mother instead of the men she has produced who is demonized" (49). The older son, pleading with the mother, cries out, "it's not my fault. They never really loved me! They were leaving me behind". He then calls out to his own mother, as she reacts to the violent scene, "you did this". The fault does not rest on the son for being blinded by greed, it is the Woman's fault for not raising better children.

The mother is exemplary of bad motherhood through her inability to properly empathize as well. During the eulogy scene, the mother is asked to say a few words, caught completely by

surprise she stumbles, “for your child...” before being interrupted by the poet who continues “for *both* of your children. Let’s not forget the one still in the wilderness”. The mother is shown to be unable to properly alleviate anyone’s pain. In an attempt to comfort Woman, she begins “I can’t imagine how—” before being cut off again, with Woman replying harshly, “No. You can’t imagine what it feels like if you don’t have a child. You give and you give and you give and it’s just never enough”. When the mother attempts to rectify the uncomfortable situation, she stammers, “I understand” to which the Woman replies, “Do you?” and after a beat continues, “Why don’t you at least put on something decent?”. The mother is once again displayed as a self-centered, unempathetic character by being present at the funeral in only her nightgown. However, while the woman character again and again asserts herself as a better partner and mother than the mother character, Aronofsky’s direction has the mother as a sympathetic character and the woman as a crass and infuriating character, once again acting as a critique about traditional societal norms for white women. Some of this directorial work is done by highlighting the mother’s white ideal femininity by making her soft spoken and polite while Woman is often inappropriate and disrespectful. As stated earlier, the plot of the film works to agitate audiences because the feeling of an unwanted houseguest is argued to be universal. The mother is made an even more sympathetic character by attempting to be welcoming and accommodating even after she becomes frustrated privately. She is often shown in softer lighting, her face aglow, nearly angelic, and relatively calm. The mother is only shown to be wearing makeup in the second half of the film, and therefore appears rather young and pure in scenes involving the Woman character in the first act. Aronofsky’s framing of the two prominent female characters as constantly at odds works to illuminate complicated notions of femininity and motherhood in Western modernity.

Finally, after the intimate partner violence discussed previously, the mother conceives her first child. She exhibits her first moment of good motherhood by knowing immediately that she is pregnant. When the poet challenges her, asking, “how could you know?” she responds simply, “because I know”, demonstrating mothers as beings capable of knowledge and understanding beyond the scientific. Her conception spurs the writer’s creativity, at least in part, and this again solidifies her new position as good mother. Further, she stops drinking the mysterious yellow powder mixed into water, begins preparing a nursery, continues to care for the poet, as well as repairing the house after the first intrusive guests.

When the intruders begin to overtake the house for a second time, the mother is again insistent that everyone leave. However, her good motherhood is displayed when a mother and child enter into the home and the mother’s hostility is immediately alleviated when she realizes the young boy has urinated all over himself and is in need of a bathroom. Her displays of good motherhood are then manifested by all responses to her physical assaults as cries out for her unborn baby’s protection. As the mother is heavily pregnant, she is shoved, groped, pulled, and kicked repeatedly, but her only pleas for relief are on behalf of the unborn child. For example, after being assaulted for several moments, a man dressed in military clothing pulls her to a place of assumed safety and asks, “are you hurt?” and her reply is simply “the baby...” before the man is killed in front of her.

Finally, the mother exhibits what Mack refers to as neoliberal motherhood by her ability to birth her child alone without the need for any medical assistance. In fact, the mother rejects the help of a doctor while she is going into labor. Alone, the poet and the mother welcome their son into the world. The mother again exemplifies good motherhood through protecting her child, refusing to sleep, and breastfeeding without any assistance. All of these actions are taken by the

