



Antinatalism in the Seventh Art and Small Screen

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Abstract

Although antinatalism has been discussed in philosophy, it has received far less direct attention in Film and Media Studies, where similar concerns are usually approached through themes such as pessimism, nihilism, extinction, biopolitics, or childhood suffering. This thesis argues that film and television offer an important space in which these ethical questions can be felt, imagined, and reflected upon, even when antinatalism is not explicitly named.

The thesis is based on qualitative textual analysis and close reading. It examines six case studies: *True Detective* (Season One), *Utopia*, *Attack on Titan*, *Children of Men*, *Melancholia*, and *Capernaum*. These works were selected since they approach reproduction, futurity, and suffering from different angles and through different genres, while still sharing a common concern with the ethical weight of bringing new life into the world. By analysing narrative structure, characterisation, visual style, tone, and recurring motifs, the thesis investigates how antinatalist ideas are embedded in contemporary screen culture.

Rather than presenting antinatalism as a formal doctrine, these works tend to express it indirectly: through dystopian worlds, ecological crisis, inherited trauma, extinction scenarios, and characters who experience existence as burden rather than gift. In this way, film and television do not simply reflect philosophical debate but actively shape how viewers perceive and evaluate questions surrounding reproduction and harm. Contemporary audiovisual media open up a space in which birth can be questioned as an ethical act. By doing so, they bring antinatalist concerns into popular culture as a serious and emotionally resonant problem rather than as a marginal philosophical stance.

Key words

Antinatalism – Pessimism – Nihilism – Existentialism – Absurdism – Film and Media Studies



Ο αντιναταλισμός στην έβδομη τέχνη και την μικρή οθόνη

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Περίληψη

Αν και ο αντιναταλισμός έχει αποτελέσει αντικείμενο συζήτησης στη φιλοσοφία, τον συναντάμε πιο σπάνια στις Σπουδές Κινηματογράφου και Μέσων Ενημέρωσης, όπου παρόμοια ζητήματα προσεγγίζονται συνήθως μέσω θεμάτων όπως ο πεσιμισμός, ο μηδενισμός, η εξαφάνιση, η βιοπολιτική ή τα βάσανα της παιδικής ηλικίας. Η παρούσα διπλωματική εργασία υποστηρίζει ότι ο κινηματογράφος και η τηλεόραση προσφέρουν έναν σημαντικό χώρο στον οποίο αυτά τα ηθικά ερωτήματα μπορούν να προβληθούν και να αποτελέσουν αντικείμενο στοχασμού, ακόμη και όταν ο αντιναταλισμός δεν αναφέρεται ρητά.

Η διπλωματική εργασία βασίζεται σε ποιοτική κειμενική και close reading ανάλυση. Εξετάζει έξι περιπτωσιολογικές μελέτες: *True Detective* (Πρώτος Κύκλος), *Utopia*, *Attack on Titan*, *Children of Men*, *Melancholia* και *Capernaum*. Τα έργα αυτά επιλέχθηκαν επειδή προσεγγίζουν την αναπαραγωγή, το μέλλον και τον πόνο από διαφορετικές οπτικές γωνίες και μέσω διαφορετικών ειδών, ενώ ταυτόχρονα μοιράζονται ένα κοινό ενδιαφέρον για το ηθικό βάρος της γέννησης νέας ζωής στον κόσμο. Μέσω της ανάλυσης της αφηγηματικής δομής, της περιγραφής χαρακτήρων, του οπτικού ύφους, του τόνου και των επαναλαμβανόμενων μοτίβων, η διπλωματική εργασία διερευνά τον τρόπο με τον οποίο οι αντιναταλιστικές ιδέες ενσωματώνονται στη σύγχρονη κουλτούρα.

Αντί να παρουσιάζουν τον αντιναταλισμό ως κεντρική ιδέα, τα έργα αυτά τείνουν να τον εκφράζουν έμμεσα: μέσω δυστοπικών κόσμων, οικολογικής κρίσης, κληρονομικού τραύματος, σεναρίων εξαφάνισης και χαρακτήρων που βιώνουν την ύπαρξη ως βάρος και όχι ως ευχάριστο. Με αυτόν τον τρόπο, ο κινηματογράφος και η τηλεόραση δεν αντανakλούν απλώς τη φιλοσοφική συζήτηση, αλλά διαμορφώνουν ενεργά τον τρόπο με τον οποίο οι θεατές αντιλαμβάνονται και αξιολογούν ζητήματα που αφορούν την αναπαραγωγή και τη βλάβη. Τα σύγχρονα οπτικοακουστικά μέσα ανοίγουν ένα πεδίο στο οποίο η γέννηση μπορεί να αμφισβητηθεί ως ηθική πράξη. Με αυτόν τον τρόπο, εισάγουν τις αντιναταλιστικές ανησυχίες στην λαϊκή κουλτούρα ως ένα σοβαρό και συναισθηματικά συγκινητικό πρόβλημα και όχι ως μια περιθωριακή φιλοσοφική στάση.

Λέξεις Κλειδιά

Αντιναταλισμός – Αντιγεννητισμός – Πεσιμισμός – Νιχιλισμός – Μηδενισμός – Παραλογισμός Σπουδές στον Κινηματογράφο και τα Μέσα Ενημέρωσης

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1. Chapter 1: Methodology and Introduction

1.1 Scope of the thesis

This thesis addresses a relative lack of sustained analysis of antinatalism as an ethical framework in Film and Media Studies. While many films and television series engage with themes such as infertility, extinction, reproductive control, childhood suffering and the loss of futurity, antinatalism rarely appears as an explicitly accepted philosophical position within these popular narratives. As a result, existing academic work has tended to interpret these works through adjacent frameworks, including biopolitics, social realism, pessimism, or nihilism, often without directly engaging with the ethical question of non-reproduction itself.

This thesis approaches reproduction not as a neutral narrative premise, but as a morally meaningful choice that is frequently assumed rather than examined. In doing so, it draws its scope by focusing on how aesthetic and narrative strategies – such as narrative structure, tone, pacing, and visual atmosphere — create conditions in which ethical questions surrounding birth, responsibility, and inherited suffering become legible, even when antinatalism is not explicitly articulated. By framing these issues across disciplines, the thesis establishes the conceptual and analytical framework within which the case studies are situated.

1.2 Purpose and objectives of the thesis

This thesis explores how antinatalism appears in contemporary popular culture, particularly in film and television. Instead of treating antinatalism solely as a formal philosophical theory, the thesis examines how it appears indirectly through storylines, visual choices, and recurring themes in movies and television series. The main research question—how antinatalism is shown in popular culture—is answered by closely analysing works that address reproduction, suffering, and a lost hope for the future.

The thesis examines how films and television series present non-reproduction as an ethical issue, rather than something missing from the story or a dystopian theme. Examining specific examples shows that antinatalist ideas are rarely stated openly. Instead, they come through in the stories about inherited suffering, lost hope for the future, the moral burden of bringing someone into the world, and challenges to the usual belief that having children is always good. This thesis aims to bridge film and media studies with moral philosophy, using antinatalism as a way to explore current cultural concerns about reproduction, responsibility, and the justification of continuing life.

1.3 Methodology

This chapter explains the methodological approach used in this thesis, which is based on qualitative textual analysis and close reading of film and television works. The selected works are treated as cultural texts and examined in detail, with attention to their narrative structure, characters, visual style, tone, and recurring themes addressing antinatalist philosophy where it applies. The focus is on how meaning is created within the works themselves, rather than on collecting external data. As such, the approach is interpretive rather than empirical; it does not rely on statistics, experiments, or audience surveys, but instead explores how ethical questions are presented and developed within the works. Close reading is particularly useful here, as it allows for a careful analysis of how abstract ideas—such as reproduction, suffering, and futurity—are embedded within storytelling.

For the purposes of this thesis, six audiovisual case studies have been selected in order to examine how antinatalist ideas are articulated and transformed through contemporary screen narratives: the television series "*Attack on Titan*" (2013), "*Utopia*" (2013), and the first season of "*True Detective*" (2014) and the films "*Children of Men*" (2006), "*Melancholia*" (2011), and "*Capernaum*" (2018). These works were chosen not as illustrations of antinatalist themes, but as interpretive examples through which broader questions from film and media studies can be explored, including narrative framing, character alignment, genre, affect, and the representation of ethical conflict.

Despite their differences, all these works, grapple with the idea that creating new life may be ethically questionable—whether through fertility crises, apocalyptic scenarios, familial trauma, or conspiracy agendas. None of them presents antinatalism as an explicit manifesto; instead, this thesis examines how antinatalist concerns emerge within their narratives. Such ideas are articulated through dialogue, dystopian environments, character choices, and narrative outcomes rather than through direct philosophical argumentation. This shared focus makes the corpus particularly well-suited for investigating how film and television participate in ethical debate.

The selection of case studies was done attempting to find a balance of diversity in medium, genre, and thematic relevance. The works span both mainstream and independent contexts, including a well-known HBO crime drama, a popular anime series, a Cannes-recognised Lebanese film, and a Danish art-house production. By bringing together widely distributed and more niche works, the study captures how antinatalist themes appear across different areas of audiovisual culture, from commercial entertainment to festival cinema. The selection also reflects a range of genres—such as dystopian science fiction, psychological drama, social realism, and speculative or conspiracy thriller—allowing for an exploration of how different narrative forms approach ethical questions surrounding reproduction and extinction.

In addition, the works were selected for their cultural visibility and critical reception, highlighting their relevance and impact. By including both television and internationally recognised films, the thesis reflects how these ideas circulate among both broader audiences and critical contexts. Each work also provides sufficient depth for close analysis. Whether through complex characters such as Rust Cohle or Zeke Yeager, or through narrative premises centred on extinction and infertility, these texts lend themselves to a detailed examination of how storytelling can engage with philosophical questions. Overall, the selection aims to balance variety with coherence, bringing together different formats and genres that together shed light on how contemporary screen media explore the ethics of procreation and the value of human life.

1.4 An introduction to anti-natalism as a philosophical position

Antinatalism is the philosophical position that questions whether it is morally right to bring new life into the world. At its core lies the belief that human existence is inseparable from suffering. Even when life contains moments of joy, pleasure, or meaning, it also inevitably includes pain, loss, illness, disappointment, and ultimately, death. For this reason, antinatalist thinkers argue that coming into existence is always a harm, or at least an imposition, because no one can consent to being born into a world where suffering is unavoidable.

From this perspective, procreation becomes an ethical issue rather than a purely personal or biological choice. Procreation refers to the act of bringing a new individual into existence, but within antinatalist thought, it is understood as a morally significant action that directly affects another being. To have a child is not simply to create life, but also to expose another individual to the conditions of existence, including vulnerability to suffering. The concept of suffering here is broad, encompassing not only physical pain but also emotional distress, anxiety, grief, frustration, and the awareness of one's own mortality. Even under favourable conditions, human life remains uncertain and fragile, and no individual can be guaranteed a life free from harm. As a result, antinatalism treats procreation not as a neutral act, but as one that imposes a risk of suffering on another person.

In this sense, antinatalism does not merely express pessimism about the world, but raises a deeper moral question about responsibility. It is closely linked to what might be called the ethics of existence, namely the question of whether it is morally justified to create new life given the presence of unavoidable harm. If suffering is an inherent part of existence, then bringing someone into being involves exposing them to harms they did not choose. Antinatalist thought therefore challenges the common assumption that birth is always a good thing rendering non-existence preferable to existence since it avoids harm. From this perspective, refraining from procreation can be interpreted as a compassionate or ethically cautious response to the conditions of human life.

