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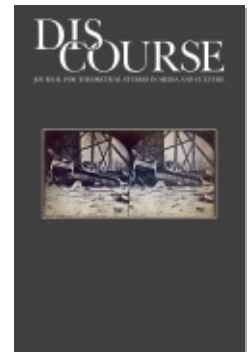
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Discourse, Volume 43, Number 1, Winter 2021, pp. 3-30 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press



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# **Destructive Environmentalism: The Queer Impossibility of *First Reformed***

**Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Steven Swarbrick**

Someone tells me: this kind of love is not viable. But how can you *evaluate* viability? Why is the viable a Good Thing? Why is it better to *last* than to *burn*?

—Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978)

## **Queer Ecocide**

On April 14, 2018, David S. Buckel, a prominent human rights lawyer, gay and trans rights advocate, and environmentalist, doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. A passerby who saw the smoke reported it to the police as a brush fire.<sup>1</sup> In a 1,276-word letter he had sent to media outlets and left on the scene of his suicide, Buckel drew a parallel between his death and the disastrous impact of fossil fuel dependency. "Pollution," he wrote, "ravages our planet, oozing [un]inhabitability via air, soil, water, and weather. Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels, and many die early

*Discourse*, 43.1, Winter 2021, pp. 3–30.

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deaths as a result—my early death by fossil fuels reveals what we are doing to ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> Buckel’s act did more than spectacularize the impossibility of sustained life in toxifying atmospheres. He sought to detoxify these atmospheres by making his combustion his ultimate carbon emission. He explained, “It may be clear that staying in the world is doing more harm than good. . . . A lifetime of service may be preserved by giving a life.”<sup>3</sup> To live, as Buckel noted, is to make waste and so too lay waste to the worlds we wish to protect. Buckel’s deoxygenated remains figured the species extinction they were meant to defer.

On April 23, 2018, nine days after Buckel took his own life, Dennis Dickey, a border patrol agent, ignited a wildfire that spread to the Coronado National Forest in Arizona. Dickey had invited family and friends to a gender-reveal party, a ritual in which expectant parents announce the gender to be assigned to their future child. His plan was to shoot a rifle and hit a target containing Tannerite, a highly explosive substance whose detonation would produce pink or blue powder. The fire that ensued ravaged forty-seven thousand acres.<sup>4</sup>

The first tragedy pertains to a person’s death (while evoking mass extinction). The other pertains to an ecosystem’s decimation. Both locate queerness in proximity to environmental peril. Buckel’s suicide, which according to his husband was inspired by the self-immolation of some Buddhist monks, belongs to a queer genealogy of direct action that frames death as protest.<sup>5</sup> Buckel reduced himself to cinder and ash in public. Similarly, in the 1990s ACT UP members scattered on the White House lawn the ashes of individuals “murdered by AIDS and killed by government neglect.”<sup>6</sup> Buckel’s death also extends a morbid strand of queer theory’s antisocial thesis—a strand, developed in part by Lee Edelman, that figures politics from the refusal and, in this case, the impossibility of reproduction and futurity.<sup>7</sup> Buckel’s self-annihilation points to a contradiction that environmental politics too often straightens out: that to live today is to accelerate extinction. Queer theory has long recognized that by saving life we work to destroy it. What makes Buckel’s action disturbingly timely is the link it draws between queerness and a general intensification of the antisocial thesis by climate change.

Whereas Buckel’s immolation merges intentionality and inevitability through the synthesis of individual suicide and species extinction, the Coronado National Forest wildfire highlights the immeasurable environmental cost of flippant acts of destruction. The latter case differently fuses sex and death. Rather than adopting queerness as an orientation toward death, Dickey used lethal

explosives to protect the integrity of the gender binary. But his attempt to label a child “naturally” female or male unleashed the queer negativity it had attempted to repress; his turned out to be an “*act against nature*.”<sup>8</sup> As the wildfire melodramatized, reproduction kills; each newborn comes with a carbon footprint that threatens the planet. While queer theory’s antisocial thesis makes the “*sinthomosexual*” and the “gay outlaw” exceptional to the demands of reproductive futurity, all the while figuring futurity’s inner unraveling, environmental destruction raises the bar considerably.<sup>9</sup> It is now the case that reproductivity, on the Left and the Right, makes life lethal. Whether the Tannerite is pink or blue, the queerness of it all is that like it or not, we are all standing in the burn zone, though structural inequalities unevenly distribute the consequences thereof. Narratives of the good (among environmentalists) and narratives of sustainable growth (among conservatives and progressives alike) all collapse under the weight of environmental existence’s queer nature. Whereas a previous iteration of queer negativity figured the death drive through an atomistic politics of individual refusal, the intensification of queerness within toxic environments makes unwitting *sinthomosexuals* of us all. Edelman’s “fuck Annie” has become a collective planetary emission.<sup>10</sup>

This essay asks how queer negativity might help us think or, more accurately, might confront us with our inability to think about the experience of environmental destruction. Neel Ahuja claims that “queer theory has always been a theory of extinctions.”<sup>11</sup> Ahuja draws an analogy between late carbon liberalism’s parasitic relation to Earth—a systemic reproduction that elicits destruction—and late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century figurations of queer subjectivity as epiphenomenal to the circulation of HIV/AIDS. Ahuja argues that in the face of extinction, we should defetishize the transcendental space of queer negation and instead pay attention to the “casual reproduction of forms of ecological violence that kill quietly, outside the spectacular time of crisis.”<sup>12</sup> In what follows, we attend to public acts that do not fit neatly either of the temporal categories delineated by Ahuja. These acts of self-destruction, of which Buckel’s immolation is exemplary, synchronize, if momentarily, the slow temporality of human extinction with the instantaneous temporality of individual annihilation.

The impossibility of narrative closure brought about by futurity’s undesirability or unlikeliness goes by several names in queer theory: from the death drive to the *jouissance* of narrative incompleteness to queer failure. For our purposes, this impossibility is best understood as a melodrama. In *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility*, Jonathan Goldberg echoes Gilles Deleuze’s description of

modern cinema by pointing to a queer “excess” or “Truth” that melodrama makes contradictorily available to the seer: “The bearer of Truth [in melodrama] may insist on the Truth but is nonetheless powerless to make it happen. Rather, Truth must be witnessed and recognized, and thus hailed by the very forces that seek to deny it.”<sup>13</sup> This is a time of the seer, not of the agent, says Deleuze, who conceives of time (and cinema) in terms felicitous to our aims here as a “fossilization” of thought by a truth too “intolerable” to be borne.<sup>14</sup> Deleuze characterizes his cinema books as a great “martyrology” of those who have seen but cannot act within the world as constituted.<sup>15</sup> These martyrs embrace annihilation as the only possible act, thus making narrative impossibility the living testimony to lives reduced to ash.

