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An American Oilscape: The Affective Emotionalism of Petroleum in *There Will Be Blood*

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Underlying the physical and ideological lives of Americans is the pulsating force of oil, a power dictating not only modes of transportation and energy, but the emotions and ideas of societies dependent on the exploitation of this natural resource. This force is often unrecognized by the contemporary individual, yet remains heavily and regularly relied on as the lifeblood which perpetuates modern American culture, a culture primarily revolving around material extravagance, cinema, and the automobile. As one of the most notable origins of the early American oil industry and a hotbed of contemporary media culture, California exists within America as an iconic centrifuge of the varying meanings attached to oil. The popular culture of California, including Hollywood and the music industry, are thus physically and emotionally based around oil, creating a



country ingrained not only in the culture of California, but one of vast oil consumption and reliance. A film emerging out of this very environment presents to the audience a distinct vision of California in the throes of oil discovery, yet ironically being produced through the continued use of oil in California. Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007) displays the evolution of the Californian landscape under the pressure of the oil industry, demonstrating to the audience the emotionalism imbued within oil, separating it from pure physicality and introducing it as the ideological pulse underlying California, and thus, America. Drawing on the vernacular of Maria Löschnigg's work, "Sublime Oilscales," I posit that the close proximity of oil and emotion is eminent within the Californian oilscape, and as revealed in *There Will Be Blood*, is a landscape formed and perceived through oil (Löschnigg, 543). I furthermore argue that oil is the primary affective natural resource, dictating not only the motion of humanity, but

its emotions as well. In exploring the emotive nature of oil's image and emotion within petroculture and petrofiction, California's oilscape, and the influence of oil upon religious and familial institutions, *There Will Be Blood* can be identified as both an amalgamation of America's relationship with oil and a perpetuation of oil's role as a driving source of emotional energy.

Oil's image is constantly commodified and manipulated within the media to elicit an array of emotional responses. Images of birds and turtles glistening with slick oil often exist as tools used to evoke feelings of guilt and pity within the audience, while video compilations of



industrious blue-collar men and women working with oil are meant to signify a sense of American dignity and pride in the manipulation of the land. However, the history of oil as the emblem of pollution makes it the most iconic and recognizable of all its

meanings, originating in 1969 with the third largest oil spill to occur in the United States. The Santa Barbara oil spill cemented the pervasive image of oil as a destructive pollutant most notably because of its proximity to the Hollywood industry and the potentiality of intense media coverage. When the oil spill occurred in early 1969, television and newspapers proliferated images of dying marine life across the nation, inciting an immediate cessation of drilling by President Nixon and the outreach of hundreds of volunteers in the oil clean-up process. Evidently, this release of oil, in a place strikingly close to the cultural epicenter of image creation within America, profoundly affected the emotions of thousands of American citizens. In the

perpetuation of these harrowing images of oil, the emotional well-being of media consumers was dismantled and moreover, provocative of action and change within the community.

In a similar manner to the Santa Barbara oil spill, the affective nature of petrofiction and petrocultures emotionally drives individuals to experience a certain feeling, manipulating the audience in both intentional and unintentional ways that further the infiltration of oil into every aspect of culture, not only in the physical sense, but within ideological and emotional facets as well. Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* engages with petrofiction in its focus on oil as the motivation for the film's plot and the vehicle which changes the audience's emotions.

There Will Be Blood relies on oil for its physical properties, being a movie produced and disseminated through the use of oil. Petrocultures scholar Stephanie LeMenager writes that "We experience ourselves, as moderns and most especially as modern Americans, every day in oil, living within oil, breathing it and registering it with our senses" (LeMenager, 6). She further explains that "all modern media forms" are supported by oil, creating a "liveness" that refuses to be separated from the natural resource (LeMenager, 6). Indeed, within the lives of modern Americans, oil is a way of living, a way of existing, and this remains true within the lives of *There Will Be Blood's* diverse range of characters. The cutthroat, unmerciful Daniel Plainview seeks to monetize every ounce of oil he can get his hands on, at the sacrifice of morality and the expense of as many human lives as it costs. While Anderson's film presents these ideas in their most extravagant and exaggerated forms, it being a loose adaptation of Upton



Sinclair's own petrofictive novel, "Oil!", the film's reliance on oil, both inside and outside the

narrative, remains a reflection of America's own problematic reliance on this natural resource and its ability to control emotion.