2. Chapter 2: Analysis of Sources

2.1 A Philosophical Overview of Antinatalism: Antinatalism in Philosophical Context

Antinatalism did not emerge in isolation. Rather, it developed within a broader philosophical tradition concerned with the value of existence, the reality of suffering, and the question of whether creating new life can be justified. Although nihilism, existentialism, and pessimism differ significantly in their conclusions, each contributes to the intellectual background from which antinatalist thought arises. Examining these traditions helps clarify both the sources of antinatalism and the ways in which it departs from its predecessors.

One of the philosophical views relevant to this background is nihilism, the view that life lacks any inherent meaning, value, or purpose. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his work "The Gay Science" (1882) famously diagnosed Western culture with a creeping nihilism in the wake of the "death of God", arguing that the collapse of absolute religious and moral certainties had left behind a void of meaning. In a nihilistic view, there are no objective moral truths or cosmic plans underlying human existence; any meaning must be human-made and may therefore appear arbitrary or illusory (Mackie, 1977). This condition is often understood as a cultural crisis, since confrontation with a seemingly meaningless universe can give rise to despair, apathy, or moral paralysis. At first sight, this position might seem to resonate with antinatalism; if existence has no ultimate purpose or value, one may reasonably ask why its continuation should be affirmed through procreation. In this respect, antinatalism partly comes together with nihilism, insofar as both confront the possibility that human continuance lacks any higher justification beyond subjective narratives.

Norwegian thinker Peter Wessel Zapffe, for example, can be read as connecting nihilism and antinatalism: in his essay "The Last Messiah" (1933), he argued that humans are a biologically "over-evolved" species whose heightened consciousness dooms us to seek meaning in a meaningless cosmos. His unsettling conclusion was that humanity should voluntarily halt procreation in order to end this cycle of needless suffering and cosmic emptiness. Here, the nihilist insight that existence lacks inherent meaning, leads directly to an antinatalist response. However, it is important to distinguish antinatalism from passive or pessimistic nihilism. The latter does not necessarily offer a solution to the problem of suffering or meaninglessness; rather, it often remains at the level of recognition. If nothing ultimately matters, the response may become one of indifference: why care, if nothing has significance? In this form, pessimistic nihilism tends less toward ethical prescription than toward apathy, despair, or resignation.

Antinatalism, by contrast, transforms a bleak diagnosis of existence into a normative claim about procreation. Nietzsche, for his part, rejected such life-denying conclusions. He advocated instead a radical "revaluation" of values and a life-affirming stance (May, 2016): the idea that individuals can and must respond actively to meaninglessness by creating values and affirming life despite its suffering. In this sense, his position moves toward what would later be recognised as a more existential orientation. He criticised philosophical pessimism as symptomatic of weakness and refused to treat meaninglessness as a sufficient reason to renounce life (Nietzsche, [1885] 2020). Nihilism and antinatalism can occasionally overlap in viewing life as lacking ultimate meaning. Where antinatalism tends toward rejecting the continuation of life, nihilism splits into two different responses; passive pessimistic nihilism which may collapse into

indifference or resignation and Nietzsche's more active nihilism which insists that one can, and indeed should, affirm life and create meaning even within a meaningless cosmos.

A second relevant philosophical view is existentialism, along with its close cousin absurdism, which likewise began from the premise that human life has no preordained meaning. Twentieth-century existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir echo the nihilist starting point: there is no fixed essence or purpose assigned to us by God or nature (de Beauvoir, [1947] 2000). Yet existentialism's distinct characteristic is to respond to meaninglessness not with resignation but with personal freedom and responsibility. Sartre's famous dictum that goes as follows "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, [1946] 2009) encapsulates this position: we find ourselves alive without any given script, and it falls to each of us to create our own purpose and values through decisions and commitments. In effect, existentialism encourages individuals to make meaning through action, even if that meaning has no foundation beyond one's choice. This attitude contrasts sharply with any counsel to withdraw from life.

Albert Camus, who often identified with existentialism and more specifically absurdism, frames the core question whether life is worth living in a world that lacks purpose. In "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), Camus confronts the "absurd" – the discrepancy between the human craving for meaning and the universe's indifference – and he asks whether this condition should lead one to escape life – as in suicide – or not. Camus famously concludes that we must imagine Sisyphus (the mythical figure condemned to push a boulder uphill for eternity) as conscious of his condition, defiantly affirming his struggle and refusing resignation. The absurdist position, much like existentialism more broadly, is one of rebellion rather than surrender: if the world offers no built-in answers, we rebel by living fully and passionately in spite of that void. This outlook intersects with antinatalism only up to a point.

Both existentialists and antinatalists acknowledge a cosmos devoid of inherent purpose and the alienation that can cause. Both also recognise the reality of suffering and the human desire to make sense of it. But the divergence lies in the ethical conclusion drawn. Antinatalists often argue that if life is inherently meaningless and saturated with suffering, refraining from creating new life is a rational or compassionate choice – essentially removing future Sisyphuses from the absurd cycle. Existentialists and absurdist, by contrast, typically view such a resignation as a failure of nerve or a refusal to exercise one's freedom. For Sartre and Beauvoir, the idea of opting out, whether through suicide or the more hypothetical scenario of never being born, is seen as avoiding the very freedom and responsibility that define us (de Beauvoir, [1947] 2000). Camus explicitly rejects suicide as a solution to the absurd, considering it a surrender of the human capacity for revolt; by extension, he would likely regard antinatalism's call to eliminate future life as a punishment of our stance of defiance. Instead of extinguishing life because it lacks "sense", Camus suggests we create our own sense through acts of living, creating, loving, and rebelling (Camus, [1942] 2010).

Indeed, existentialism champions engagement with life's trials as the authentic response to an absurd world, whereas antinatalism views disengagement—at least in terms of ending the lineage of suffering – as the more ethically consistent outcome. There are, however, notable grey zones between these positions. Certain thinkers straddle the line, like the Romanian French philosopher Emil Cioran, for instance, is often classed with existentialist or nihilist writers, yet he supported a highly pessimistic outlook that flirts with antinatalist sentiments. In works like "The Trouble with Being

Born" (1973), Cioran lamented birth as a catastrophe and was troubled wondering why anyone would want to bring a child into the world. His morbid reflections illustrate that not all who grapple with the absurd end up affirming life – some, like Cioran, lean toward the hopelessness that underlies antinatalist thinking, even if they do not formalise it as a strict ethical doctrine. On the whole, though, existentialism contributes vital context to antinatalism's debate by raising the fundamental question – Is life in a meaningless world worth continuing? – while mostly answering in the opposite manner to antinatalists: that one must find or create reasons to live, rather than yield to nothingness.

The third, and most directly connected, philosophical view is philosophical pessimism, which confronts the possibility that life's inherent features (particularly suffering) overwhelm its positive aspects. Pessimism, especially in its Schopenhauerian form, offers perhaps the clearest foreshadowing of antinatalist ethics. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) argued that the world is driven by an irrational "will to live", an insatiable striving which manifests in all creatures as ceaseless desire and restless craving. He suggested that this makes satisfaction impossible, "Every goal that is achieved is once again the beginning of a new course of action, and so on to infinity...human endeavours and desires... always delude us into believing that their fulfilment is the final goal of willing; but as soon as they are attained they no longer look the same and thus are soon forgotten...we are lucky enough when there is still something left to desire and strive after... so that the game might not come to an end..." (Schopenhauer, [1818] 2000, p. 188). For Schopenhauer, suffering is the normal state of life, and happiness is only a short break from it. He compared human life to a pendulum that swings between pain and boredom (Schopenhauer, [1851] 2004). When one escapes urgent pain, one faces the emptiness of boredom; either way, enduring fulfilment remains out of reach for him. Given this bleak analysis of living, Schopenhauer entertained the idea that non-existence might be preferable to existence. He stopped short of explicitly advocating for the extinction of humanity, but he celebrated ascetic self-denial and even celibacy as he refused to perpetuate the cycle of suffering. In essence, his philosophy harboured a nascent antinatalism: at one point he approvingly cites an ancient Greek chorus-line – "Not to have been born is best"¹.

Schopenhauer reflected that if human beings were fully rational, the sheer burden of life's misery would refrain them from bringing new life into being (Schopenhauer, [1890] 2022). This position provided a crucial foundation that later thinkers would explicitly build into antinatalist arguments. In the twentieth century, several philosophical pessimists carried Schopenhauer's logic to its conclusion. Zapffe, as we have already seen in his essay "The last Messiah", urged that humanity should end its "tragic" existence by consciously abstaining from procreation – effectively a manifesto for antinatalism grounded in pessimistic analysis of the human condition. Likewise, Cioran's deeply pessimistic thoughts often border on recommending that humanity should vanish quietly.

Another figure often cited in this context is the Italian poet-philosopher Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837), who wrote extensively on life's futility and the idea that existence might be a mistake of nature. While Leopardi did not formulate an antinatalist proposal, his writings – like Schopenhauer's – clearly articulate the intuition that the pains of life far outweigh its pleasures. These thinkers share with antinatalism, the sense that non-existence would spare us the suffering existence entails.

¹ "Το να μην έχεις γεννηθεί, αυτό είναι το καλύτερο" (1211-1248) Σοφοκλής - Οιδίπους επί Κολωνῶ

Antinatalism can be seen as applied pessimism: it takes the view that, if life is as full of inevitable harm as pessimists claim, then refraining from creating life is a morally sound course of action. Contemporary antinatalist philosophers like David Benatar have explicitly drawn on this tradition, developing arguments (such as the asymmetry between pain and pleasure) that owe much to the pessimistic ethos that avoiding harm is preferable over gaining pleasure. However, even within pessimism contrasting voices and nuances can be found. Not all pessimists or their inheritors advocate stopping continuation of the kind. As mentioned above, Nietzsche was against this idea; he began his intellectual journey under Schopenhauer's influence but famously broke away (Kaufmann (1974), accusing pessimists of succumbing to life-denial and instead promoting a "Dionysian" affirmation of life's tragic nature (Nietzsche, [1886] 2012). Nietzsche distinguished between what he saw as a "weak" pessimism that concludes life must be negated, and his own idea of a "pessimism of strength" which fully acknowledges the horrors of existence yet still says "yes" to life.

Apart from these main philosophical views, other related perspectives have also intersected with antinatalist thought in various ways. For instance, a modern ethical theory known as negative utilitarianism aligns with antinatalism. Negative utilitarians argue that reducing suffering should be the highest moral priority, even more important than promoting happiness (Popper, 2011). From this perspective, no amount of happiness can justify allowing severe suffering. Taken to its extreme, this view could suggest that ending life altogether would be morally desirable, since it would eliminate suffering entirely. Most utilitarians do not accept such a conclusion. Even so, the principle of minimising suffering supports an important antinatalist idea: that it is better not to create a life that will likely contain pain than to create one for the sake of the pleasures that life may potentially experience.

The realm of literature and cultural thought provides further echoes in the stream of antinatalism ideas. Absurdist and pessimistic literature in the twentieth century, from Samuel Beckett's darkly comic plays to more overtly philosophical works like Thomas Ligotti's "The Conspiracy Against the Human Race" (2010), have pushed pessimistic ideas into popular consciousness. Ligotti's book, for example, directly endorses antinatalism from a horror-philosophy angle, depicting human consciousness as a kind of cosmic accident and nightmare from which non-existence is the only true escape.