mother as natural and already known. She exemplifies good motherhood in her innate wisdom of mothering without any outside help. Finally, the mother rejects the father's positionality by asserting her role as mother as above his as father. Try as she might to stay awake to protect the infant, the poet, now father, takes the child when she falls asleep and releases him to the fanatical crowd. The mother's last moment of heroic motherhood comes from her response to the murder of her only hours-old child. Screaming out into the crowd, the mother calls out "no, no, that's my baby! I'm his mother!" and "where's my baby" repeatedly. When she comes upon the alter of his mutilated body, the mother begins attacking each person within her reach. After a brief moment of stabbing random members of the crowd, the mother is knocked to the ground by the priest-like figure and she is beaten violently as her clothes are quickly torn from her body, exposing her breasts as words such as "die, cunt", "dirty whore", and "fat pig" are yelled from the crowd. Her body shows no signs of pregnancy, and she remains, despite the blood, a sexually appealing figure. This again replicates notions of white femininity and motherhood as described by Shome. That white women's bodies after motherhood are depicted as sites of disciplining and impossible standards. After she is assaulted, again, her only concern is for her child "they killed my baby". She does not cry out about her sexual assault, but instead concerns herself only through the violence that is enacted upon the poet and her child. In her final act as the ultimate mother, she sacrifices her life for revenge against the people who murdered her child.

This violent depiction of the death of Christ as an infant and the destruction and assault of Mother Nature, which are both enacted in the name of Christianity, lead into the final scene of this film. After the writer attempts to rescue the mother, she looks once again into the soul of the home, and the screen depicts the organ dying as the pulsating ceases. She declares, "it's time to get the fuck [she scratches the writer across the cheek] out of my house". She then flees in an

attempt to destroy the house once-and-for-all. After violently falling down a flight of stairs into the basement, the writer approaches the mother the moment before she spills what is assumed to be oil onto the floor and drops the lighter. As the home becomes engulfed in flame, the mother is depicted in a mirror image of the anonymous, now assumed previous mother, of the opening scene. The house becomes consumed, but the writer is unscathed. The two lovers exchange a series of lines which are reminiscent of both the children's book *The Giving Tree* and the Bible. As the mother finally dies, the writer states, "Now I must try it all again" before he reaches into her chest to remove the same crystal object the audience also sees in the beginning of the film, as well as the object destroyed by Adam and Eve. The cycle repeats and the house again reverts to its beginning, as the author laughs. Finally, a new woman emerges from the ashes on the bed and repeats the exact actions of the mother in the opening sequence, calling out "baby?" before the screen cuts to black and the film ends.

## **Conclusion**

The mother, both the character portrayed by Jennifer Lawrence and the other two white women, does not represent only white womanhood and the importance of protecting and preserving white femininity, she represents the planet and the complicated figure of Mother Nature. As Roach and others argue, by representing the planet as a mother figure Earth is seen as a supply of endless resources, love and sacrifice. When the mother character gives herself to the poet through her final acts of digging out her own heart and thus restarting the world from the beginning once again, the audience is exposed to an understanding the planet is capable of constant regeneration. The idea falls in line with complicated notions of the Earth as existing beyond human animal survivals, with scholars such as Griffin emphasizing that while the world may end for human life, it will carry on without humanity (Kilkenny). Further, as outlined by

Brummett, the film's use of apocalyptic rhetoric works to assuage contemporary feelings that we as a species are lost without direction in a critical moment. Instead, we exist within a well-constructed plan executed by God that cannot be altered. Competing interpretations of the usefulness of the apocalyptic in environmental rhetoric leave room for debate over whether Aronofsky's film incites action or apathy. Mills-Knutsen would argue that apocalyptic rhetoric allows for audiences to walk away feeling that faith and God will intervene on behalf of humankind. However, Foust and Murphy advocate that apocalyptic rhetoric allows for audiences to feel empowered to become advocates for the environment. *mother!* may leave audiences confused, empowered, disgusted, or apathetic. Either way, Aronofsky's film leaves an impact on conceptualizations of white woman as Mother Nature and the Judeo-Christian tradition as at odds against "her".