We turn to *First Reformed*, written and directed by Paul Schrader, to track the convergence of these melodramatic forces as they bear on characters confronted with the truth of unlivability.<sup>16</sup> The film takes place in the fictional town of Snowbridge, New York, where the protagonist, Reverend Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke), tends to the First Reformed Church in the months leading up to its 250th-anniversary reconsecration. Abundant Life, a megachurch nearby, is orchestrating the celebration, underwritten by Ed Balq, an oil magnate with an abysmal environmental record. At *First Reformed*, Toller meets Mary Mansana (Amanda Seyfried), a parishioner, and her husband Michael (Philip Ettinger). Mary is pregnant. Michael, a radical environmentalist who believes that bringing a child into a doomed world is unethical, kills himself and requests that his ashes be scattered at a toxic waste dump later revealed to be tied to Balq Industries. Visibly transformed by Michael’s death, Toller plans his own suicide to coincide with the reconsecration. All three protagonists in *First Reformed*—Reverend Toller, Mary, and Michael—self-destruct. Michael commits suicide. Ernst puts on a suicide vest, which he replaces with barbed wire. Mary, still pregnant, cuts herself when she passionately embraces Ernst. These acts of self-destruction made in the name of environmentalism read as queer: Michael refuses heterosexual reproduction, and Ernst and Mary’s lacerative embrace makes both romantic and religious passion jarring. Casting reproduction as the ultimate force of destruction, these acts preempt extinction in the name of pushing it away.

*First Reformed* imagines a queer obliteration of the ego that does not reorganize itself into impersonal kinship. According to Leo Bersani’s theory of “homo-ness,” in sex, individuals narcissistically extend themselves into the world, misrecognizing difference as “a nonthreatening supplement to sameness.”<sup>17</sup> Suddenly in excess

of itself, the ego is shattered by its illusory mastery—a process it repeats masochistically. For Edelman, shattering is brought about by the death drive, an urge to return to an inorganic state that opposes forms of social viability.<sup>18</sup> Nicole Seymour proposes that self-shattering and antisociality open out onto a “queer interest in the natural world.”<sup>19</sup> “After all,” Seymour explains, “a measure of self-renunciation and anti-sociality is central to many if not most forms of environmentalism, including ecocriticism; the renunciation of anthropocentrism and the adoption of biocentric or ecocentric viewpoints are veritable prerequisites for participation in either.”<sup>20</sup> Where Seymour sees humility, Edelman and Bersani see an inflated humanism. In the latter’s version of queer theory’s anti-social thesis, it is in order to find traces of themselves in the world that individuals push themselves beyond their limits and imperil their egos. Taken together, these theories of self-shattering suggest that the humility and narcissism motivating Michael and Toller in *First Reformed* are two sides of the same coin. The characters seek to return to Earth so as not to encroach on the survival of other species at the same time as they view their planned deaths, megalomaniacally, as emblematic of human extinction.

*First Reformed*, we propose, stages self-destruction to melodramatize the contemporary intensification of negativity by ordinary toxicity and pollution. Schrader suggests that life amid climate crisis is configured by what Goldberg, after the filmmaker Douglas Sirk, calls melodrama’s “impossible situation”—that is, a relational impasse from which there is no way out without loss.<sup>21</sup> To exist is to contribute to environmental destruction and thus to pose an obstacle to any ethical project rooted in futurity, reproduction, or even survival: such is the impasse of the present, as *First Reform* inhabits it. The “metaphysical location of the impossible situation,” Goldberg explains, is “a relationship between the absolute opposition of life and death,” an identification “with something impersonal, not living and not dead”—here, an identification with extinction.<sup>22</sup> Rather than dwell indefinitely in the impasse, *First Reformed* has recourse to self-annihilation, an event that spectacularizes the combustion of ethics. Reading with scholarship on cinematic ontology, we further claim that Schrader’s film, part of a broadly religious tradition he calls “transcendental cinema,” problematizes the conflation of intentional and inevitable self-destruction amid environmental catastrophe through the collapse of representation. What results is a cinema wherein narrative shattering signals both the fossilization of thought by time and the intensification of queerness within disastrous environments.

### Destructive Melancholy

Near the beginning of *First Reformed*, Toller, in voice-over narration, dictates the inaugural entry in a diary. He is to write entries in longhand, as factually as possible, for exactly one year. “I will keep this diary for twelve months,” he recites, “and at the end of that time it will be destroyed. Shredded, then burnt. The experiment will be over.” The protocol lays out a combustible askesis eventually echoed by Toller and Michael’s ideations and performances of self-destruction. Before he reaches the twelve-month mark and gets to shred and burn a catalog of his innermost thoughts, Toller follows Michael in planning his own death—an act that, as we will see, challenges thinkability. Michael’s last name, *Mensana*, lays out a paradox: his suicide issues from *and* eliminates *mens sana*, a sane or healthy mind.

Toller’s journal is a coping mechanism in the face of grief. His son, whom he had convinced to enlist in the army, died in the Iraq War. This tragedy contributed to the dissolution of Toller’s marriage. The object of Toller’s grief evolves throughout the film and balloons in scale to become planetary as he comes to mourn a doomed Earth, a planet that has already died but keeps being desecrated. He assures us, in voice-over, that he hasn’t lost his faith. Instead, he believes that the planet’s destruction exceeds the category of redeemable sins within a Christian paradigm. Early in *First Reformed*, Michael asks Toller, “Can God forgive us? For what we’ve done to this world?” After Michael’s death, Toller confronts Balq with the same question: “Will God forgive us for what we are doing to his creation?”

Pairing the rubrics of queerness and ecology, Catriona Sandilands observes affinities between practices of grieving the ungrievable in the contexts of HIV/AIDS and environmental collapse.<sup>23</sup> The populations lost to HIV/AIDS as well as extinct species and ravaged ecosystems qualify as ungrievable for two reasons: their existence is trivialized by homophobia or by capitalist systems of extraction and exploitation, and their disappearance constitutes a loss of almost unthinkable magnitude. Whereas in grief, per the Freudian model, the individual manages to overcome loss, in melancholy the individual, rather than giving up the lost object, internalizes it. “So by taking flight into the ego,” Freud sums up, “love escapes extinction.”<sup>24</sup> Sandilands insists that melancholy isn’t merely a denial of loss. Melancholy may be a politicized way of preserving a “life . . . already gone” within a culture that doesn’t recognize this life’s significance.<sup>25</sup>

The politics of melancholy has a long standing in queer theory.

From the racial melancholy of David Eng's *Racial Castration* to the queer-of-color melancholy of José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications*, the psychoanalytic theory of melancholy—of losses turned inward—has become a linchpin of antinormativity.<sup>26</sup> Melancholy's uptake in queer theory owes to the melancholic traffic between heteronormativity and its genealogy of abjection, exemplified by Judith Butler's ironic claim that "the 'truest' gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man."<sup>27</sup> From the perspective afforded by Butler's gender melancholia, the strictly straight man only becomes so due to heteronormativity's foreclosure of same-sex attachments. The strictly straight man preserves his attachments against loss by turning them inward, making the ego the sedimentary effect of unavowable losses. It is because melancholy reverses the inside/outside paradigm on which heteronormativity's foundations are built that queer theory prioritizes a melancholic politics of preservation. We are, the queer melancholic intones, everything we abject.