Even much earlier, certain religious or mystical traditions contemplated themes relevant to antinatalism. Gnostic and Manichean sects in late antiquity, for example, viewed the material world as fundamentally corrupt or evil, a prison for the spirit (Van Oort, 2020). Some of these sects indeed discouraged procreation on the grounds that it would be wrong to entrap more divine souls in the suffering of physical existence (Bronkhorst, 2001). While arising from very different metaphysical premises such beliefs present a notable historical precedent for the idea that avoiding birth could be a spiritually or ethically preferable choice. These diverse perspectives—from ancient religious renunciations to modern secular ethics—highlight that the anxieties driving antinatalism are not unique to one time or ideology. Humans have long grappled with the question of whether life's burdens might ever outweigh its worth, and whether our ethical duty might conceivably be to spare others from life rather than to perpetuate it.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that for every voice leaning toward renunciation of life, there have been powerful counterarguments defending it and the future generations. Philosophical humanism and most religious moral systems traditionally affirm that life, even when tragic or absurd, remains a gift or at least an opportunity for meaning. We have already seen how existentialists advocate personal

commitment to life. Similarly, thinkers like the philosopher Hans Jonas (1903-1993) have argued for a strong responsibility to the future: Jonas's "imperative of responsibility" suggests that we must act so as to ensure the continued possibility of genuine human life on Earth, effectively positing a moral duty to preserve and protect the existence of future generations (Jonas, 1984, p. 11). This stands in stark contrast to any notion of willingly ending the human story. Such humanist or life-affirming positions show that antinatalism is far from an inevitable result of recognising life's hardships or uncertainties. Rather, it is a distinctive resolution of these dilemmas old as time—one that opts for mercy or caution by preventing new lives from having to face what it sees as an unacceptable ordeal.

In sum, antinatalism occupies a complicated place on the map of modern thought. It inherits from nihilism the unsettling idea that no transcendent meaning supports our lives, and from pessimism the conviction that life is profoundly marred by suffering. It acknowledges, like existentialism, the stark reality of our freedom in a world without inherent purpose – yet it draws an opposite ethical lesson from that reality. Each of the intellectual currents discussed above contributes something to antinatalism's conceptual DNA, whether it be a general sense of life's emptiness, a devastating acknowledgement of pain, or an argument about moral priorities. Antinatalism is not limited to a sole predecessor. It is neither mere nihilism nor naive pessimism, but an assertive moral stance that takes the darkest assessments of existence and translates them into a normative claim about what we should do, or refrain from doing. In a way, it can be seen as the extreme conclusion: if one truly believes life is meaningless and full of suffering, then perhaps the kindest or most logical act is not to perpetuate it. Yet this conclusion remains highly controversial and counterintuitive to many, given the human impulse to survive and hope for betterment. By examining the philosophical foundations of antinatalism, we can better appreciate its place in contemporary debate: a radical viewpoint at the crossroads of nihilism's void, existentialism's question of meaning, and pessimism's lament about pain, one that boldly challenges the moral sanctity of birth and the continuity of the human project. This context provides a backdrop for understanding how antinatalist ideas expand throughout various domains of culture including, as this thesis will explore, the narratives and symbolisms of film and television, where such philosophical questions are often dramatized in uniquely affecting ways.

2.2 Analysis of key antinatalist texts

As we have seen above, modern antinatalist thought is rooted in a long lineage of nihilistic and existential philosophy, with key texts progressively sharpening its ideas. An early foundation was laid by Arthur Schopenhauer in works like "The World as Will and Representation" (1818) and his later essays collected as "Studies in Pessimism" (1890). Schopenhauer never used the term "antinatalism", since it did not exist just yet, it is safe to assume that his ideas aligned with it through his depiction of life governed by an insatiable "will" that condemns all creatures to restless craving. For Schopenhauer, suffering is woven into the very fabric of existence: desire by its nature can never be fully satisfied, so life swings between pain and boredom. In this view, non-existence quietly appears preferable to existence, since to not be born would spare one the torments that existence entails. His philosophy thus became a

cornerstone for later thinkers who took that hint towards a more explicit ethical conclusion.

Zapffe's essay "The Last Messiah", is one of the earliest unambiguous antinatalist texts, interpreting human consciousness itself as a tragic over-evolution that makes us painfully aware of life's emptiness. Zapffe argued that because we cannot escape the cosmic meaninglessness and anguish that self-awareness brings, the only compassionate "solution" is a voluntary extinction of our species. Cioran's aphoristic work "The Trouble with Being Born" (1973) added a literary voice to this nascent current. Cioran, too, questioned the worth of existence, remarking in his work that "it's not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill yourself too late" – suggesting that by the time we understand life's hollowness, we have already suffered it. While Cioran did not construct a formal argument, his merciless reflections on the regret of being born resonated deeply and helped to crystallise the idea that bringing someone into the world might be a grievous harm. In sum, thinkers like Schopenhauer, Zapffe, and Cioran, each in their own way, contributed insights and attitudes that paved the way for antinatalism, even if they did not identify with the term. Schopenhauer's "pessimism" highlights the structural negativity of existence, Zapffe on his part talked about the unique human burden of excessive self-awareness, and Cioran tackled in his works the personal despair at life's gift. These themes set the stage for antinatalism to later take shape as a distinct stance.

It is only in the twenty-first century that antinatalism became a self-aware philosophical position, largely thanks to the works of David Benatar. Benatar's "Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence" (2006) is the most influential modern text that gave antinatalism both its name in popular discourse and a rigorous analytical framework. In this book, Benatar introduces his influential "asymmetry" argument: the absence of pain (in the case of a never-born person) is unequivocally good, whereas the absence of pleasure (for that never-born person) is not bad, since there is no one deprived of the pleasure. This asymmetry points out Benatar's central claim that coming into existence is always a net harm to the one who is born – consequently, procreation is morally problematic. His argument provided antinatalism with a systematic, secular ethical justification and was highly influential in sparking contemporary debates. Indeed, by 2015 Benatar engaged with critics in the volume "Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong to Reproduce?" co-authored with David Wasserman. The dialogue format points to the maturing of antinatalism as a topic: it moved from the margins of philosophical pessimism into a structured debate with challenges and rebuttals. Benatar's subsequent book "The Human Predicament" (2017) widened the lens to life's broader existential issues – meaning, death, the trajectory of civilization – but continued to affirm pessimistic conclusions consistent with antinatalist thinking (such as the inherent tragedy and futility in human life). Alongside Benatar, other contemporary authors have contributed to antinatalist and closely allied "anti-life" philosophies.

The Argentine Brazilian philosopher Julio Cabrera, for example, developed a "negative ethics" approach in "Discomfort and Moral Impediment" (English ed. 2019). Cabrera argues that human existence is structurally harmful and that our very birth places us in a condition of moral disadvantage, advancing a case against procreation on slightly different grounds from Benatar's but reaching a similar conclusion. Other writers like Thomas Ligotti and Sarah Perry have helped broaden the audience for antinatalist ideas. Ligotti's "The Conspiracy Against the Human Race" (2010) blends horror and philosophy, using the lens of supernatural fiction to point out a deeply antinatalist

message about consciousness as a nightmare of evolution. Perry's "Every Cradle Is a Grave" (2014) offers an accessible overview of antinatalist arguments, interwoven with discussions of societal attitudes toward birth and suicide.

These works, though outside strict academic philosophy, demonstrate how antinatalist thought has spread into wider cultural discussions about the ethics of creating life. Collectively, the key texts – from Schopenhauer's formative pessimism to Benatar's formal arguments and beyond – illustrate the evolution of antinatalism from a set of diffuse, often literary critiques of life's value into a coherent philosophical position. This collection of writings provides the conceptual tools and vocabulary that underpin current debates on whether bringing new human beings into the world can be morally justified.

3. Chapter 3: Analysis of themes and case studies

3.1 Antinatalism in Popular Culture: an overview of existing research on the portrayal of antinatalism in film and television

The presence of antinatalist themes in contemporary film and television carries social, cultural, and philosophical implications, particularly in relation to established assumptions about reproduction, futurity, and moral responsibility. We observe that in media studies, reproduction is usually regarded as something natural, often desirable to the characters or the society and it is mostly unquestioned (Olszynko-Gryn & Ellis, 2017, p. 385). Antinatalism's near-absence from this field does not indicate its irrelevance but rather reflects the deep cultural naturalisation of reproduction. Although antinatalism has received sustained philosophical attention, its cultural and audiovisual representations remain largely understudied. Film and media studies have instead approached reproduction through adjacent concerns such as futurity, biopolitics, childhood suffering, and extinction.

Existing film and media studies have been devoting attention to narratives of reproduction, infertility, and futurity, particularly in genres such as apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic cinema (Johnson & Quinlan, 2018). Studies frequently examine infertility as a metaphor for political or civilisational exhaustion (Bauman, 2013), most notably in analyses of *"Children of Men"*, as well as the broader disappearance of children in dystopian futures and post-human or post-reproductive instances of speculative fiction films (Heffernan, 2014). Within this body of work, children are commonly interpreted as symbols of hope, continuity (Edelmann, 2004) or loss, while reproduction functions as an ideological anchor that secures narratives of progress, meaning and futurity. However, these works tend to treat infertility primarily as a tragedy, or absence, or allegory rather than as an ethical position. What remains largely unexplored is an explicit ethical interrogation of whether reproduction should occur at all, and a sustained analysis of non-birth as a morally significant stance rather than a narrative catastrophe. By contrast, an antinatalist perspective reframes infertility and reproductive refusal not as loss, but as an ethical question concerning harm, consent, and the legitimacy of continuation, thereby revealing a critical dimension that existing approaches leave untheorized for the most part.

Other narrative frameworks that intersect with antinatalist concerns are biopolitics and reproductive control which are more present in dystopian television such as *"Utopia"* – which we will visit below in Chapter 3—and the *"Handmaid's Tale"*² (2017). These works have been analysed through the lenses of population control and reproductive governance, with scholarly attention focusing on tensions between coercion and freedom, state violence and the systematic abuse of reproductive bodies. Whether through the mass forced sterilisation global population or the enforced subjugation of fertile women to childbearing slavery, reproductive control constitutes the conceptual core of these narratives. However, while such representations are often discussed in relation to authoritarian power and biopolitical domination, they are not grounded in antinatalist philosophy as such. Antinatalism does not advocate coercive intervention,

² Based on the 1985 homonymous novel of Margaret Atwood

but rather centres on a voluntary, individual ethical refusal of reproduction, grounded in concerns about harm, consent, and responsibility (Vasiljevic & Perić, 2025).

A related framework through which "*Utopia*" can be interpreted is environmental collapse and the ethical implications of human impact on our planet. The series repeatedly brings up the idea that ecological degradation—driven by overconsumption, overpopulation, and the unsustainable use of resources—has placed humanity in a position of irreversible harm. Within this narrative, the proposed extinction of humankind is framed not as an expression of misanthropic pessimism alone, but as a response to environmental damage, where the continuation of human life is presented as incompatible with planetary survival. This aligns superficially with certain antinatalist concerns regarding harm and responsibility, particularly in Benatar's argument that bringing new beings into existence perpetuates suffering and contributes to ongoing harm (Benatar, 2006). However, "*Utopia*" departs significantly from philosophical antinatalism in its logic: rather than advocating a voluntary refusal of reproduction grounded in individual ethical reflection, it frames extinction as a necessary, externally imposed corrective to ecological crisis. While some antinatalist thinkers have acknowledged environmental considerations as part of a broader ethical critique of procreation (Gould, 2021), they generally resist the instrumentalisation of human extinction as a policy objective, emphasising instead the moral asymmetry between preventing harm and actively inflicting it.