## CONCLUSION. HOW TO PREVENT THE END OF THE WORLD

This dissertation queried how contemporary auteur cinema draws on Christian forms to give expression to the ineffability of environmental collapse. Through a generic analysis, utilizing ecocriticism, of *First Reformed*, *Interstellar*, and *mother!* I have argued that contemporary film has used Christian forms for the demobilization of environmental activism. Through both direct depictions of environmental activism and a general malaise about efficacy to impact the future, these films reflect a growing mentality in American culture of eco-pessimism. I opened this project with a discussion of the downsides of discussing climate change as a problem beyond the scope of human intervention, most notably that it could discourage the average person from taking any action. However, scholars such as Franzen have argued that perhaps facing the reality of climate change will encourage people to participate in more “half measures” instead of only pursuing options that are unrealistic, such as reaching zero-emissions.

There are two more significant pieces to the problem of solving climate change, at least within American culture. First is the complete incomprehensibility of the issue; climate change is a hyperobject. It is too large and complex of an issue to ever truly be fully comprehended. Second, American culture has long conceptualized science as an ideological, debatable issue, as I make note of in the introduction. Shortly after beginning this project, this challenge was demonstrated all the more through the denial of Covid-19 by a subset of Americans and politicians alike, most notably those of the Republican Party. Despite hard evidence and consistent assertions by doctors around the globe that Covid-19 is a serious illness, some Americans continue to refuse to follow guidelines and most politicians at local and state levels have failed to enact serious policies to prevent further spread of the pandemic (Carroll). The continued rejection of expert testimony during the entirety of the Covid-19 pandemic is

exemplary of American's apathy or downright rejection towards science. As Wilson argues, "Unfortunately, when faced with inconvenient scientific research, the current administration only digs deeper into its toolkit of censorship and misinformation" (para. 8). At the time of writing, 319,000 Americans have died from Covid-19 (December 21, 2020).

For some, the government and public response to Covid-19 creates an even deeper hopelessness in the future of fighting climate change. While the science denial that started with Big Tobacco and encouraged the rejection of climate change paved the way for denial of the Corona Virus, it is also telling of the future of fighting for environmental protections. Even if the increasing number of American deaths impacted conservative politicians to change course on denial of the virus, it is unlikely climate change will get a similar treatment, due in part because its effects are less observable in raw data such as deaths (Hasemyer & Banerjee).

This project also attends to the contested connection between Christianity and climate change. While numerous arguments have been made about the denial of climate change and Christianity, I have made it a point throughout this project to argue for the complication of this issue. A majority of Christian identifying individuals in the United States do not deny climate change on the basis of religion (Pew Research). Even so, this project was born out of a desire to interrogate the continual use of Christian forms within environmental cinema. This dissertation interrogates film as a rhetorical artefact because of its continued place of significance and reflection in American culture. Furthermore, by analyzing environmental films I can attend to cultural trends in environmental fears which fluctuate over time. Environmental films also give insight into the ways in which audiences may perceive environmental problems and their solutions. Finally, by choosing to analyze auteur films instead of big-budget blockbusters, I was

able to attend to these cultural influences even more precisely by comparing an auteur's previous works to those with environmental messaging.

Genre analysis provided an opportunity to evaluate the ways in which affect expresses Christian forms as well as the motivations behind the auteurs in choosing these forms. In this project, I chose to continue Gunn's work of expanding upon generic criticism with the application of psychoanalysis and affect. Through an examination of the collective unconscious traces within the text can be uncovered. Additionally, Gunn argues that the study of genre provides a path for "naming the ineffable," which becomes increasingly important when considering the concept of climate change as a hyperobject and the sublime. These concepts are all rooted primarily in experiences in the body.

This final chapter will begin with a review of chapters one through four. Next, I will discuss the unmotivated audience and the ineffable as expressed in the films. Then I will focus on the missing piece of environmental cinema, at least as it is expressed in these films. Each of these films is missing representation of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, as well as nonhuman animals. Further, each of these films contains a fantastical element which I argue only furthers the separation between the realities of climate change and the audience. Finally, I will discuss areas of future research, especially in a post-Covid-19 world. As I noted above, the rise and continued spread of denial about the severity of Covid-19 is indicative of the United States response to climate change and must be interrogated further.