One popular offshoot of queer melancholy is Timothy Morton's "dark ecology," which he also brands as a "queer ecology."<sup>28</sup> In a statement on environmental destruction that he explicitly ties to Butler's theory of gender melancholy, Morton writes, "It is strictly impossible for us to mourn this absolute, radical loss. It is worse than losing our mother. It resembles the heterosexist melancholy that Judith Butler brilliantly outlines in her essay on how the foreclosure of homosexual attachment makes it impossible to mourn for it."<sup>29</sup> Morton adds in parentheses: "In general, a partnership between queer theory and ecological criticism is long overdue."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, this "partnership" makes immediate sense, given that dark ecology, like queer theory, "undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature."<sup>31</sup> Similarly to Butler's gender melancholic, queer ecology "preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe."<sup>32</sup> As others have since argued, queer ecology spells the end of nature construed as radical exteriority.<sup>33</sup> Melancholy entails that everything that was once deemed outside, including our objects, is brought inside. Ecological politics becomes "claustrophobic precisely because what is *outside* it is now *included*."<sup>34</sup>

In contrast with this Butlerian-ecological view, which since Morton's writing has become the mainstream of queer and ecological criticism (no longer dark indeed), we contend that it is precisely because what is outside is now inside, via the inward turn of melancholy, that ecological thought becomes impossible. We are living in the age that Frédéric Neyrat calls "saturated immanence," when the very thought of the outside, of what escapes the immediacy of our relations (transcendence with a lowercase "t"), is rendered



unthinkable or suspect due to the conviction that every outside is a projection of desire turned inward.<sup>35</sup>

Although an insistence on the traffic between inside and outside was necessary to avoid normative splits such as nature/culture and sex/gender, we end up with a dearth of real differences to think with. All differences are now inside the gender-culture matrix, which means that queer and ecological theories have reproduced the very inside/outside split that melancholy was supposed to deconstruct. It is no wonder, then, that queer and ecological paradigms converge today in melodramatic acts. As Goldberg argues, the subject of melodrama is *subjected to* a “Truth” that is unbearable because it is outside the immanence of our relations.<sup>36</sup> Melodramatic truth does not exist but rather *insists* by punching holes in the immanence of relations turned inward.

If, as both Butler and Morton argue, the truest gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man, then the truest gay male environmentalist could be the border patrol agent, Dennis Dickey, who set fire to a national forest in the name of gender conformity. By this logic, a gender-reveal party would be a melancholic act of preservation gone awry: by preserving one attachment (“natural” genders), he, Dickey, unintentionally destroys another (nature). Herein lies the difficulty of melancholy politics as it is currently theorized: it is far too sweet. For both Butler and Morton, melancholy is a way of coping with unavowable losses and of turning loss into a politics of preservation. Although losses structure our existence, they are made contingent by melancholy: homosexual and ecological attachments that are foreclosed in one arena become the bedrock of the psychic-social field. Yet reading melancholy as preservation only accounts for half of the melancholic turn. The problem, as we see it, with a model where relations are turned inward is that it obscures another simultaneous turn outward. As Elizabeth A. Wilson points out, queer theorizations of melancholy tend to overlook melancholy’s sadism—its “aggression turned outward.”<sup>37</sup> Wilson writes, “As well as attaching to things that are damaging us, we are also trying to damage the things to which we are attached. . . . [S]houldn’t gay melancholia entail, beyond the logic of strangulated affect and public catharsis, a hatred of the object it has loved and lost?”<sup>38</sup> Wilson’s argument is that theories of gay melancholia have centered too narrowly on modes and objects of repair without acknowledging that repair itself is structured by animus. I love you/I hate you: these statements are braided. The very structuration of reparative politics is a sadistic cut: between the worlds we want and the worlds we abject. Through the lens of Wilson’s “aggression turned outward,” then, a gender-reveal party in

Arizona that decimates forty-seven thousand acres of forest in the name of the gender binary seems less like an example of preservation gone wrong—a way of framing melancholy that diminishes environmental destruction as merely contingent, a friendly fire. We propose a different interpretation. When nature burns, as it did so spectacularly for Dickey, then and only then has the queer melancholic reached their sweet-sadistic mark: a nature loved/a nature destroyed.

This opposition between a politics of repair and a politics of destruction collapses not only in instantaneous acts of willed combustion, be it queer acts of refusal or ecological acts of dark, gothic despair, but also gradually, unexceptionally, and garishly, in pink and blue, across the political spectrum. Within this impossible representational space that we call melodrama, queerness appears less sweet and less righteous than it typically does; this is no less true of the queer representational space of *First Reformed*. A sentimental child-centered politics certainly transpires through the film<sup>39</sup> but is ultimately sacrificed to something else, something queerer. This queerness is at play in Toller and Michael's conversation and manifests in a distrust of reproduction and in the notion that human beings ought to be subtracted from any equation pertaining to the planet's future.<sup>40</sup> There is a fundamental queerness to the contemporary experience of awaiting and, by the same means, contributing to extinction. Instead of folding the ego's destruction into a realm of intrapsychic, nonnormative preservation, queer ecocide in *First Reformed* calls for an irrecoverable abolition of the individual—its subtraction from the act of thinking sociality.

### Voice as Object

Toller is exposed to Michael's worldview in a conversation that takes place at the Mansanas' residence, an austere house in shades of gray and brown with creaky hardwood floors. Toller meets Michael on Mary's advice. Not long ago, Michael returned from Fort Providence, in Canada's Northwest Territories, where he was arrested while advocating with an organization called the Green Planet Movement. The two characters sit face to face, as if in a Socratic dialogue. Emphasizing their initial schism is the door frame that stands between them. The aperture leads to the living room, where sunlight scarcely passes through the diaphanous curtains (figure 1). "Mary says things have gotten you down," Toller offers in a bid to move beyond small talk. Michael brings up Mary's pregnancy. Congratulations and thanks soon give way to a thought



Figure 1. Michael Mansana (Philip Ettinger) and Pastor Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke) in a Socratic dialogue in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed* (Killer Films, Omeira Studio Partners, Fibonacci Films, Arclight Films, Big Indie Productions).

experiment. “How old are you, Reverend?” Michael asks. “Forty-six.” “Thirty-three,” Michael reciprocates, pointing to himself, before continuing, “That’s how old our child will be in 2050. Five years older than I am now. You’ll be eighty-one. Do you know what the world will be like in 2050?” Michael draws for a bemused Toller a portrait of the planet’s dire future. “The Earth’s temperature will be three degrees centigrade higher. Four is the threshold. ‘Severe, widespread, irreversible impacts.’ And when scientists say stuff like that—the National Center for Atmospheric Research, Lawrence Livermore, the Potsdam Institute . . .” In voice-over, Toller ventriloquizes Michael: “By 2050 sea levels two feet higher on the East Coast. Low-lying areas underwater across the world. Bangladesh, 20 percent loss of landmass. Central Africa, 50 percent reduction in crops due to drought. The Western reservoirs dried up. Climate change refugees. Epidemics. Extreme weather.” The voice-over narration, which probably relays the journal entry that Toller is to write later that day, suggests that he has metabolized, or will metabolize, Michael’s message.