The representation of childhood suffering and the ethical responsibility of it, which is another main argument of antinatalism, has also been examined in cinema with particular emphasis on films that portray children as victims of war, poverty, neglect, and forced labour, such as we see in the movie "*Capernaum*" (Kehya, 2024). The related academic research is typically grounded in frameworks of social realism and human rights, focusing on the exposure of structural injustice, the ethics of care and the moral outrage elicited by the systemic failure to protect vulnerable lives. Within this critical tradition, childhood suffering is understood as a call for social, political, or humanitarian intervention, and reproduction is often treated as a given background condition rather than a subject of ethical scrutiny. What remains largely absent, however, is a philosophical engagement with the possibility that birth itself may be ethically problematic under conditions of extreme deprivation and structural harm. While realist films are very good at showing the real-life effects of these situations, they often stop short on questioning whether having children is morally acceptable in the first place. This is exactly the question antinatalism focuses on, by presenting birth not just as a point of vulnerability, but as a possible ethical imposition.

Film-philosophical literature has also extensively engaged with themes of pessimism, nihilism, and extinction, particularly in works such as "*True Detective*" and "*Melancholia*". This body of research typically focuses on questions of meaninglessness, human insignificance, and the collapse of historical or metaphysical teleology, often framing the end of humanity as a confrontation with the limits of sense, value, and anthropocentrism. While such analyses offer rich accounts of despair, disenchantment, and the erosion of human centrality, they rarely extend these concerns to the domain of reproductive ethics. In "*Melancholia*", Lars von Trier adopts a distinctive approach by presenting extinction with an unusual degree of serenity and acceptance, in contrast to the dominant tendency in other narratives to affirm survival and the continuation of life.

By repeatedly linking reproduction to harm, exhaustion, or coercion, popular culture opens a space in which the refusal or questioning of reproduction becomes

conceivable without being immediately framed as pathological or antisocial. Philosophically, such portrayals redirect ethical attention away from abstract ideals of survival or species continuity and towards issues of consent, responsibility, and the asymmetry between existence and non-existence. Films and television shows thus function less as vehicles for explicit antinatalist argumentation and more as affective and narrative contexts in which the morality of birth is temporarily suspended and subjected to critique. Through this process, reproduction is increasingly represented not merely as a biological fact or social expectation, but as a decision with ethical consequences that extend beyond individual desire toward questions of future suffering, obligation, and the conditions under which continuation can be justified.

3.2 The role of media in shaping ethical and philosophical debates: How do media influence public perception and abstract concepts such as antinatalism

In philosophical discourse, ethical debates and abstract concepts are typically developed through discussions, arguments, and counterarguments. Cinema and television, operate differently. Rather than presenting systematic philosophical reasoning, they translate abstract ideas into narrative and affective and audiovisual experience. In doing so, they do not resolve ethical questions so much as render them perceptible, emotionally intelligible, and available for reflection. Through narrative framing, character perspective, and formal devices such as camera positioning, sound, pacing, and visual composition, audiovisual media enable viewers not only to understand ethical problems intellectually, but also to encounter them as lived dilemmas. In this sense, cinema functions as a form of moral simulation, allowing audiences to evaluate philosophical positions within concrete and emotionally charged scenarios (Sinnerbrink, 2018).

One important way in which media accomplish this is by constructing hypothetical or extreme worlds that function as thought experiments. Films and television series such as *"Children of Men"*, *"Utopia"*, *"Melancholia"*, and *"Attack on Titan"* imagine situations in which reproduction, survival, and futurity are radically destabilised; in most of these works, infertility becomes universal, extinction becomes imminent, or inherited violence renders future life morally questionable. These settings intensify ethical conflict and make abstract philosophical problems more concrete and imaginable. In this sense, cinema and television can be understood as forms of moral simulation, placing viewers within fictional scenarios in which the value of continuation, the burden of existence, and the ethics of reproduction are subjected to narrative pressure (Lankhuizen, 2025).

Ethical reflection also emerges through character-centred moral conflict. Rather than advancing philosophical claims in a purely abstract form, audiovisual narratives embody competing positions in the experiences, choices, and suffering of particular characters. Justine's depression in *"Melancholia"*, Zain's hardship in *"Capernaum"*, Rust's bereavement in *"True Detective"*, and Zeke's disillusionment in *"Attack on Titan"* all anchor broader ethical questions in subjective experience. By presenting the emotional and existential conditions from which such perspectives emerge, these works encourage the viewer to engage philosophical ideas not only as arguments, but as responses to suffering, futility, trauma, or despair (Rohm, Hopp & Smit, 2021 and Lankhuizen 2025).

This is especially significant in the case of antinatalism, which occupies a relatively marginal position in both mainstream philosophy and popular culture. Antinatalist ideas seldom appear in film and television as direct advocacy. More often, they surface indirectly through narrative worlds, character perspectives, and aesthetic choices that present birth, futurity, and continuation as ethically fraught. Across a range of contemporary films and television series, antinatalist concerns therefore emerge less as an articulated doctrine than as a recurring set of questions: whether coming into existence can be justified, whether suffering can invalidate the assumed good of birth, and whether the continuation of life is always ethically desirable. In this way, audiovisual media do not simply “introduce” antinatalism to audiences; they shape how it is imagined, felt, and morally evaluated (Sinnerbrink, 2015).

Across a range of contemporary film and television series, antinatalist concerns emerge not as explicit philosophical positions but as narrative points that question the morality of reproduction. These works do not argue that one ought not to reproduce; rather, they construct fictional worlds in which the continuation of life appears ethically fragile, burdensome, or harmful. Media also indirectly help to legitimise antinatalism—where it appears—by presenting it as a serious ethical and narrative idea, rather than just a marginal philosophy. In doing so, it moves antinatalism into the centre of films and television narratives.

"True Detective" Season One, provides a particularly illustrative case of this dynamic. Although Nic Pizzolatto has acknowledged the philosophical influences of the series (Milazzo, 2019, p. 194), it does not present itself as a sustained theoretical exchange. Instead, antinatalist reflection is embedded within crime narrative situated in a bleak social and moral environment. The investigation of ritualistic murders in the American South operates as a narrative framework within which broader questions concerning existence, human nature, and ethical motivation can be explored. Through the detectives' conversations, themes such as the burden of self-awareness, the persistence of violence, and the fragility of moral justification are repeatedly revisited, creating a discursive space in which antinatalist concerns can surface indirectly rather than directly. Antinatalism in *"True Detective"* is not conveyed through dialogue alone but is enacted through characterisation and narrative form. Rust's rejection of reproduction closely tied to his experience of loss and his prolonged confrontation with suffering, leading him to frame procreation as an ethical imposition within a world marked by violence and decay. This perspective is reinforced by the series' characteristics, including its emphasis on temporal repetition which mimics the idea of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, and an ending that withholds rather than restores a clear sense of futurity. *"True Detective"* ultimately demonstrates how abstract ethical position can be translated into narrative structures, tonal atmospheres, and aesthetic patterns that shape audience perception without requiring explicit philosophical exposition (Stoddart et al., 2017).

Another example of this dynamic appears in the television series *"Attack on Titan"*, where antinatalist logic is articulated within a long-form narrative of inherited violence and collective trauma. As the series progresses, the character of Zeke Yeager advances what he calls the “euthanasia plan”: a proposal to render his people incapable of reproduction in order to bring an end to centuries of war, persecution, and suffering. Zeke's reasoning closely mirrors core antinatalist intuitions—namely, that being born into a world structured by unavoidable harm constitutes a moral wrong, and that preventing future births may therefore be an act of compassion rather than cruelty. Importantly, the series does not present this position as a detached philosophical

argument, but as the emotional and ethical outcome of lived experience. Zeke's stance is shaped by childhood trauma, ideological betrayal, and a profound sense of futility regarding historical progress. At the same time, "*Attack on Titan*" does not endorse his conclusion. By embedding antinatalist reasoning within a broader conflict of perspectives, the series both articulates and problematises the idea that the cessation of birth could serve as an ethical solution. The viewer is thus invited to confront the internal coherence of antinatalist logic while also grappling with its moral and political costs, particularly when it shifts from voluntary refusal to collective imposition.

A related but distinct treatment of reproduction appears in "*Utopia*", as we've noted above. Antinatalist ideas surface indirectly, through the suggestion that preventing future lives may be preferable to condemning them to a depleted and violent world. However, by associating non-reproduction with coercion, secrecy, and violence, the series foregrounds the tension between voluntary antinatalism and enforced population control. In doing so, it complicates the reception of antinatalist thought, presenting it as morally intelligible yet ethically dangerous when detached from consent. The series thereby shapes public perception not by validating the refusal of reproduction, but by framing it as a disturbing response to systemic failure, one that exposes the fragility of moral norms under conditions of crisis.

In cinema, "*Children of Men*" offers a more ambivalent engagement with antinatalist themes by imagining a world in which reproduction has ceased entirely. Within this setting, the absence of children functions as a constant reminder of lost futurity, forcing both characters and viewers to confront the extent to which meaning, hope and moral orientation are bound to the expectation of continuation. At first glance, the film appears firmly pronatalist: the discovery of a single pregnancy is framed as miraculous, and the protection of the unborn child becomes the narrative's central imperative. Yet the ethical background of the film is more complex. Reproduction is not portrayed as a simple good, but as a fragile and burdensome event, one that reactivates structures of control, sacrifice, and violence (Amago, 2010). The pregnant body becomes a site of political struggle, while the future it promises remains uncertain and precarious. In this way, "*Children of Men*" simultaneously affirms and destabilises natalist assumptions. By presenting a society that collapses without reproduction, yet also depicting the immense ethical weight placed on a single birth, the film opens a space for reflection on whether the demand for continuation is itself ethically neutral or morally overdetermined.³

Where "*Children of Men*" situates reproductive anxiety within political dystopia, "*Melancholia*" shifts the problem of continuation to a cosmic scale by telling us a story about the imminent extinction of life on Earth. Against this backdrop, the usual moral frameworks that prioritise survival, legacy, and futurity lose their coherence. The film's most unsettling gesture lies in its emotional inversion: while some characters respond with panic and denial, the melancholic protagonist experiences calm and even relief at the prospect of total annihilation (Sinnerbrink, 2016). This response destabilises the deeply ingrained assumption that extinction must be tragic and that life's continuation is inherently valuable. Rather than arguing that humanity should not exist, "*Melancholia*" renders that question experientially plausible by aligning non-existence with peace, stillness, and release. Through its slow pacing, sombre visual composition, and overwhelming cosmic imagery, the film reframes extinction not as moral

³ [Humanity and Stolen Choice in Children of Men – Perisphère](#) [19/06/2026]

catastrophe but as metaphysical resolution. In doing so, it invites viewers to reconsider the value of continuation and futurity in a universe indifferent to human survival⁴.