### **The Missing Pieces of Environmental Cinema**

This dissertation has worked through several contemporary films through a generic criticism in order to best explore their exigence and impact. While rhetorical criticism cannot wholly interpret how an audience may be impacted upon exit of the cinema, it can understand

which audiences are addressed and how contemporary understandings of the climate crisis are either reinforced or complicated. These auteur directors all chose, in what has been described as their passion projects, to use Judeo-Christian forms to discuss environmental problems. As I have noted in my review of chapters, each of these films perpetuates an audience with a lack of efficacy in combating global warming. Through a variety of narrative choices, each film depicts the environmental crisis as so immense as to be insurmountable. There are several other recurring characteristics across these films that I will discuss here. First, each of these films fails to accentuate the Black, Indigenous, Latinx, or other peoples of color's experiences. Racial and Indigenous disparity as it relates to the environmental crisis is either dangerously misrepresented or completely absent from these narratives. While I discuss the importance of race in the environmental movement in chapter two, significantly more attention is due in the discussion of race as it relates to these films. Next, I will discuss the absence of nonhuman animals and other "natural" elements in these films. As noted in the sections regarding new materialism, in order to do substantial and meaningful environmental criticism, a radical reconceptualization of nature is necessary. This is done in part by giving more agency to nonhuman animals and other natural features when conducting criticism. Finally, a piece of what sparked this project is the ubiquitous interweaving of supernatural and fantasy elements in films about environmental destruction. Each of the films discussed in this project, along with several other environmental films, feature at least some fantastical element to remove it from complete realism. I argue that this choice further removes audiences from the severity of climate change, even in films that focus entirely on the reality of global environmental collapse.

### *Centering White Narratives*

Representation in films has become a major point of contention, leading to major Hollywood protests and consistent discussion in popular media. Molina-Guzmán writes, “As a cultural institution, contestations over the lack of diversity in Hollywood are indicative of broader social conflicts over the changing status of ethnicity, race, and gender” (439). In *Framing Blackness*, Guerrero states that representations of Black actors in film has had a rather dismissal increase, arguing, “For blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society” (2). Science fiction in particular fails to adequately offer representation in films that otherwise provide a perfect possibility of racial expression. Instead, “what is overlooked is how such films also reflect a sublimated racial anxiety as the civil rights movement and the push for equality gained momentum” (Nama 157). The absence of people of color in film production is just as significant as the lack of people of color on the screen. Quinn argues, “I want to suggest that cultural industries like film, when examined simultaneously as image factories and industries, offer revelatory sites for the study of racial identity formation” (5). Molina-Guzmán echoes this sentiment, “the focus by news media and cultural activists on improving on-screen diversity shifts attention away from a critique of institutional power” (451). The lack of representation of people of color in these particular films is important when considering which peoples most adamantly work on behalf of protecting the environment.

The environmental movement, meaning the generalized activism on behalf of a cleaner, healthier planet, is racist in its lack of recognition for the Black and Indigenous activists. Environmental justice and the work done by Black and Indigenous activists to fight on behalf of

minority communities who are consistently targeted by hazardous waste and chemical processing facilities has been ignored for decades. As noted in chapter two, white activists within environmental movements continually see environmentalism as white cause because its motivations reflect the interests of white people (Purifoy). Due in part because Black activists work to protect areas not considered worthy of protection (i.e., cities and not parks), their activism is not considered environmental by white activists. While I have noted briefly the significance of casting Cedric the Entertainer as the antagonistic role in *First Reformed*, as well as discussions of centering whiteness in *mother!*, this exclusion of people of color works to reinforce these incorrect assumptions made by white audiences in relation to people of color in environmental activism.