When internalizing Michael’s message, Toller takes in an object that is and is not of a piece with the reality represented.

As Freud notes in “Mourning and Melancholia,” the melancholic type does not know what they have lost in the object. The melancholic’s vocalizations, which are ritualistically self-blaming, remind us that loss is internalized to be replayed.<sup>41</sup> The ecological melancholy of Michael’s speech, though well meaning, automates this unconscious wish to repeat loss as desire’s sole aim. Put differently, what appears as the inward turn of melancholy (preservation) is at the same time the outward turn of sadism, a sadism that refuses to let go of the object “nature” once and for all because having is a prerequisite for losing, and losing is deeply satisfying.

To preserve his attachment to the planet, then, Toller internalizes its destruction in the form of a vocative object. This object takes on an enigmatic quality in its reenactment. Not only is it difficult to place the voice-object diegetically, but it is also unclear to what extent this object’s purpose is strictly preservative. The voice-over shatters the scene of representation. Does the voice belong to Toller or to Michael? Does it belong in the present moment, in the near future of Toller’s journal-writing, or in the speculated future of extinction? This shattering is the enigmatic, sweet-sadistic core of the voice-over itself. The voice-over is ostensibly Toller’s, but it has taken on a life of its own. The voice-over is an instance of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, which Slavoj Žižek glosses as the vocative remainder of unconscious jouissance: “the voice as object . . . cannot be attributed to any subject and thus hovers in some indefinite interspace. This voice is implacable precisely because it cannot be properly placed, being part neither of the diegetic ‘reality’ nor of the sound accompaniment (commentary, musical score), but belonging, rather, to that mysterious domain designated by Lacan as ‘between two deaths.’”<sup>42</sup> Toller’s voice-over carries a deadly refrain that cannot be placed, either narratively or acoustically, and so jeopardizes the representative space of the film by repeating an impossible situation. In Goldberg’s impossible situation, intentionality and inevitability coincide: the subject of melodrama bears a “Truth” (the truth of extinction) that cannot be brought about in part because the melodramatic subject is constituted by impossibility. To save life, Michael and Toller internalize the voice of inevitable destruction. Yet this voice qua autonomous object threatens the scene of life by taking the voice away from the living. Toller’s voice repeats, and with this repetition we are confronted with an impossibility that is neither life nor death but rather a melodramatic suspension of the two. Ultimately, it is subtraction that both Michael and Toller elect in response to the ecocidal mania of reproductive futurism.

Whether Toller adopts Michael's worldview during or after their conversation is unclear. In the heat of the moment Toller, visibly panicked, tries to mute Michael's operatic pessimism. Toller asks Michael whether he has considered harming himself. Michael doesn't respond directly and instead asks Toller, "How can you sanction bringing a girl—for argument's sake, let's say my child is a girl, a child full of hope and naive belief—into a world . . . when that little girl grows to be a young woman and looks you in the eyes and says, 'You knew this all along, didn't you?' What do you say then?" Toller resorts to antichoice rhetoric by suggesting that abortion's immorality supersedes reproduction's. Mary is notably excluded from this conversation about the ethics of her own pregnancy, making her a mere discursive object: a synecdoche for an imperiled and perilous future (we return to Mary's role as a symbol, more than a character, later in this essay). Michael rejects Toller's relativistic suggestion that "throughout history" humans have experienced sorrow. The present environmental catastrophe, Michael insists, denotes a historical shift: "This is something new." He brings up martyrdom—a change of topic that, as we eventually learn, isn't a non sequitur. In the remainder of *First Reformed*, Michael and Toller fashion themselves as ecological martyrs, choosing to die to slow down extinction.

### Death as Protest

Michael has in fact been thinking of harming himself—and possibly others. Mary asks Toller to come over when her husband is at work. She guides Toller to a clapboard garage. A wooden crate hidden under stacks of junk contains an explosive vest, of which Toller promises to dispose. The next day, Toller receives an ominous text message from Michael: "Meet me at the Westbrook Park Trail. East entrance. The red diamond trail. Come alone." When he reaches the site, Toller discovers a gruesome scene. Michael, dead, is lying face down next to a rifle. His head—*mens sana*—is partly blown. Blood stains the snow. At his request, Michael's ashes are scattered at Hanstown, a site turned into a toxic waste dump by Balq Industries. At the service, which Ed Balq later condemns as a "protest funeral," the Abundant Life youth choir sings an a capella version of Neil Young's "Who's Gonna Stand Up," the chorus of which is "Who's gonna stand up and save the Earth? / Who's gonna say that she's had enough? / Who's gonna take on the big machine? / Who's gonna stand up and save the Earth? / This all starts with you and me."

Toller doesn't inform the police of the suicide vest's existence. While his silence ostensibly aims to protect Mary's privacy and Michael's memory, we later realize that Toller holds on to the vest so he can wear it himself. Detonating the explosive device at the reconsecration would signal the absurdity of the event's financial ties to a corporation responsible for environmental wreckage. On the day of the event Toller solemnly buttons the vest, hidden under his cassock. He writes his journal's final entry, which uncharacteristically isn't relayed in voice-over, and connects the vest's wires. Although his plan is derailed by the sight of Mary entering the church, Toller's suicide bombing clearly aims to realize the stunt that Michael, deprived of his vest, couldn't stage.

In addition to figuring accelerated, human-caused extinction, Toller's planned suicide preempts a death that already appears imminent due to a high risk of environment-caused illness. Michael's death and a head-to-head with Balq prompt Toller to research Balq Industries' Environmental Protection Agency violations. Strikingly, footage of Toller's research accompanies voice-over narration in which Toller addresses health complications: "I can no longer ignore my health. I've postponed my checkup too often." Throughout the film, Toller coughs. His urine is bloody. A doctor recommends a gastroscopy, hinting at a stomach cancer diagnosis. Like Richard Powers's novel *Gain*, which juxtaposes the history of a chemical conglomerate with the story of a woman with ovarian cancer living near the headquarters, *First Reformed* suggests a correlation between Toller's symptoms and environmental toxicity without confirming causality.<sup>43</sup> Pointing to the oblique relation between toxicity, symptom, diagnosis, and cure, Michelle Murphy explains that the measurement of certain chemical exposures and not others, motivated by corporate and other special-interest groups, has delineated domains of perceptibility and domains of imperceptibility.<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli echoes this point while ratcheting toxicity to the scale of the global carbon cycle, where geochemical processes press inexorably on life itself.<sup>45</sup>