Finally, "*Capernaum*" approaches the ethical problem of birth from the opposite end of the scale: not through speculative futures or cosmic annihilation, but through the immediacy of lived suffering. Unlike philosophical antinatalism, "*Capernaum*" offers no theoretical framework and no generalised ethical claims. Its power lies instead in its insistence that birth can be experienced as harm fully aligning with antinatalism's arguments. By giving narrational authority to a child who wishes he had never been born, the film confronts the viewer with an ethical question "Can existence itself constitute an imposed burden?" The realist aesthetic of the film—its close attention to bodily exhaustion, emotional distress, and structural injustice—prevents this claim from appearing abstract or rhetorical. Rather than calling for the refusal of reproduction, "*Capernaum*" exposes the moral cost of treating birth as an unquestioned good in contexts where suffering is pervasive and unavoidable.

Some of these works in specific topics, guide the interpretation of the audience by selectively framing antinatalism, emphasising certain aspects of the concept while downplaying others. For example, in "*Utopia*", antinatalism is framed as authoritarian and dangerous; in "*Attack on Titan*", it appears logically coherent yet morally troubling; and in "*Melancholia*", it is associated with emotional peace and existential release. In this sense, the interpretations are not neutral or open-ended but already embedded within the narrative structure. The audience does not simply encounter antinatalism as an abstract idea; rather, it is directed toward specific moral evaluations through character alignment, narrative framing and the ethical consequences presented within each story. Films and media act as thought machines that expand what audiences consider thinkable or conceivable.⁵

Another important way in which cinema and media influence public perception is through the creation of empathy via identification with characters. Narrative films do not simply present ideas but position the viewer emotionally in relation to them. Through character alignment, audience is encouraged to adopt the perspective of individuals whose experiences make abstract ethical positions more comprehensible. Audiovisual techniques play a crucial role in this process. Elements such as music, camera positioning, and visual composition, guide emotional response, bringing the viewer into closer proximity with the character's inner state. For example, the use of distant or solitary framing—where a character is placed within vast, empty spaces—visually conveys isolation and existential disconnection, allowing the audience not only to understand, but to feel these conditions (Rohm, Hopp & Smit, 2022).

This dynamic is particularly evident in "*Melancholia*", where Justine's response to the impending extinction of humanity is rendered emotionally intelligible through aesthetic form. The film's slow pacing, muted colour palette, and recurring use of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" create a melancholic atmosphere that aligns the viewer with the main character's psychological state. Rather than presenting her apparent relief as irrational, the film gradually situates it within a broader experience of depression, making her acceptance of annihilation appear coherent and even comforting. In this

⁴ Lars von Trier - MELANCHOLIA - Ego & Extinction - Film Analysis: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAlTuOwAyNo> [19/06/2026]

⁵ <https://pubadmin.institute/psychology-and-media/media-framing-shapes-perceptions-interpretations> [19/06/2026]

way, the audience is led to experience extinction not solely as a catastrophe, but as a form of release.

A similar process operates in *"Attack on Titan"*, where Zeke embodies an explicitly antinatalist logic. Through narrative development, dialogue and emotional backstory, the series encourages viewers to understand his motivations as emerging from trauma, disillusionment, and a perceived impossibility of escaping suffering. Although his plan is morally contested within the narrative, the use of sombre music, reflective pacing and moments of introspection prevents him from being perceived as a purely antagonistic figure. Instead, the audience is invited to empathise with his reasoning, recognising it as emotionally grounded rather than purely ideological.

Some of these works, function as narrative simulations that allow the audience to engage in moral evaluation. Rather than presenting fixed answers, they construct situations in which viewers are invited to judge the ethical positions being explored. In *"True Detective"*, for example, Rust's explicitly philosophical statements prompt the audience to reflect on and assess his bleak worldview. His ideas are presented directly, encouraging viewers to consider whether they agree with his pessimistic interpretation of existence.

In *"Attack on Titan"*, however, the ethical dilemma is structured differently. Instead of a single articulated position, the narrative presents two extreme and opposing solutions: Zeke's plan to eliminate his people through sterilisation, and the main character's, Eren, plan to destroy the rest of the world in order to protect his. By placing these positions in direct conflict, the series simulates a moral dilemma in which no resolution appears clearly justified. The audience is therefore drawn into a process of ethical evaluation, weighing the arguments, considering the consequences and questioning which, if any, position can be defended.

A similar dynamic appears in *"Utopia"*, where the prospect of partial human extinction through forced sterilisation creates a comparable space for moral reflection. Although most characters initially oppose the plan, the gradual transformation of Wilson Wilson—who ultimately comes to support and even lead the cause—introduces further complexity. By presenting the issue from multiple perspectives, the series encourages viewers to reflect on their own moral stance, asking not only whether such actions could be justified, but also how they themselves might respond in similar circumstances.

In all these cases, media influence public perception by staging ethical dilemmas as lived experiences. Rather than simply introducing antinatalist ideas, they enable audiences to test these ideas within fictional yet emotionally credible scenarios, shaping how they are understood and evaluated.

Taken together, all these works demonstrate how film and television shape ethical and philosophical debates by rendering reproduction morally visible. They do not advocate antinatalism as a solution, nor do they converge on a single conclusion regarding the value of life. Instead, they repeatedly disturb the assumption that bringing new life into the world is self-evidently justified. Through narrative worlds marked by violence, infertility, extinction, ecological collapse, and childhood suffering, audiovisual media transform antinatalist concerns into questions that can be imagined and felt. In this way, antinatalism enters popular culture not as doctrine, but as a problem—one that challenges viewers to reconsider the ethical status of birth, the legitimacy of futurity, and the responsibilities entailed in continuing life under conditions of profound uncertainty. In doing so, they actively shape how audiences understand and evaluate

these ethical questions, influencing not only interpretation but also broader cultural attitudes toward reproduction and existence.

3.3 Dystopias without children and the meaning of procreation: Antinatalist themes in film and television

Many works of fiction in the twenty first century seem to have been contemplating about future scenarios where the human race will not (want to) reproduce. In the movie "*Children of men*", the complete sterilization has led the world in disarray. The scenario in which no child has been born in 18 years shows the effect that hits a society that goes through a deep existentialist crisis as the people realise that they are under extinction. The movie highlights that without the hope of new life, despair is engulfing them- humanity's fate seems predetermined, as the authoritative governments lead people to distress or to outbursts of violence. The appearance of a pregnant woman highlights how important gestation is in the form of carrying a hopeful message. In conversation with how antinatalists tend to speculate about the future outcome of a society that has stopped reproducing, "*Children of Men*" shows the sorrows and anxieties that a society faces upon the loss of hope. Ironically this is precisely the future that antinatalists strive for, because human extinction is the key, the resolution, the goal. This anxiety surrounding extinction, however, contrasts with Benatar's argument that such reactions are largely centred on the concerns of existing individuals rather than on future ones that can potential be spared. While "*Children of Men*" presents a world where the absence of reproduction leads to meaninglessness and social collapse, Benatar maintains that although extinction may be experienced as harmful by the last generations, it is not bad in itself, since no future people would exist to be deprived or to suffer (Benatar, 2006). From this perspective, the despair depicted in the film reflects a deeply ingrained pro-natalist bias, which prioritises the continuation of humanity, whereas antinatalist thought views the gradual extinction of the human species as a means of preventing further harm.

A different but closely related exploration of antinatalist concerns appears in the film "*Capernaum*", which follows a young boy, Zain, who sues his parents for bringing him into the world, explicitly questioning the morality of his own birth. Unlike "*Children of Men*", which frames reproduction as a lost and ultimately necessary hope, "*Capernaum*" brings the ethical problem of procreation into an immediate and social context. Through its portrayal of poverty, neglect, and systemic injustice, the film highlights how existence itself can be experienced as harm under certain conditions. Zain's rejection of his own life gives voice to a central antinatalist thought, that being born can constitute an imposed burden rather than a gift. In this way, "*Capernaum*" does not theorise antinatalism in abstract terms but dramatizes it through the perspective of a child whose suffering calls into question the assumption that bringing new life into the world is always justified.

Yet another movie more aligned with the essence of the ideas in the antinatalist philosophy, is "*Melancholia*" of Lars von Trier where Justine says, "Earth is bad. We do not need to grieve for it... no one is going to feel melancholic" feeling relief. In this way she voices the thought that the disappearance of the earth is preferable to its continuation. This resonates with the nihilistic and antinatalist thought. Since life is

treated as something corrupt and devastating, non-existence is not a loss but a release. This pessimism aligns with the character's depression but also with the movie's dialogue which summarises that this statement is the universal truth- almost as cosmic law that "life on Earth is not worth it!"

In no other medium do we see a character so closely created on the basis of the ideas of antinatalism as Rust Cohle from "*True Detective's*" season one, with even his introduction relating his identity with philosophy, more specifically pessimism. The character's ideas will be analysed later on in one of our case studies. Rust believes that bringing new life into existence is morally wrong and this radical pessimism that could be described as "philosophical pessimism" or "antinatalist nihilism" (Morioka, 2021). Nic Pizzolatto, the writer of the show has mentioned, in interviews that he has been inspired by antinatalist philosophers and other writers with pessimistic views to form and create Rust's character (Milazzo, 2019, p. 194) - he wanted his detective to be supporting ideas such as that "humanity is wrong and nothing has meaning". What is striking is that these views were not confined to an arthouse audience, but were heard weekly by millions of viewers worldwide, even sparking discussions in the media. As the press noted, it was surprising that such a successful series promotes such a dark philosophy and ideas such as that we must stop reproducing⁶. Benatar himself noted in an article that many of his students asked him about "*True Detective*", having been impressed by the character of Rust Cohle and his explicit anti-natalist stance⁷.

Another example of antinatalist ideas and consequences will also be analysed deeper in a later section, a popular manga/anime series titled "*Attack on Titan*" by Hajime Isayama starts as a story that focuses on survival and how can humans overcome the big threats they are facing as titan monsters are devouring them. In later seasons the focus of the main question has evolved and shifted towards the question of what freedom is. One of the characters we come to know later on, Zeke Yeager, has his own view of what freedom is for his people. Zeke's plan is, in essence, an antinatalist solution to end suffering. Isayama brings at the forefront to the anime community, a radical argument of antinatalism "Is it ever justifiable—even out of love or for the common good—to choose to exterminate your own people?". The story may be fictional, but that rendered the viewers to expand the discussion and contemplate on concepts that refer to Benatar.

Another core argument of the antinatalist philosophy is the concern of ecologic crises and overpopulation. A television series that addresses that, is "*Utopia*" where a group is seeking to "save" the world from the environmental catastrophe through a drastic reduction in births - in essence they recommend an involuntary "BirthStrike" for all humanity. This idea reflects a very real concern: as environmental problems intensify, many people are actually wondering whether it is responsible to bring children into a world that is falling apart. It is no coincidence that around the same time, in the late 2010s, movements such as "BirthStrike" began (an initiative by people who declared they were abstaining from having children due to the climate crisis) or that several celebrities spoke openly about choosing not to have children for the sake of the planet

⁶ <https://www.thecritique.com/articles/no-exit-from-darkness-the-philosophy-of-true-detective/> [31/05/2026]

⁷ <https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&p=5f40c2698864f9dcbde80a2b6125a80b1843d1c5241495486857842cca529331JmltdHM9MTc4MDE4NTYwMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=07e84d4e-a67e-63c5-0621-5bf3a7f562c5&psq=Benatar+himself+noted+in+an+article+that+many+of+his+students+asked+him+about+True+Detective%2c+having+been+impressed+by+the+character+of+Rust+Cohle+and+his+explicit+anti-natalist+stance.+%5bjupiter+article%5d&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhY3JpdGlxdWUuY29tL2FydGlibGVzL3doeS13ZS1zaG91bGQtc3RvcC1yZXByb2R1Y2luZy1hbi1pbmRlcnZpZCxtc2l0aC1kYXZpZC1iZW5hdGFyLW9uLWFudGktbmF0YWxpc20v> [19/06/2026]

and additionally that the state of the planet is not viable for the next generation to exist. These statements and stances create what we call "environmental antinatalism" and GINKs: green inclinations, no kids (Richie, 2013); movements that talk about overpopulation and how voluntary sterilization can be done in favour of the environment as well. They may not be fully aligned with Benatar's philosophy, but they share the common argument that ceasing procreation is an ethically responsible act under the particular circumstances we find ourselves in (Grimbeek, 2023 & Gould, 2021).