These films orient the viewer into a Eurocentric mode of understanding the ecosphere. Not a single person of color is featured in a significant role aside from Reverend Jeffers; a symbolic absence that reflect a material reality. While *Interstellar* casts more Black men than *First Reformed*, their roles remain relatively insignificant in the general diegesis and their race is not relevant. *Interstellar* is a film which seems to exist devoid of race. For example, the scene in which Cooper discusses his son's future, he is sat opposite the Black principal, who is unnamed, but his role is primarily that of miseducator and contrarian to Cooper's hopes and dreams for his son and daughter. Of the astronauts set out to save the future of planet Earth, only one is Black, Dr. Romilly, whose work focuses on physics and has little impact on the general narrative of the film. He is unceremoniously killed by a rigged explosive set by Dr. Mann; his death is hardly acknowledged during a series of chaotic scenes and the characters only briefly pause to grieve the loss. While Dr. Doyle's death is similarly dismissed by the characters upon their return to the spaceship, the moments before are critical to the plot. Similarly, *mother!* does not cast any

people of color in the primary roles of the film. The only credited people of color in the film are invaders within the home who cause a litany of problems. The film's credits provide each invader with a title, i.e. one Black man, Jovan Adepo, is credited as "cupbearer" and a Black woman, Amanda Warren, is credited as "healer". While these names sound significant, they bear no actual impact on the diegesis of the film. Much like a majority of Hollywood, Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx voices are completely absent from the primary narrative.

### *Hidden Nature*

In order to radically reconceptualize nature, its significance and impacts upon material reality must be recentered. Quality ecocriticism must attend to the ways in which nature is both constructed and a material reality while assessing the ways different aspects of the environment are absent from films. Nonhuman animals are perhaps the most glaring absence in these films. For example, *First Reformed* features several images of maimed or dead animals, however, no live flourishing examples of wildlife or other types of animals exist in the film. An early quotidian scene shows Reverend Toller removing a clearly rigor mortis squirrel from a piece of barbed wire, which he later uses to self-flagellate. While this scene could be an attempt to mirror the suffering of a nonhuman animal onto his own flesh, more likely the squirrel acts as a dead thing which inconveniences Toller and works to show the monotony and degrading features of his work at the church. Other images of dead nonhuman animals are featured in the film, if only for a brief moment. When Toller explores the contents of Michael Mensana's computer, he finds an image of bird whose stomach contents reveal a litany of plastic. Also of note in Mensana's computer is the background image of a severely emaciated polar bear, a popular photograph for emphasizing the extreme suffering of nonhuman animals in climates that are destroyed due to global warming.

While the images of endangered and suffering nonhuman animals in *First Reformed* does some work to establish the critical damage done to the “natural” world through pollution and other more generalized climate destruction, their brief attention on screen and lack of discussion in any dialogue, besides the debate between Toller and Jeffers discussed in chapter two, perpetuates nonhuman animals as insignificant in the effects. However, *First Reformed* does emphasize the destruction of the “natural” world through a montage of sublime natural scenes juxtaposed against several monstrous instances of pollution. This supernatural montage, which will be discussed more below, works to remind audiences about the pristine natural world and the direct destruction perpetuated by humans onto it. Repeated imagery throughout the film of EPA Superfund sites and industrial pollution also work to reinforce this understanding. However, repeated imagery of pristine landscapes may work to reinforce white conceptualizations of the environmental movement as focused on protecting natural lands rather than the reality of work needed to protect communities of color in more sub/urban environments. While work to protect natural landscapes is imperative, this only demonstrates the way these issues become interconnected.