Refracted through biospheric and geochemical enmeshment, intentionality runs aground with inevitability as the two terms map the scarred terrain of "geontology," Povinelli's word for the geontopolitical distributions of life (*bios*) and nonlife (*geos*) under late liberalism.<sup>46</sup> For Povinelli, this division between biology and geology underlies Western ontologies: the question of being—from Aristotle to Heidegger to the Dakota Access Pipeline—prioritizes life, understood as intentional, self-organizing, purposive, and enclosed, over its so-called opposite, nonlife, understood as unintentional, desultory, and inert. And while it is true that geology

extrudes life, an uncritical theory of life has rendered imperceptible not only the countless viral relays between biology and geology but also, on a macroscale, geochemical disturbances to the planetary carbon cycle, histories of fossil fuel extraction, and the onset of anthropogenic climate change. Jane Bennett's assemblage theory marks one of the better-known attempts to puncture life's enclosure by obviating theory's myopic focus on the biological body politic.<sup>47</sup> Bennett instead traces assemblages of organic and inorganic matter that range across differences of intentionality and inevitability, cause and effect, and life and death.

Still, something of nonlife's vitiating force falls out of the picture of Bennett's vital assemblages. While the neologism "geontology" is meant to signal not so much a sublimation of as a *confrontation* with nonlife, the neovitalist turn to assemblages avoids that confrontation with its focus on "lively matters."<sup>48</sup> Bennett cuts through the red tape of geontopolitics only to claim that all things are animate—not alive per se but vibrant or vibratory. This argument concedes too much to an image of life as lively and dynamic, thus falling under the sway of a covert biontologism. Queer theory can make a difference here. Equally suspicious of the biontologization of life as purposive and self-organizing, queer theorists such as Edelman and Bersani posit a "real" that is neither life nor its opposite, biological death, but rather nonlife.<sup>49</sup> Edelman calls it the "rock of the real."<sup>50</sup> The point is not that this rock, or this real, is lifelike; rather, the point is that life tries falteringly to knit together, to assemble and reassemble, this geontological tear in reality, becoming lifeless as a result. By harnessing life's vitiating force, queer theory collapses life's metabolic narrative upon itself, like a collapsed lung. This is what is happening now at a planetary scale as human intentionality and the narratives thereof queer themselves from within by choking on life's abject remainders (CO<sub>2</sub>). Hence Povinelli's question: "Where is the human body if it is viewed from with the lung? The larger, massive biotic assemblage the lungs know intimately—including green plants, photosynthetic bacteria, nonsulfur purple bacteria, hydrogen, sulfur and iron bacteria, animals, and microbes—is now what is thought to produce the metabolism of the planetary carbon cycle, which may be on the verge of a massive reorganization due to human action."<sup>51</sup> Scaling down from the outer atmosphere of the planet to the inner atmosphere of the human lung, Povinelli shows that the metabolism of the human body maps the metabolic and geographical coordinates of a planetary system on life support. "These excisions [of scale]," Povinelli adds, "are becoming more difficult as the carbon cycle, where forms of existence produce themselves as atmosphere, is

interrupted by the consumption of carbon to produce and expand one form of life: late liberalism.”<sup>52</sup>

Thus interrupted, breath registers its extimate relations with nonlife in political statements and aesthetic forms. Deleuze for one captures the sense of aesthetic interruption, which he too defines as a shortage of breath, in his analysis of the literary writings of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. For Deleuze, the impersonal quality of a philosophy without breath insists itself in the personal, merely descriptive language of Sade’s and Masoch’s libertines. “In Sade,” Deleuze writes, “we discover a surprising affinity with Spinoza—a naturalistic and mechanistic approach imbued with the mathematical spirit. . . . In the work of Masoch there is a similar transcendence of the imperative and the descriptive toward a higher function.”<sup>53</sup> Deleuze’s anoxic formula (breathlessness, death = transcendence, politics) finds its cinematic expression in *Cinema 2*, where the habitual intervals between images create a life too “intolerable” to be borne.<sup>54</sup> Confronted with the intolerability of the image, Deleuze’s cinematic martyrs are sacrificed by a cruel film cut that trades aesthetic coherence for the impossibility of queer form. In this way, Deleuze’s cinema of cruelty furthers Bersani’s claim in *The Freudian Body* that the aesthetic is, even in its reparative modes, a tautology for masochism.<sup>55</sup>

*First Reformed* enmeshes Toller’s symptomatology with the planet’s, where air pollution, deforestation, species extinction, soil degradation, and overpopulation are enterically enfolded. Like the deadly incorporation of the other’s voice, this emplotment of toxicity proves destructive to not only Toller’s health but also the film’s framing dispositif: abundant life. According to Balq Industries and the Abundant Life church that is its mouthpiece, Christ died so that human life could have its encore. Toller’s “encore” is more Lacanian in inflection.<sup>56</sup> He stages a martyr’s death so that life, and the fantasy life that is compact with environmental destruction (the lasting imprint of heteronormativity’s green thumb), can live on by other means: by refusing viability and the social imperative to live at any cost. Toller’s illness isn’t explicitly stated as part of his planned suicide’s political message. Yet to us, his symptoms further blur the line between an intentional and an inevitable early death amid environmental collapse.

However apropos the film’s treatment of queer and environmental negativities may be, something about *First Reformed* is eerily out of time and out of place. Megachurches such as Abundant Life are staples of metropolises as well as large suburbs in the southern United States. They virtually do not exist in upstate New York, where the film is set.<sup>57</sup> The film’s only major Black character is Abundant



Life's resident pastor, Joel Jeffers (Cedric Kyles). Jeffers is a figure of corporatism. Michael, via Mary, and Toller criticize him for running his church as one would a corporation and for reducing *First Reformed* to a museum or souvenir shop. Jeffers also stands as a figure of bribery, prioritizing Balq's bottom line over Michael's last wishes and Toller's moral objections. Through Jeffers, *First Reformed* conflates Black religious life with carbon capitalism.

This conflation appears especially misguided in light of toxicity's disproportionate impact on the African American population. Dorceta E. Taylor explains that much of the environmental justice movement's rhetoric has relied on the assertion that hazardous facilities such as Hanstown, the toxic waste dump where Michael's ashes are scattered, are concentrated in minority and low-income communities.<sup>58</sup> In a study of toxic inequality in Chicago's neighborhoods at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Robert J. Sampson and Alix S. Winter report that the city's Black and Hispanic neighborhoods bear a great deal of the city's lead toxicity.<sup>59</sup> As the authors note, the debilitation through lead poisoning of a majority African American population in the Flint water crisis, begun in 2014 and still unresolved as of 2021, is not an aberration but instead is an exemplar of contemporary segregation qua toxic management. As Mel Y. Chen observes, lead exposure tends to reach the status of social and political problem when it affects a white subject whose suffering can be sentimentalized.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, *First Reformed* positions a white character as the paradigmatic victim, actual or potential, of a toxicity it attributes to the joint actions of a white oil magnate and a Black megachurch pastor.