3.4 Different approaches through different mediums

It should be noted that antinatalism can be portrayed in numerous ways depending on the medium. In science fiction and dystopian works (such as "*Children of Men*", "*Utopia*" and "*Attack on Titan*") the issue is portrayed as common— that is either brought on by the scenario that supports involuntary sterilization, or through the cessation of births for the "greater good". These works explore the social and political implications: "What happens in a world without future?", "Can humanity find its meaning without children?" or "Can we 'play God' with biology to prevent a bigger distraction?"

In more introspective works, that double as character studies (like "*True Detective*" and "*Melancholia*") antinatalism functions as a way to showcase the existentialist and ethical position of a person or character. It is regarded through monologues, dialogues and symbolisms. The audience is asked to confront the personal view of the character that considers the gift of life as a curse. Here, the focus is the philosophical reasoning and psychology—Rust justifies his stance by voicing his concern about how much pain a life can contain, while Justine is so submerged in her disappointment that equates her own depression with a universal truth about the "cruelty of life". A related dynamic appears in "*Capernaum*", where antinatalist meaning emerges less through explicit philosophical reflection than through the lived experience of suffering, as Zain's rejection of his own existence turns birth itself into an ethical accusation.

In the genre of thriller and horror stories, or in comic books, these ideas may appear in the form of allegories or extreme situations. For example, in certain horror stories (such as the novels of Thomas Ligotti), the notion presented that the very creation of humanity is an act of hubris against nature—a theme conveyed through existential horror rather than philosophical dialogue. In the Marvel universe, the supervillain Thanos (in the *Avengers* films, 2018–2019) has a twisted "Malthusian" logic: he believes the universe suffers from overpopulation and decides to eliminate half of all living beings to achieve balance. Although this is not exactly anti-natalism (since it involves killing existing beings rather than stopping births), the enormous popularity of these films has brought to the forefront, albeit in a simplistic way, the question of whether the continuation and population growth of life is always a good thing or whether it can be seen as a source of misery.

The perception of the audience to these antinatalist thoughts varies. Not infrequently, these works bring conversations to the surface—other times these tend to be more philosophically oriented (e.g. analyses in forums, published articles or books and academic essays) and other times emotional. In the case of "*True Detective*", a vivid dialogue started with audience finding themselves resonating with Rust's ideas and others dismissing them as a kind of adolescence nihilism. However, the fact that a

television series involved the audience with ideas such as these is considered groundbreaking. In an article by "The Critique"⁸ where the main focus is the dark themes of "*True Detective*", it was noted that it is not usual to encounter such a clear depiction of the argument of "better never to have been" in pop culture.

Similarly, the movie "*Capernaum*" was regarded both as moving and shocking to the audience: many critics praised it for its boldness in giving a voice to a child who laments his own birth which can be considered a taboo subject, while some viewers felt uncomfortable, hearing a child say that he shouldn't have been born (Sasikumar & Vijayalakshmi, 2021). In online communities, such as Reddit, there are even dedicated subreddits (e.g., *r/antinatalism*⁹) where works like "*Children of Men*" or anime like "*Attack on Titan*" are thoroughly discussed through the lens of antinatalism and analyse whether their messages ultimately support or contradict this position, which is telling of how much these topics affect the audience who is willing to further discuss on them.

⁸ <https://www.thecritique.com/articles/no-exit-from-darkness-the-philosophy-of-true-detective/> [19/06/2026]

⁹ <https://www.reddit.com/r/antinatalism/> [19/06/2026]

3.5 Case Study 1

3.5.1 Everybody's nobody: Rustin Spencer "Rust" Cohle and the antinatalism worldview in *True Detective* (Season 1)

Getting to know Rust

The first season of "*True Detective*" follows Rust Cohle, a deeply cynical detective in Louisiana whose worldview reflects philosophical pessimism and antinatalist ideas. The story unfolds across two timelines. In 1995, Rust and his partner, Marty Hart, investigate a ritualistic murder with possible occult connections. In 2012, the same characters are revisited through a series of interviews about the case, which had been considered solved at the time. As the narrative progresses, these interviews gradually reopen the investigation and lead toward its resolution in the present. The noir undertones and the culture of the Southern States set the background as eerie, decaying and existentially bleak. Assisting the build-up of the ambience in this bleak worldview, Rust finds numerous occasions to give us a glimpse of his mind. He believes that human existence is a grievous mistake and that it is unethical to pass on life to future generations.

"I think human consciousness is a tragic misstep in evolution. We are creatures that should not exist by natural law ... I think the honourable thing for our species to do is deny our programming. Stop reproducing. Walk hand in hand into extinction – one last midnight – brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal."

This is Rust's infamous monologue, from episode 1, "The Long Bright Dark", which works as an introduction of his character's core beliefs and worldview to us viewers. He declares his belief that human distinction should be advocated through abstention from reproduction. He frames procreation as an unworthy or dishonourable act. To Rust, being born is to be forced into inevitable suffering and meaninglessness, a fate he believes, no morally reflective being should wish on another.

The root of Rust's worldview derives from his own personal history with bereavement that preceded other traumatic experiences in his life. The loss of his young daughter caused a fall in his marriage. During his interview, later in 2012, Rust reflected on how he views loss, essentially as a sad blessing:

"Sometimes I feel grateful [when I think of my daughter]. ... She went out painlessly as a happy child... Trouble with dying later is you've already grown up. The damage is done. It's too late. ... I think of the hubris it must take to yank a soul out of non-existence into this meat, to force a life into this threshers. As for my daughter, she spared me the sin of being a father."

The above quote briefly summarises Rust's antinatalist ethos and how he ultimately views procreation. He considers it a "hubris" and parenthood a "sin". To be a father is, in his mind, to impose to an innocent being to come to this "thresher" of pain and mortality. In his eyes, her early departure was a blessing, preventing her from meeting further suffering. Taken together, Rust's personal history and philosophical outlook make him a particularly strong case study for antinatalism, as the series consistently reinforces his views through both dialogue and narrative development.

3.5.2 Philosophical Context – Pessimism, Nihilism, Existentialism and Antinatalism

"I'd consider myself a realist, but in philosophical terms I'm what's called a pessimist"

Rust's pronouncements closely mirror classic ideas from the philosophical pessimism tradition, particularly the thought of Schopenhauer who argued that existence is fundamentally driven by an irrational will to live that produces endless striving and pain; hence "life is suffering" and "all people carry within themselves an unconquerable source of suffering" (Schopenhauer, [1818] 2000, p. 344). Rust's claim that human life is a "raw deal" and that we are "programmed" to persist in a futile cycle of pain echoes this view. Schopenhauer even suggested that our condition is so miserable that a "complete non-being would be decidedly preferable" (Sorensen, 2022, p. 263) – a sentiment Rust clearly shares when he declares that non-existence (in other words, ultimately extinction) would be better than the continuation of life.

Rust's character was formed heavily influenced by Thomas Ligotti's sole non-fiction work "Conspiracy against the human race" (Milazzo, 2019, p. 194), and other writings of late modern pessimists such as Cioran and Zapffe, as well as the general contemporary antinatalist thought. For instance, Cioran described birth, as the crime of bringing someone into existence and wrote, "I long to be free – desperately free. Free as the stillborn are free" (Cioran, [1973] 2011 p. 9). This haunting image of the "never-born" as ultimately free from suffering resonates with Rust's praise of walking "hand in hand into extinction," i.e. embracing the stillness of never-being as a release from life's anguish. Similarly, Rust's assertion that humans are "creatures that should not exist by natural law" is strikingly consonant with Zapffe's and Cioran's view of human self-consciousness as a tragic aberration. Zapffe's argument of over-evolved consciousness, which is the cursed ability of humans that allows them to contemplate their own suffering and the meaninglessness of life, thus making their existence fundamentally absurd and painful. Rust's line in episode 1 "The Long Bright Dark", "human consciousness is a tragic misstep in evolution" could almost be a direct summary of Zapffe's thesis.

The contemporary antinatalist thinker, Thomas Ligotti is an author known for his horror short stories, through which he has popularised pessimistic and antinatalist ideas in modern literature. In Ligotti's writing we come across the following statement: "Our self-removal from this planet would still be a magnificent move, a feat so luminous it would bedim the sun. No evil would attend our departure from this world, and the many evils we have known would go extinct along with us" (Ligotti, 2010, p. 36). It resonates with

Rust's vision of a voluntary human extinction – all of us “opting out of a raw deal,”¹⁰ says the character, leaving “the earth uninhabited” – is essentially a dramatic expression of this same radical conclusion: that humanity should cease to exist in order to eliminate suffering.

Despite this alignment with nihilistic pessimism, Rust is not misanthropic. Antinatalists often are not, as their stances derive from reflecting the suffering of others and empathising. They desire to seek, to alleviate and to cease the pain. Darkly misanthropic it may seem, although, in reality, it is highly compassionate, which is a disposition we encounter frequently in the works of Benatar. Not unlike other antinatalist thinkers, Rust doesn't rant about hating people; rather, he pities conscious beings for the burden of existence they must carry, and thus advocates “opting out” to spare future beings from inheriting that burden. This parallels “philanthropic antinatalism” (Wasserman, 2015), which is grounded in compassion and the avoidance of harm, in other words these philosophers are saying, that if we take seriously the ethical principle of preventing harm, then refraining from reproduction is the only guaranteed way to prevent all the serious harms and suffering that any new person will inevitably experience in life” (Benatar, 2006). Both Rust and Benatar argue that even a happy life contains needless suffering and ends in death, “outcomes no potential person needs to endure if we simply do not bring that person into existence.”

Rust, thus, serves as a fictional mouthpiece for a junction of ideas from Schopenhauer's pessimism (life = suffering), Mainländer's and Cioran's calls for voluntary extinction or “will-to-nothingness,” and Benatar's modern antinatalist ethics (non-procreation as the only sure way to prevent harm), while also reflecting an existential confrontation with a meaningless world.

In episode 3 “A Locked Room”, Rust says in a conversation, “If the only thing keeping a person decent is the expectation of divine reward, then that person is a piece of shit,” showing how he doesn't believe in religious optimism that defines or navigates human purpose, he also outright mocks the thought that divinity can guide human moral. This resonates with Nietzsche's criticism of moral systems of religions, more specifically, Christianity. Yet Rust's response to nihilism is the opposite of Nietzsche's life-affirmation; Rust embraces a form of “passive nihilism” (to use a Nietzschean term) a resigned, negative evaluation of existence without seeking to create new values or “say yes” to life. In Nietzschean terms, Rust would be a “preacher of death” (Nietzsche, [1885] 2020) who sees humanity as a lost cause.