*Interstellar* also features sublime images of the “natural” world. As noted in chapter four, one example of this is an image of the planet Earth as seen from outer space; the first photographed an image of Earth suspended in space allowed for new understandings of an interconnected, wholistic ecosystem which should be protected. *Interstellar* features a plethora of sublime images of nature, both Earth and alien: a pristine lake, expansive desert landscapes, giant waves, mountains, even fields of corn become sublime in their lush color and seemingly endless rows. These images are dangerous when combined with the frontier mythos of *Interstellar*. Instead of admiring the beauty of the endless water or mountains on their planetary



expeditions, they are seen as resources to extort. Sublime landscapes do not exist without purpose and should be considered only for their ability to support *human* life. Each planet explored in the film features no alien lifeforms, including plants. Instead, they are blank canvases with water, oxygen, and a star in which America is intended to paint a new existence assumingly exactly like the previous one. The question of agency is answered with a definitive no.

Finally, *mother!*, a film explicitly stated to be about the trials and tribulations of mother nature features the least amount of nature of the films. The entire film is situated within an antique home, the outside of which is only featured briefly and is shown to be a field of tall grass surrounded by a ring of trees. The only nonhuman animals within the film is a single frog which emerges inside a hidden room in the basement and several locusts which symbolize the plagues of Egypt featured in the book of Exodus. These nonhuman animals may work in a sense to remind audiences of the power they hold within Biblical scripture, but do not work to reorient conceptualizations of nature to be more inclusive of nonhuman animal's agency. However, the allegorical nature of *mother!* and the significance of the home as representative of the entire planet is of note. Aronofsky's directorial choice of only showing human bodies interacting with each other and depicting the house as having a living organ represent nature to varying degrees. Further, because the mother character is herself mother nature, it becomes less necessary overall to represent natural living elements such as plants and nonhuman animals. I argue it is the most severe absence in *mother!* as the film is meant to represent the experience of mother nature, a figure in Western culture who should encapsulate all features of nature / the environment. Instead, the narrative of *mother!* confines her entirely within manmade structures.

## *A Fantasy*

So far, I have discussed the absence of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color from these narratives as well as the absence of nature and nonhuman animals. These missing pieces of environmental cinema have several important impacts precisely because they are not there. However, one aspect which is present across these films, but may have serious adverse implications, is that of fantasy. Each film strays from realistic cinema and features at least one scene which implores audiences to suspend disbelief or takes them away from reality. I argue that this is not unique to the three films here, but instead is an integral part of almost every environmental film released in the last thirty years, excluding *Erin Brockovich*. Whether it be set so distantly in the future that the technology employed is basically incomprehensible or set entirely within a fantasy world, environmental films often included motifs of fantasy which I argue again invites audiences to see overcoming climate change as an action of pure imagination and impossible hope. However, it would be rash to dismiss outright the possibilities presented within fantasy, science fiction, expressionism, or any form of cinema that may feature fantastical elements. As Wallace et al. argue, “From their beginning, science fiction narratives have often been engaged in exposing and subverting mechanisms of power in society: questioning change, questioning dominance” (5740). Science fiction provides space to critique norms of gender and sexuality (Pluretti, Lingel, & Sinnreich); while other fantastical film genres provide space for entirely Black futures to be imagined, though not without some consequences (Asante & Pindi). Fantasy and fantastical elements in film provide opportunities for imagining alternative realities and negotiating different futures.

The inclination to include fantastical elements in environmental cinema has been discussed primarily as it relates to children’s eco-cinema. Films such as *Princess Mononoke* and

*FernGully* have been written about extensively for their use of fantasy to express environmentally conscious narratives (Smith & Parsons; Thevenin). Smith and Parsons write, “Both films reject the principles of deep ecology in displacing responsibility for environmental destruction on to ‘supernatural’ forces and exhibit anthropocentric concern for the survival of humans” (25). Similar to the narratives of *Princess Mononoke* or *FernGully*, the films described here utilize fantastical or supernatural elements in their resolutions which displace the responsibility of solving for climate change as outside reality. For instance, *Interstellar* relies on a time traveling narrative to account for Cooper’s cooperation to navigate the spaceship *Endurance* in order to find the next viable planet for human life. It is only through this science fiction (at present) impossibility that human life is saved from extinction. Without this narrative element, it is explained, Cooper never would have joined NASA, and they would have failed to recruit a pilot for the trip. Although Smith and Parsons as well as Thevenin are writing about the impact these narrative structures have on child audiences, I believe these conclusions can be drawn also for films targeted at adults as they are predicated off the same narrative structure and use of fantastical elements. Smith and Parsons as well as Thevenin do not argue for the implications of their studies only because they are children’s films, but primarily because of the elements within those films and how they impact the reception of the environmental message.