*First Reformed* covers up toxic inequality by having Toller internalize it. His martyred internalization of planetary destruction indeed entails the internalization of racist geographies of toxic exposure. Insofar as Toller's planned suicide is meant to spectacularize extinction, it encompasses all deaths by environmental causes including the deaths of people of color, who are here made invisible despite their statistically higher exposure to toxicity. Toller is the world; the world is (in) Toller. Toller and the film itself thus absorb toxicity while disavowing its operation as an agent of whiteness's reproduction. This iteration of the inward turn, more sadistic than sweet, corresponds to the white subject's racial melancholy as Anne Anlin Cheng defines it: "white American identity and its authority [are] secured through the melancholic introjection of racial others that [this identity] can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate and whose ghostly presence nonetheless guarantees its centrality."<sup>61</sup> By containing and neutralizing racial others

disproportionally vulnerable to toxicity, Toller can imagine that *his* explosion will be universalizable, that it will mean something on a planetary scale. One type of megalomaniac destruction, Balq's, gives way to another, Toller's.

### Styles of Transcendence

*First Reformed* styles environmental collapse as a break in rhythm, a fluttering of breath, and a disaster in form. Although the film begins in a clinical mode, surveying the signs of a dying planet, it ends in a critical mode. Its question is not the everyday question posed on American bumper stickers, *What would Jesus do?*, but rather the philosophical one, *What would Tarkovsky do?* If the name Andrei Tarkovsky has become emblematic, thanks in part to Deleuze, of a certain post-Kantian mode of thinking about time and difference in twentieth-century avant-garde cinema, it did so, according to director Paul Schrader, at the expense of narrative cohesion. A cinema released from narrative gave way to an image of time without movement—what Schrader, in deference to the films of Ingmar Bergman, Robert Bresson, Carl Theodor Dreyer, and Yasujiro Ozu, calls “transcendental cinema.”

In 1971 Schrader, then a film student, wrote a book titled *Transcendental Style in Film*. The book was republished in 2018 with a new introduction by the author titled “Rethinking Transcendental Style.” Schrader’s object of analysis, as he clarifies in this new piece, is not any religious content per se but rather religious style, more precisely a filmic style of thought about the holy. “Church people had been using movies since they first moved to illustrate religious belief,” Schrader writes, “but this was something different. The convergence of spirituality and cinema would occur in style, not content.”<sup>62</sup> Schrader goes on:

Transcendental style can be seen . . . as part of a larger movement, the movement away from narrative. . . . By delaying edits, not moving the camera, forswearing music cues, not employing coverage, and heightening the mundane, transcendental style creates a sense of unease the viewer must resolve. The film maker assists the viewer’s impulse for resolution by the use of a Decisive Moment, an unexpected image or act, which then results in a stasis, an acceptance of parallel reality—transcendence. . . . World War II dates the rough demarcation of a shift, more in Europe than America, from movement-image to time-image. Screen movement still occurred, of course, but it was increasingly “subordinated to time.”<sup>63</sup>

By distancing itself from narrative technique, transcendental style affirms what can only be asserted by negation: it is a spiritual style for a dead God, “an acceptance of parallel reality—transcendence.”<sup>64</sup> This parallel reality exists because it is denied; it appears only through the medium of the editorial cut, or the film’s wandering caesura, its bated breath. Although Schrader never says so, transcendental style is melodramatic—not to mention queer—in that it wrests the image from any given so as to give witness to a reality in excess of the world thus composed. Schrader goes on to clarify his point regarding film’s subordination to time and the “non-rational cuts” it engenders:

Man exits one room, enters another—that’s movement-image editing. Man exits one room, shot of trees in the wind, shot of train passing—that’s time-image editing. . . . Deleuze called this the “non-rational cut.” The non-rational cut breaks from sensorimotor logic. . . . Movement-image is informed by Aristotelian logic: “A” can never equal “not A.” Time-image rejects the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, posits a world where something and its opposite can coexist: “A” can be “not A.”<sup>65</sup>

Transcendental style rejects organic wholeness. Instead of creating a larger whole (Life, the Heterosexual Unit), it produces explosive differences: of time, materiality, thought, and sex. This is a cinema in which parts without predetermined wholes combine to further their radical disjunctions: “A” can be “not A.”

We recognize the wandering temporality of the cut, which the film makes coextensive with the planetary carbon cycle’s interruptive and spasmodic temporal reorganization of life and nonlife, in the film’s penultimate scene of transcendental collapse. Toller appears at his desk, his diary open, soaking his insides with alcohol (80-proof and above will burn). Mary knocks unannounced. Grief-stricken over the loss of her husband, she turns to Toller for guidance. The room is austere and dimly lit. The camera frame is static, matched to the architecture of the room. Mary and Toller come together at a distance at first. The restrictive 4:3 aspect ratio, consistent throughout the film, gives the viewer less while filling the frame with more: more of the human face and more emotion. Deleuze and Félix Guattari write of the face in close-up that it is not a part of the diegetic whole but instead is a part unto itself.<sup>66</sup> As in our previous discussion of the voice-object, the face, once partialized, stands outside narrative sequence and intensifies the viewer’s relationship to time, charging it with affect. As we linger over Mary’s face, we hear her explain to Toller the “thing” she used to do with Michael. She states, “We used to do this thing called the



Figure 2. Mary Mansana's (Amanda Seyfried) hair falls like a curtain over Pastor Ernst Toller's face.

Magical Mystery Tour. It sounds silly. But . . . we would . . . share a joint and lay on top of each other fully clothed. We would try to get as much body-to-body contact as possible. We'd have our hands out and we would look straight into each other's eyes and move them in unison like right, left, right, left. And then we would breathe in rhythm." "You want me to do this?" Toller offers. Mary hesitates: "No. I didn't mean that." Moments later, she accepts Toller's overture. They walk to the middle of the hardwood floor. The camera maintains its distance as Toller asks for instruction: "Do we need music?" he asks. "No," says Mary, "we just listen to the breaths." They stretch out on the floor, their bodies horizontal. Toller lies supine, Mary prostrate and directly above. They are stacked one on top of the other, Mary's palms resting on Toller's like two fallen leaves. They look into each other's eyes as if across a chasm, but it is only a matter of inches. Their faces fill the screen like two splayed cross sections or silhouettes. No words are exchanged, only audible breath. Their noses touch. Their mouths inhale and exhale one into the other. Mary's hair, a perfect bell shape, falls in vertical strands over their adjoined faces like a curtain, veiling their tête-à-tête from the viewer (figure 2). The final unbroken shot lasts for approximately forty-five seconds, long enough for us to feel time dilate and grow heavy, as though Mary and Toller were no longer

two living, breathing persons but rather sedimentary layers, compressed by eons, their bodies one great tuning fork echoing the primordial sound of the universe: om, the inexhaustible breath.