Nietzsche has used this term to argue with the passive stance that some pessimist philosophers used “life is basically a nightmare”, by saying that by following this thought, they no longer attack and are unable to create values, in other words, they choose resignation (Bolea, 2021, p. 153). By contrast, an existentialist, as we have discussed above, could ask, whether the recognition of life's absurdity demands suicide or revolt (Camus, [1942] 2010). Rust acknowledges this very question when Marty pointedly asks him why he even gets out of bed in the morning if he truly believes what he says. Rust's answer is “I tell myself I bear witness. But the real answer is that it's obviously my programming, and I lack the constitution for suicide.”¹¹ which illustrates a key tension; intellectually, he sees no value in life, but biologically and psychologically he is compelled to go on. This reflects Schopenhauer's observation

¹⁰ Episode 1 “The Long Bright Dark”

¹¹ Episode 1 “The Long Bright Dark”

that even when we judge life to be worthless, the blind will-to-live keeps us tethered to existence, making suicide a difficult “self-overcoming” (Schopenhauer, [1818] 2000, p. 362). Rust’s inability to kill himself despite his beliefs may also echo Camus’s notion that the act of living (even in defiance of meaninglessness) is a form of rebellion against the absurd. In Rust’s case, however, continuing to live is less a heroic revolt than a kind of empty habit “my programming,” as he says, since he admits he stays alive by inertia and fear of suicide, not because he finds renewed purpose.

3.5.3 Narrative and Aesthetic Reinforcement

"True Detective" uses its narrative structure and style to underscore Rust’s antinatalist and nihilistic themes. In the 1995 timeline, during the investigation of the ritualistic child-murder, Rust’s horrific experiences (uncovering a widespread pattern of abuse and suffering) seem to validate his dim view of human existence. The show’s mise-en-scène reinforces his worldview: the Louisiana landscape is depicted as bleak, decaying, and almost post-apocalyptic – fitting Rust’s description of reality as “one ghetto, a giant gutter in outer space”. The cinematography often frames Rust against deserted swamps, burned down churches, and storm-darkened skies, visually reflecting his inner convictions about the emptiness and corruption of the world. The series’ slow pacing and philosophical dialogues set it apart from typical crime dramas and give space for Rust’s antinatalist soliloquies to leave a deep impression on the viewer.

Rust’s character development provides a case study in how personal trauma can lead to an antinatalist outlook. He is not a straw-man villain spouting pessimism; he is a complex, sympathetic figure whose nihilism is grounded in grief and guilt. His bleak philosophy is partly a reaction to the senseless death of his toddler daughter and the collapse of his family – events that for Rust confirmed the “sickness” of existence and the cruelty of fate. This personal dimension makes his antinatalism understandable as an emotional and ethical response to suffering. In one poignant scene (quoted above), he reflects that his daughter’s death saved her from growing up and enduring the disillusionments of life, and “spared” him the sin of fathering a child into a world of pain. Such moments link Rust’s abstract philosophy to concrete narrative events, showing how intellectual pessimism can be rooted in real loss.

The show’s narrative complicates Rust’s antinatalist outlook through both character interactions and its final resolution. Throughout the series, Rust’s partner Marty frequently responds with discomfort or confusion to Rust’s philosophical reflections, acting as a proxy for the audience. His reactions, such as “That sounds God-fuckin’-awful, Rust” or “shut the fuck up,” highlight just how far Rust’s views are from mainstream attitudes and help frame them as unsettling rather than immediately persuasive.

However, it is the final episode that most clearly challenges Rust’s philosophical absolutism. After confronting the serial killer and nearly dying, Rust experiences what appears to be a hallucination or mystical vision in which he feels the presence of his deceased daughter and father. He describes this experience as a moment of

dissolution, where his sense of self faded and was replaced by a feeling of warmth and connection.¹²

This moment can be interpreted in different ways. On one level, it may be read through the show's intertextual references, particularly "The King in Yellow" (1895) by Robert W. Chambers, which influenced the series' occult atmosphere. In parallel with the book's plot where characters hallucinate due to coming into contact with the King in Yellow, Rust's visions could be understood as hallucinations triggered by trauma and exposure to violence, rather than as any form of transcendence.

At the same time, the scene can also be read more psychologically, as a moment of emotional clarity and partial closure following his long-standing grief over his daughter's death. In the final conversation with Marty, Rust appears altered. While he does not abandon his pessimism entirely, he tentatively introduces a new idea: that even within a predominantly dark universe, there may be small but meaningful forms of light. His remark—"once there was only dark... if you ask me, the light's winning"—marks a subtle but significant departure from his earlier insistence on inevitable decline and extinction.

This ending remains deliberately ambiguous. Some interpretations view it as a genuine shift toward hope or meaning, possibly echoing existentialist ideas such as Camus' notion of finding value in struggle despite the absurd. Others see it as a temporary emotional response, one that does not fundamentally overturn Rust's deeply rooted pessimistic worldview.

In either case, the narrative introduces a tension within Rust's philosophy. While much of the series reinforces his antinatalist perspective, the final scene complicates it by suggesting that even a committed pessimist may experience moments of connection, meaning, or affirmation. Visually, this shift is reinforced in the closing image of the night sky, where Rust points out that although darkness still dominates, the light is slowly gaining ground—a symbolic gesture toward the possibility of hope within an otherwise bleak universe. This ambiguity also illustrates how the series does not impose a single philosophical conclusion but instead invites the audience to navigate between pessimism and tentative affirmation.

3.5.4 Cultural Impact and Reflections

Rust Cohle became an iconic character in recent television, precisely because of his dark philosophical monologues. His antinatalist lines – almost unheard-of in mainstream television – sparked widespread discussion and internet fascination. Many viewers were struck by the radical nature of Rust's viewpoint, which comes into contrast with ordinary optimism and pro-family values. Memorable quotes like "Time is a flat circle," "We are things that labour under the illusion of having a self," and the call for human extinction, have been extensively analysed in blogs and social media. The

¹² Rust's monologue from the last episode " There was a moment, I know when I was under in the dark that something – whatever I had been reduced to, not even consciousness, it was a vague awareness in the dark. And I could feel my definitions fading. And beneath that darkness, there was another kind, it was deeper, warm. Like a substance, I could feel, man. And I knew my daughter waited for me there. So clear, I could feel her. I could feel them. I could feel a piece of my pop, too. It was like I was a part of everything that I ever loved. And we were all, the three of us just fading out. And all I had to do was let go. And I did. I said, "Darkness yeah" and I disappeared. But I could still feel her love there. Even more than before. Nothing – nothing but that love. And then I woke up "

character's popularity suggests a resonance with contemporary anxieties about meaning, religion and human progress. In a cultural moment marked by disillusionment and "prestige TV" that often tackles existential themes, Rust gave voice to a strain of pessimism that clearly both disturbed and intrigued audiences.

Yet, the show's reception also highlights how antinatalist or nihilist views remain controversial and shocking to many. Some viewers dismissed Rust's philosophy as edgy for shock value, while others found it intellectually stimulating or even darkly comforting in its honesty. The mild redemptive note at the end of "*True Detective*" Season one perhaps reflects a broader cultural need for hope: even within a narrative drenched in pessimism, the writers ultimately allowed a crack of light to appear. This suggests that while antinatalist and nihilist ideas can be explored in popular culture, they are often counterbalanced by themes of personal connection, meaning-making or moral resolve. In Rust's case, despite all his pronouncements, he continued to do his duty (solving heinous crimes and saving the innocent) and reconciled, to some degree, with the value of those actions. In sum, Rust's character serves to introduce millions of viewers to distilled arguments from antinatalist philosophy – forcing a confrontation with the idea that perhaps "non-existence is preferable to existence" – while the narrative context grounds those ideas in human experience and leaves room for interpretation on whether one should ultimately reject or resist such conclusions.

3.6 Case Study 2

Attack on Being: Zeke and the "Euthanasia Plan" as salvation

"*Attack on Titan*" is an anime adapted by the manga of Hajime Isayama (2009-2021). The story starts as an apocalyptic survival fantasy with humanity contained within walls, protecting them from man eating Titans. The characters are part of the army of the remaining humanity, and their purpose is to pulverize the beasts and liberate humanity from its cage. In the later seasons we see that this premise was just a tiny fraction of the truth for Isayama's world.

In the final season of the anime, the character Zeke Yeager puts forth a provocative and morally complex idea, "the Eldian Euthanasia Plan". Zeke's plan is, in essence, a solution to end suffering which resonates with antinatalistic ideas. Zeke is a part of the Eldian race, which has been cursed to transform to Titans. Due to this fact, this race and its opponents, have been fighting wars for hundreds of years. Zeke is powered and motivated by his personal experiences. He has witnessed unending cycles of violence, abuse and revenge suffered by his people as well as inflicted by his people when transformed to Titans. Due to his upbringing and witnessing of all this sorrow, Zeke has concluded that this cycle will never break as long as Eldians continue to be born into what he calls, this hell¹³. Zeke's plan is to use the Power of the Founding Titan to sterilise all Eldians, so that no more Eldian children can ever be born and therefore suffer.

As shown through flashbacks, Zeke was traumatised by a childhood in which his radicalised parents used him as a pawn in their rebellion only to be betrayed and executed, which left Zeke in the care of his grandparents. He saw firsthand how idealism and the act of bringing a child into conflict leads to misery for all. This history combined with the beliefs and regrets of his mentor, shaped Zeke's belief that procreation can be a cruel act. In his eyes, the original sin is birth itself, and the only way to end the "suffering of being" is to ensure no more birth will occur.

Zeke's euthanasia proposal is presented by him as an act of mercy and salvation. By ensuring that the current generation of Eldians is the last- i.e. by extinguishing the entire bloodline – he intends to "free" the people of the world from their fear of the Titans and "free" the Eldians from their suffering. The logic is straightforward and reflects David Benatar's philanthropic antinatalism as we have seen above.

It is worth noting that Zeke's use of the term "euthanasia" for his plan is telling; [*εὐθανασία*], which literally means "good death" implies this merciful release that Zeke strives for. He sincerely believes that preventing future births is a benevolent act for both his people and the world at large. He is not motivated by sadism or conquest, rather he is driven by compassion and empathy because his goal is to prevent future suffering. Zeke's plan is antinatalism taken to a radical extreme – a state-mandated end of an entire lineage – which raises complicated moral questions about freedom, collective rights, and ends versus means.

Zeke's perspective is rooted in a classic pessimistic evaluation of life that connects to the same ideals as Rust, but with a crucial difference in scope. Like Rust (and Schopenhauer, Cioran and others), Zeke regards life – at least life for the Eldian people—as misery and hell. Non-existence is preferable to those. His declaration "this

¹³ Attack on Titan episode 74, "Sole Salvation"

hell will never end" so long as people keep being born into it could almost be a line from Schopenhauer or Mainländer. In fact, Mainländer wrote "life is hell, and sweet, silent night of absolute death is the annihilation of hell" (Mainländer, [1876] 2024, p. 185), a sentiment Zeke would likely endorse. In Benatar's asymmetry framework, "the absence of pain [in non-existence] is good, whereas the absence of pleasure is not bad". Zeke embraces this view wholeheartedly: he is willing to forego the future happiness of unborn Eldians (since "not being born, they won't miss it") in order to achieve the absolute good of eliminating their suffering and eliminating the Titans' threat to others.