There Will Be Blood's petrofictive interpretations of California present a landscape defined and shaped by oil, a reflection of its existence in reality. California is renowned for its contributions to the oil industry, tactfully situated on a hotbed of oil reserves and oozing tar pits, these environmental sites of oil have elevated the state as a media and financial focal point within the United States, perpetuating an oil identity within the landscape and defining its existence. Thus, the terminology of Maria Löschnigg's "Sublime Oilscares" is fittingly appropriate in defining California (Löschnigg, 543). Although *There Will Be Blood* was filmed in Marfa, Texas, the film's setting of California is significant in perpetuating the Californian oilscape within modernity. Despite the American oil industry beginning in Philadelphia, and having a more extensive history within Texas, the setting of California has a more impactful emotional signification because of the images and meanings attached to the state that further define America (Szeman et al., 350). Environmental politics and historian Paul Sabin describes as much, "California, as both a major producer and consumer of oil, thus offers a case history for



the impact of oil on individual states and a microcosm of its penetration of the United States as a whole" (Sabin, 1). The large, underground oil reserves of California seep out of the ground and blur property lines, creating

division and complex regulation for oil companies, making the political landscape of California an oilscape as well. Upton Sinclair's novel, "Oil!", recognizes the pertinence of the Californian oilscape in its discussion of the land. The opening words of the book describe the graceful

landscape of California from the perspective of a boy in a car, the first chapter entitled, “The Ride.” It reads, “The road ran, smooth and flawless, precisely fourteen feet wide, the edges trimmed as if by shears, a ribbon of grey concrete, rolled out over the valley by a giant hand” (Sinclair, 1). In this first line, Sinclair makes evident not only the description of the land itself, but the fact that the land is inseparable from oil, the automobile, and human development. In creating a fictive atmosphere, both Sinclair and *There Will Be Blood*'s Paul Thomas Anderson draw on the Californian oilscape in an effort to elicit the emotional qualities of oil within their respective audiences.



Petrofiction and petrocultures take advantage of the emotionally-driven image of oil in allowing it to operate within a fictional setting, driving a story and the emotions of the audience. As a vision of petrofiction, *There Will Be Blood* utilizes the image and emotionalism of oil to develop and influence the ideologies of media consumers. In writing about petrofiction, literary scholar Brent Bellamy writes, “The usefulness of the term comes from its ability to name culture’s material connection to fossil fuels and, crucially, to identify the fictive quality of fossil capital. I do not mean to suggest that the carbon-based mode of production is a fiction, but rather

that it requires fiction to operate—the entrenchment of fossil fuels is as deeply cultural as it is economic” (Bellamy, 410). Depictions of oil, and depictions of social imaginings in relation to oil, are therefore grounded in the physical and the imaginary, a binary that makes oil doubly powerful. *There Will Be Blood*'s chronological situation at the forefront of oil discovery and dependency, acts as an ominous vision, or possibly a warning from Anderson to the audience of the struggle and destructiveness of oil. Whether a realization of hopelessness or a plea for change, *There Will Be Blood* presents the petrofiction genre as a nuanced, highly emotive place where the collision of the physical and emotional realms can unapologetically and powerfully combine. Graeme Macdonald intimates the relationship between oil and fiction in saying, “what has gone mostly unremarked, however, is the inextricable connection between the propulsive energy of fiction and the attention to energy in fiction—the stuff and material forces that make things go and happen within literary worlds” (Szeman et al., 162). As Macdonald suggests, the impetus of fictions and cultures by oil is of the utmost importance to understand in a world that mirrors these same emotional motivations within the fictive landscape.