And then it happens. As the curtains fall on this reality, we are transported to another. The Magical Mystery Tour has begun. Mary and Toller begin to levitate in a nod to Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (figure 3).<sup>67</sup> Mary and Toller's surroundings fade to black as we, along with them, float through outer space. It is, if not the beginning of time, the beginning of life on Earth as starry space turns to snow-capped mountains, followed by images of green hills, a pristine shore, a blue sea, and a vast forest. All of this appears sped in time lapse. It is paradise at the speed of a screen saver or nature documentary—hence, for us, a paradise lost. In *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Stanley Cavell writes that film “overcame subjectivity” and the problem of skepticism “in a way undreamed of by painting.”<sup>68</sup> This is because “photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it.” Cavell further claims that “the reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity), is a world past.”<sup>69</sup> Film stages the problem of skepticism—of the human subject's access to the world outside of



Figure 3. Mary Mansana and Pastor Ernst Toller levitate as the Magical Mystery Tour begins.



Figure 4. Pastor Ernst Toller's face darkens as a pastoral landscape turns postindustrial.

thought—by envisioning a world in which skepticism, taken to its logical extreme, has eliminated the human subject entirely. The “automatism” of film presents the world as it is “in itself,” but it is a world from which we are absent. Moreover, as Cavell points out, a world without the viewer is “a world past”; film, as a medium, is deeply melancholic. *First Reformed* reminds the viewer of this melancholy condition, and savagely so. As the Magical Mystery Tour continues, Toller peers outside the curtain of Mary's fallen hair. His face begins to darken as the forest canopy below turns to congested highways followed by landfill, industrial smokestacks, clear-cutting, plastic waste, a landscape devastated by fire, and finally a polluted and derelict shipping yard (figure 4). By the end of the ritual, Mary and Toller have exited the frame completely. Their disappearance not only presages a world in which intentional and inevitable destruction have collapsed but also hastens the void left by Toller's willed subtraction.

This is transcendental style for the climate change era. It moves outside the immanence of our relations to approach the unthinkable: deep time colliding with the present and human breath fueling a planetary conflagration. The decision of “an unexpected image or act”—Schrader calls this the “Decisive Moment”—is not to be confused with the choice of an alternate reality, as in the

film *Another Earth*, where a duplicate planet Earth is found, promising individuals the chance at a better life elsewhere.<sup>70</sup> Nor is it the quantum reality imagined by the patriarchal parable *Interstellar*, in which a father communicates with his daughter across infinite time and space to stave off human extinction.<sup>71</sup> In *First Reformed*, there is only this world. Such is the film's cruelty: it makes us powerless before the image of Earth's and our own annihilation. Yet this powerlessness to think other worlds does not prevent the film from envisioning the world as an open whole. On the contrary, it is because *First Reformed* is freed from having to think a truer world that it can release the image to novel variations. The critique of "bad transcendence" by antifoundationalist thinkers such as Morton and Butler had the unintended consequence of reinstalling immanence as a transcendental ground. By contrast, *First Reformed* aligns transcendence with the foreclosure of queerness to think time and transcendence—they mean the same thing according to Schrader—without the human eye as anchor. Transcendence, here, comes not from above (the Archimedean point of view) but rather vertiginously from within. It is a baseless spiral.

In the film's final scene, spiral is what we get. Toller has been performing his last rites before the start of the First Reformed reconsecration ceremony: visiting the scenes of Balq Industry's toxic runoff, stalking the streets and staring introspectively in the mirror (a callback to Schrader's screenplay for *Taxi Driver*, featuring one Travis Bickle, a former U.S. marine turned suicidal saint).<sup>72</sup> On the day of reconsecration, we see Toller buttoning his suicide vest and gazing at it in the mirror. Among the wires and explosives, a patch with the names and faces of two murdered ecological activists appears stitched to the upper-left corner of the vest. Happy with the fit, he conceals the suicide vest with his vestments. While sitting at his desk, he pens the final words of his diary. Before taking the podium, he decamps to the window for a final look outside. He fills the frame of the window like a coffin. That's when he sees Mary enter the First Reformed church. Distraught, he ambles back and forth, pausing only to let out a strangulated scream. He is forced to improvise. He emerges from a dark pantry, barbed wire and Drano bottle in hand. The barbed wire was salvaged from the church garden; when we last saw it, a dead animal hung from its edges. Cut scene.

When we return to Toller, it's now his flesh that the barbed wire pierces; he wears it wrapped around his naked chest like a crown of thorns fashioned into bondage gear (figure 5). "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," a song of refuge, plays in the background. When we next see him, Toller is wearing a white robe. The blood from his



Figure 5. Pastor Ernst Toller wraps himself in barbed wire.

mutilated flesh blossoms rose petals on the white of his linen. He fills a glass with Drano. “FULL CLOG DESTROYER,” the product’s epithet, appears vertically in the left-hand side of the screen as sodium hydroxide the color of honey runs down the middle of the frame. Toller’s shoulders and head are curiously lopped from the frame—a visual reminder of Michael Mensana’s blown-off head. The parishioners are waiting. We are waiting. Time is charged to the bursting point. Toller takes the cup in hand. Then, Mary. She calls him: “Ernst.” The glass hits the floor, spilling its contents, and Toller walks steadfast to Mary. The camera, static throughout the film, begins to rotate. It spins around Mary and Toller as they kiss and embrace (figure 6). The barbed wire, seemingly not an impediment, can only sink deeper as they coil arms and edges around each other. The camera too rings around them until it stops. After two slow rotations, the screens cuts to black.

The ending is quickly followed by filmic collapse. Put differently, *First Reformed* ends twice. Schrader first gives us a false happy ending of the kind often found in the Sirkian melodrama. In such a happy ending, characters move beyond the impasse—or delude themselves into thinking they can do so—by disavowing a loss hidden in plain sight. Toller and Mary’s embrace affirms life qua heterosexual romance and reproductive futurism (Mary being, of course, an archetype for motherhood) while disavowing





Figure 6. Mary Mansana and Pastor Ernst Toller enjoy a dizzying embrace.

its enmeshment with morbid queerness—an enmeshment that, Goldberg indicates, is the metaphysical location of the impossible situation. But in mere seconds, this false happy ending is brought past its point of ignition. The film spirals, inasmuch as suicide and preservation lose their ontological grounding against the backdrop of environmental catastrophe. The camera spins around the duo until narrative shatters and the film cuts to black. The instantaneous cut is the film's second ending. Transcendental style appears in the void of unthinkability left by irresolvable contradictions.

The film's conclusion confirms that Mary was never an agentive character but instead was a biblical emblem of feminine plenitude threatened by queer forces: first Michael, then Toller. Reductively, instrumentally, Mary *is* childbearing and later child rearing. The meaning of her ultimate absorption into the void of negativity, illegible in terms of personal motivations or intentions, is symbolic rather than biographical.<sup>73</sup> Mary—or, what she represents—is siphoned. This isn't a *folie à deux*. The *folie* is queer, and the queerness is Toller's.