However, Zeke's ideology also illustrates a deviation from some antinatalists thinkers. Most philosophical antinatalists – i.e. Benatar and Cioran – advocate voluntary cessation of procreation by individual choice or at most by broad persuasion. Zeke by contrast, seeks to forcibly impose sterility on an entire population. This has drawn comparisons to coercive population control, eugenics or even genocide – albeit a unique form of "bloodless" genocide that aims to avoid direct killing. The moral perils of this approach highlight a critique often levelled at antinatalism; that it might lead to undemocratic or inhumane measures if taken to its extreme. Philosophically, one might contrast Zeke's stance with more life-affirming or existential philosophies. Camus, who acknowledged life's absurdity but insisted we must imagine Sisyphus happy, would see Zeke's renunciation of life as a surrender to despair. Nietzsche too would likely label Zeke's mission as an example of nihilism's "will to nothingness" – a symptom of life-denial by someone who cannot "say yes" to life's challenges, labelling Zeke as a preacher of death as well, because the character focuses on the tragic "one face" of existence – the endless war and suffering of his world – and thereby concluding no future should exist.

The narrative gradually unveils Zeke's antinatalist plan, using dramatic storytelling and visual symbolism to underscore its ethical weight. For much of the series, Zeke is portrayed as a mysterious antagonist, the Beast Titan with a hidden agenda. Only in the final arc do viewers learn the full extent of his scheme and the personal history behind it. The storytelling technique of withholding Zeke's true intentions until later seasons creates a powerful reveal that forces both characters and audience to re-evaluate Zeke. When his motives are explained- particularly in the episode¹⁴ where Zeke and his brother Eren explore their father's memories—it casts earlier events in a new light. Scenes of Zeke's childhood shows him being torn between expectations of his revolutionary father and the kindness of his mentor, who lost his own family and also grappled with concerns about the very essence of suffering because of the cruelty of life. The anime uses muted colour palettes and sombre music in these flashbacks, eliciting sympathy for the lonely boy who comes to believe no child should have to suffer as he did. Zeke seems soft and subdued, especially comparing to his brother who arises from this trip to memories as a character with his own hidden agenda. By the time Zeke articulates his plan to euthanize the Eldians, the narrative has given viewers a basis to understand, if not agree with, his radical reasoning.

The visuals and symbolism in "*Attack on Titan*" often reinforce themes of hopelessness and the crushing burden of the past, which align with Zeke's pessimism. The "Paths" – a mysterious, otherworldly plane where Zeke and Eren have a pivotal metaphysical confrontation – is depicted as an endless night sky filled with branching pathways of light (the connections between all Eldians). In this dreamlike, blue-lit realm (where time

¹⁴ "Attack on Titan" episode 79 "Memories of the Future"

itself is fluid), Zeke desperately implores Eren to help him “free everyone” by ending the cycle of violence at its source. The visual of countless glowing paths suggests the vast web of life¹⁵ that Zeke seeks to carefully extinguish – a cosmic image of lineage and memory that he hopes to snuff out for the greater good. This imagery resonates with Cioran’s notion of lingering upon the frontier of birth and gazing back at the never born. In one of *Attack on Titan*’s most poignant moments, Zeke – who has often been portrayed in cool control – breaks down and begs Eren with tears in his eyes to go through with the plan, shouting that only by ending the Eldian line can the “eternal” inferno of violence be quenched. The raw emotional intensity of this scene – two brothers in a cosmic space debating the value of an entire people’s existence – is visually and narratively arresting, confronting the audience with the heart of antinatalist ethics in a way few works of fiction do.

However, just as *True Detective* complicated Rust’s absolutism, *Attack on Titan* complicates Zeke’s antinatalism by placing it in tension with other perspectives and showing its potentially horrific costs. The very name “Eldian euthanasia” hints at the moral ambiguity, yet Zeke’s plan involves a secret, unilateral violation of an entire population’s reproductive rights (and, by extension, their existential agency). The narrative clearly frames this plan as deeply controversial. Eren, the story’s protagonist, ultimately rejects this approach, indicating that he finds it abhorrent to rob his people of choice, even if it means continued struggle. Eren chooses a different, arguably even darker path – a genocidal “solution” known as the Rumbling – which suggests that *Attack on Titan* presents no easy answers to the cycle of hatred: every proposed solution is morally nightmarish. By having its characters earnestly consider mass antinatalism and then actively oppose it, the series invites the audience to grapple with antinatalist logic while also highlighting its controversial nature. The show’s action-packed, tragic war narrative gives visceral evidence for Zeke’s claims – innumerable characters, including children, do indeed suffer and die in atrocious ways throughout the story, underscoring the cruelty of the world (as several characters note in dialogue). But in the end, the narrative stops short of endorsing Zeke’s plan as the answer. Instead, it portrays it as one desperate response to despair, a response that other characters (and likely many viewers) cannot accept.

The portrayal of Zeke’s antinatalism in a massively popular anime series indicates that these marginal philosophical ideas are part of contemporary storytelling. *Attack on Titan* has reached a global audience, sparking debate far beyond academic circles. Zeke’s “euthanasia plan” became a talking point among fans and commentators, many of whom recognised its resonance with real-world antinatalist or negative utilitarian arguments (some analyses explicitly dubbed Zeke an “antinatalist villain”¹⁶). By presenting antinatalism through the lens of a character who is both sympathetic and deeply morally troubling, the series challenges viewers to consider questions like: “Is it ever ethically justifiable to end all future lives to spare suffering?”, “Is the value of life defined more by suffering or by potential happiness?” These are essentially the same questions posed by philosophers like Camus (when asking whether life is worth living) or by Benatar.

At the same time, *Attack on Titan* reflects a cultural discomfort with such an absolute negation of life. The series does not present a clear positive alternative—indeed, it shows how Zeke’s antinatalism and Eren’s violent pro-natalist solution to kill everyone

¹⁵ [Attack On Titan: The Paths, Explained](#) [09/06/2026]

¹⁶ [Thoughts on Zeke Yeager – as a representation of the antinatalist's character in fiction? : r/antinatalism](#) [09/06/2026]

in the world but Eldians, are both catastrophic. But by climaxing in the rejection of Zeke's plan, the story leans towards the idea that even in a terrible world, the extinction of a people (even by their own choice) is not an answer. This aligns with a general contemporary stance that, even as we acknowledge deep problems (war, inherited hatred, environmental collapse, etc.), society still largely recoils from the notion of giving up on the future entirely. Zeke's portrayal may thus be read as a critical mirror: he holds up an unsettling solution that forces the other characters (and us) to clarify why humanity should continue. In the end, "*Attack on Titan*" suggests that however hellish "this hell" is, there remains an innate resistance to the finality of antinatalism – a resistance echoed by existentialist thinkers who argue we must seek meaning or freedom within life's suffering, rather than end life to end suffering.

4. Chapter 5: Conclusions

Antinatalism, once an obscure marginal philosophical position, has increasingly entered public discourse through contemporary culture. Film and television have played a crucial role in this shift, functioning as accessible mediums through which complex ethical ideas can be explored beyond academic contexts. Rather than presenting formal arguments, popular media translates antinatalist concerns into narrative form, allowing audiences to engage with them emotionally and imaginatively. In doing so, these works make abstract philosophical questions more visible and relatable.

At the same time, these representations are far from uniform. Different works adopt varied positions in relation to antinatalism: some appear to reject it, while others remain ambiguous or unresolved. For instance, *"Children of Men"* ultimately reaffirms the value of birth by presenting pregnancy as a medium of hope and restoration, whereas *"True Detective"* offers a more open-ended perspective, softening but not fully overturning Rust's earlier pessimism. What unites these examples, however, is a growing willingness within contemporary culture to engage with the question of whether life is inherently valuable, or whether its continuation can be ethically questioned.

These representations also raise important questions regarding their potential influence on social attitudes toward reproduction. By portraying birth as ethically complex, or even problematic, such narratives challenge the widespread assumption that procreation is inherently positive or self-evident. Even when they do not explicitly endorse antinatalism, these works create space for doubt, reflection, and debate. In doing so, they may contribute to a gradual shift in how individuals perceive reproductive choices, encouraging a more critical and ethically aware approach to the question of whether, and under what conditions, it is justified to bring new life into the world.

In this sense, antinatalism in popular culture reflects broader social concerns. Over the past two decades, creators have shown increasing boldness in confronting the possibility that existence itself may not be an unquestioned good. This tendency can be linked to wider anxieties regarding environmental crisis, social instability, and a sense of diminishing faith in progress. The recurring question "Would it be better if we did not exist?" thus emerges not only as a philosophical problem, but also as a cultural symptom of contemporary uncertainty.

The case studies examined in this thesis further demonstrate how these ideas are embodied through narrative and character. Rust Cohle and Zeke Yeager, in particular, articulate distinct yet related forms of antinatalist thought. Rust represents an individual, existential form of pessimism, shaped by personal loss and philosophical reflection, which leads him to view existence as an unjustifiable burden. Zeke, by contrast, extends similar assumptions to a collective level, proposing the end of reproduction as a solution to inherited suffering. In both cases, procreation is framed not as a neutral act, but as an ethical imposition that perpetuates harm.

It is important to note that these narratives do not simply endorse antinatalism. Instead, they place it in tension with opposing perspectives and expose its ethical complexity. Rust's worldview, while largely reinforced, is ultimately complicated by a final moment of ambiguity, suggesting the persistence of a desire for meaning even within a pessimistic framework. Similarly, Zeke's plan is presented as tragically motivated but ultimately rejected, highlighting the ethical problems associated with imposing non-

existence on others. In both cases, antinatalism is not presented as a definitive solution, but as a position that demands critical engagement.

These portrayals suggest that contemporary culture has not embraced antinatalism but is increasingly willing to confront its implications. By presenting arguments that are internally coherent and emotionally compelling, works such as "*True Detective*" and "*Attack on Titan*" encourage viewers to seriously consider perspectives that would otherwise remain abstract or marginal. As a result, audiences are invited to reflect on questions that lie at the core of antinatalist ethics: whether bringing new life into the world can be justified, whether suffering can ever be outweighed by happiness, and whether existence itself can be considered a harm.

Further research could expand this line of inquiry in several directions. One important area would be the empirical study of audience reception, examining how exposure to antinatalist themes in film and television may influence viewers' attitudes toward reproduction and existence. Additionally, future studies could explore a broader range of cultural contexts and media forms, including non-Western cinema, digital media, and literature, in order to assess whether similar ethical concerns emerge across different social and cultural frameworks. Finally, interdisciplinary work combining philosophy, media studies, and sociology could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how antinatalist ideas circulate within contemporary culture.

Ultimately, antinatalism in popular culture functions both as a reflection of contemporary anxieties and as a challenge to established assumptions. It disrupts the widely held belief that life is inherently valuable and that birth is always a positive event. Through narrative, imagery, and character, film and television create spaces in which these assumptions can be questioned, even if they are not fully overturned. In this way, antinatalist ideas enter public consciousness not as doctrine, but as a set of unsettling and provocative questions.

The presence of such perspectives in widely consumed media suggests that the philosophical problem of existence has gained renewed cultural relevance. Whether one accepts or rejects the conclusions of antinatalism, its increasing visibility indicates a broader shift in how contemporary society engages with issues of suffering, responsibility, and the continuation of life. As this thesis has shown, popular culture does not resolve these questions, but it plays a significant role in bringing them to the forefront of collective reflection.

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