I argue in this dissertation that art, at least art that concerns itself with the total environmental destruction of the world, has some responsibility for addressing activist publics in lucid ways. Thevenin argues that resolutions such as that of *Interstellar* “fail to offer (even metaphorically) any effective avenue for real-world, environmental activism. Instead, young viewers are told a story in which the singular act of an individual...resolves the issue at hand” (156-157). Additionally, films which feature a supernatural explanation, either for the destruction

of the planet (*mother!*) or the resolution of that destruction (*Interstellar*) leave audiences powerless in the fight. No solution is presented in which they may actively take part. Conversely, films such as *Erin Brockovitch*, which I argue is one of the only prominent environmental films which does not feature fantastical elements, offer solutions to environmental problems through litigation and community activism. Even this film, however, falls trap to Thevenin's critique because it is the titular character whose work, primarily alone, creates substantial change. Climate change remains the greatest threat to human existence, and audiences may leave these films filled with eco-pessimism; a feeling that no action on their behalf can make a significant enough impact in the realities of global ecological destruction. Instead, they are powerless or must wait for a substantial moment of the future to change the history of the human species.

I find the integration of fantasy in *First Reformed* problematic for an additional reason. Two fantastical moments occur in the film. The first, Reverend Toller and Mary play a game in which they lay atop one-another facing each other and attempt to touch as much of the other as possible. Once they begin playing the game, the pair begin to float in the center of the room, and slowly appear in the center of outer space. As the two levitate, the camera pans around them, and their surroundings fade from deep space to hovering over a mountain range, a rich green forest, etc. As the two continue to "travel" above these sublime landscapes, Toller brushes Mary's hair from his face and the scenes change from the sublime to the grotesque. I find this juxtaposition of fantasy and literal images of environmental destruction to create a problematic parallel which may align viewers with conceptions of massive piles of tires or rivers of plastic as merely fantasy. The second moment of fantasy occurs in the final scene of the film, in which Mary miraculously appears in Toller's home after the door is shown to be locked. After Mary enters the room, the two embrace and share a long intimate kiss before the film ends. Here, the

implication could be drawn that love conquers the devastating realities of climate change, as Toller is moments away from participating in some form of self-destruction in the name of activism. This ending is characteristic of Paul Schrader, who evokes the transcendent in his last moments and leaves audiences unsure of reality and the fate of the male protagonist.

I have argued briefly for the problems of integrating fantasy into environmental films, but I believe this area of research should be investigated at greater length than it was granted here. Additionally, while I have provided a brief highlight of the significance of absent racial minorities in this conclusion, environmental communication research would benefit greatly from further discussion of the impacts of these missing voices. This dissertation fails in adequately giving space to discussion of lack of racial representation in environmental film. Further, while I believe this project adds significantly to the field of environmental rhetoric in respect to the use of Christian forms to express the ineffable, I believe greater work could be done regarding works that were not discussed at length in this project, such as *Noah*. More work about the influence of Christian forms in environmental rhetoric should be done in order to better understand the impact these messages have on audiences unsure of how to act on climate change.

The planet is in definite peril. Debates will continue to rage regarding how or what should be done, if anything, regarding catastrophic global climate collapse. It is precisely because of the continued denial of its existence, as well as the continued election of presidential leadership in the United States which will no doubt fail to act dramatically enough, that environmental film should be discussed for its failures as well as its successes. Climate change may be ineffable, but to surrender to its force as if it is insurmountable will be the end of humanity and possibly the other inhabitants of Earth as well.

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## VITA

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