*First Reformed* only dampens the violence of Toller's suicidal rampage by baking it into the formal detonation of an impossible situation. The formalization, as void, of the unbearable confluence of individual and species destructions brings us, the spectators, much relief. Buckel's suicide and Dickey's wildfire, by contrast,

didn't cut to black. In the wake of these events, we remain in melodramatic and ethical suspension, where the queer dictum "More life!" sounds increasingly perverse. We are still inhabiting an impossible situation—for now.

### Notes

1. Jesse Barron, "David Buckel, a Lifetime of Service Ended in Self-Immolation," *New York Times*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/12/27/magazine/lives-they-lived-david-buckel.html>.

2. Jeffery C. Mays, "Prominent Lawyer in Fight for Gay Rights Dies after Setting Himself on Fire in Prospect Park," *New York Times*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/nyregion/david-buckel-dead-fire.html>.

3. Barron, "David Buckel, a Lifetime of Service Ended in Self-Immolation."

4. Amir Vera, "Border Patrol Agent's Gender Reveal Party Ignited a 47,000-Acre Wildfire," CNN, October 2, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/02/us/az-off-duty-border-patrol-agent-wildfire/index.html>.

5. Barron, "David Buckel, a Lifetime of Service Ended in Self-Immolation."

6. Jason Silverstein, "Why the Ashes of People with AIDS on the White House Lawn Matter," *Vice*, August 29, 2016, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/vdqv34/why-the-ashes-of-aids-victims-on-the-white-house-lawn-matter](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vdqv34/why-the-ashes-of-aids-victims-on-the-white-house-lawn-matter).

7. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

8. Elizabeth A. Wilson, "Acts against Nature," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 23, no. 1 (2018): 22 (emphasis in the original).

9. Edelman, *No Future*, 25 (emphasis in the original); Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 113.

10. Edelman, *No Future*, 29.

11. Neel Ahuja, "Intimate Atmospheres: Queer Theory in a Time of Extinctions," *GLQ* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 365.

12. Ahuja, "Intimate Atmospheres," 372.

13. Jonathan Goldberg, *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), ix.

14. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 169, 2.

15. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xiv.

16. *First Reformed*, dir. Paul Schrader (Killer Films, Omeira Studio Partners, Fibonacci Films, Arclight Films, Big Indie Productions, 2017).

17. Bersani, *Homos*, 7.

18. Edelman, *No Future*.

19. Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 6.
20. *Ibid.*, 6.
21. Goldberg, *Melodrama*, 3.
22. *Ibid.*, 25, 79.
23. Catriona Sandilands, "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, 331–58 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).
24. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953), 257.
25. Sandilands, "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," 342.
26. David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
27. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 147.
28. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 181; Timothy Morton, "Queer Ecology," *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 274.
29. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 186.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 187.
32. *Ibid.*
33. See Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 121–58.
34. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 197 (emphasis in the original).
35. Frédéric Neyrat, *Atopias: Manifesto for a Radical Existentialism*, trans. Walt Hunter and Lindsay Turner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 4.
36. Goldberg, *Melodrama*. See also Deleuze, *Cinema 2*; Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
37. Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 74.
38. *Ibid.*, 85, 88.
39. As Nicole Seymour demonstrates, environmentalism frequently conjures the figure of the innocent child as the imaginary victim of environmental collapse and the benefactor of environmental activism. Similarly, Rebekah Sheldon argues that amid crisis, the child is invested with "the emergent energies of posthumanity." Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Rebekah Sheldon, *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 21.

40. Amplifying resonances between queer theory and environmental studies, Sarah Ensor posits that cruising, a scene dear to many male-identifying queer theorists, “might inspire an ecological ethic more deeply attuned to our impersonal intimacies with the human, nonhuman, and elemental strangers that constitute both our environment and ourselves.” According to Ensor’s utopian account, in cruising, “anonymity and impersonality can be the ground of intimacy rather than barriers to it.” The suicidal ideation and performance of self-annihilation in *First Reformed* reject the idea that at this stage of planetary destruction, an ethics may be rooted in cross-species intimacies, however thrillingly impersonal. Michael, like Davis S. Buckel, sees his own survival as an obstacle to that of other organic beings. Sarah Ensor, “Queer Fallout: Samuel R. Delany and the Ecology of Cruising,” *Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2017): 150, 155.

41. “What consciousness is aware of in the work of melancholia is thus not the essential part of it, nor is it even the part which we may credit with an influence in bringing the ailment to an end. We see that the ego debases itself and rages against itself, and we understand as little as the patient what this can lead to and how it can change.” Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 257.

42. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 126.

43. Richard Powers, *Gain* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998).

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46. *Ibid.*, 5.

47. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

48. *Ibid.*, 112.

49. Edelman, *No Future*; Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

50. Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?* 70.

51. Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 42.

52. *Ibid.*, 46.

53. Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. by Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 20.

54. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 169.

55. Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

56. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge (Encore)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998).

57. According to data compiled by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, the largest church in the state of New York outside of the New York City boroughs boasts an average attendance of thirty-five hundred parishioners. Hartford Institute for Religious Research, "Database of Megachurches in the U.S.," 2015, <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>.

58. Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

59. Robert J. Sampson and Alix S. Winter, "The Racial Ecology of Lead Poisoning: Toxic Inequality in Chicago Neighborhoods, 1995–2013," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 13, no. 2 (2016): 261–83.

60. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

61. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), xi.

62. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 2.

63. *Ibid.*, 3.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*, 4.

66. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

67. *Mirror*, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky (Mosfilm, 1975).

68. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 23.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 3; *Another Earth*, dir. Mike Cahill (Artists Public Domain, 2011).

71. *Interstellar*, dir. Christopher Nolan (Legendary Pictures, Syncopy, and Lunda Obst Productions, 2014).

72. *Taxi Driver*, dir. Martin Scorsese (Bill/Phillips Productions and Italo/Judeo Productions, 1976).

73. Schrader describes Mary as though she were a symbol, rather than a character, in an interview whose publication coincided with the film's theatrical release: "On one level, Grace descends and he's saved from his suicidal ways. On the other hand, there he is in Gethsemane with the cup in his hand and he's saying, 'Lord, please let this cup pass from me.' But he doesn't, and he drinks it, and now he's on all fours, purging out his stomach. And God, who hasn't talked to him for the whole film, now comes over to him and says, 'Rev. Toller, would you like to see what heaven looks like?' . . . It looks like one long kiss." Eric Cortellessa, "Paul Schrader on *First Reformed's* Provocative Ending and Its Many Influences," *Slate*, June 13, 2018, <https://slate.com/culture/2018/06/first-reformed-ending-paul-schrader-explains-why-its-designed-to-be-ambiguous.html>.

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