There Will Be Blood connects images of oil with emotion in order to solidify the longstanding partnership between the two. As the domineering main character, Daniel Plainview, stands in awe of a gas blowout, what the film describes as a “gusher” or “strike,” thousands of gallons of oil gushing from the earth before his eyes before turning into flames, he fails to remember or mourn the death of a man who died in the same oil rig a day earlier. Where one man feels a sense of awe and captivation at the phenomena, the conflicting depiction of death demonstrates Anderson's multi-faceted understanding of oil's affectiveness. The juxtaposition of these emotions connects the audience to these contradictory feelings and in so doing, complicates oil as an image with a rapidly evolving definition. Ecological studies scholar Alexa Weik von

Mosser writes that cognition “cannot be separated from emotion, and emotion is linked to the feelings of the body, it is inevitable that our physical environment influences how we feel and consequently how we think” (Weik von Mossner, 4). As *There Will Be Blood* strives to transport the viewer through a spectrum of emotions, the petroleum-fueled narrative and environment drives these emotions, and thereby, the cognizance of the audience. In this way, oil simultaneously affects the characters and the audience in their thoughts, feelings, and actions, bestowing new meaning and relevance to oil in the tangible and metaphysical realms.

There Will Be Blood's portrayal of oil is closely associated with somaesthetics, the aesthetic use of the body within film and culture. The first ten minutes of the film lack any representation of oil, but rather, the camera chooses to focus on the movement and physical



presence of the men, as well as the death of H.W.’s father. Soon after oil is discovered, H.W. is marked with a swipe of oil on his forehead, binding him to its influence in his life. In a similar manner, the “gusher” or “strike” that

occurs signifying Daniel Plainview’s immanent success, immediately flings H.W.’s body off the oil rig and permanently damages his perception of the world in disabling him. The showers of oil rain down and cover every surface, further reflecting the presence of oil in all things. As Daniel Plainview and H.W. are entirely immersed in oil, the film presents separate images of their faces looking upwards, glistening with oil, symbolizing another loss of purity. Furthermore, the bodies of the dead are embedded in oil, such as the man posing to be Henry Plainview. After he is brutally shot in the head by Daniel, he buries him in a pool of oil, a representation of oil’s deadly influence on the individual. In Stephanie LeMenager’s “The Aesthetics of Petroleum,” she

explains, “Anderson’s script obsesses upon the resistance of bodies, their heft, the friction of their interaction” and that the film gives “almost too much sensory information” (LeMenager, 79, 81). Matching the intense somatic nature of the film, the emotional responses, so closely related to the body, reveal the emotionalism inherent to oil as it exists in modernity.

Bodily representations within *There Will Be Blood* provide the means for the intense emotions the film relies on to be conveyed, almost to the point of melodrama. However, these oil-fueled reactions provide an emotional foundation the audience can identify with, because they too, like the characters in *There Will Be Blood*, are set into motion by oil and the processes of petroleum companies. In Peter Hitchcock’s exploration of representations of oil within the “American imaginary,” he acknowledges the presence of oil as the pervasive influence motivating fiction and reality. He writes about oil narratives and petrofiction, saying “This does not mean that the story is now told, but that we are beginning to understand how it might be better expressed” (Hitchcock, 82). In recognizing the use of oil as the material through which culture, such as movies and novels, are created, the apparent emotionalism affecting audiences of these emblems of culture can be more readily understood. Expressions of emotion in *There Will Be Blood* are varied and in depth, most notably in the characters of Daniel Plainview and Eli Sunday. Plainview puts on a façade of level-headedness to impress and swindle his potential investors, also exemplified in his ambivalence towards the deaths of his employees. However, his deep-seated emotional imbalance as a result of his pursuits in the oil industry are revealed in a conversation with the man he believes is his brother. He says, “Are you an angry man, Henry? Do you get envious?...I have a competition in me. I want no one else to succeed. I hate most people.” His outbursts within the movie result in murder and dangerous, drunken outrages. Eli Sunday acts as a foil to Plainview ideologically, yet temperamentally exists as a complement in

his vivid displays of emotion, most notably in his passionate sermons, in which he manipulates his face, voice, and body to convey a spiritual presence and convince his congregation of his



effectiveness as a prophet. In a subversion of power with his father, Abel, Eli displays his intense anger in an Old Testament-esque struggle, calling his father “stupid” and climbing across a dinner table to pin him on the ground. These surges of emotion are reminiscent of the explosions of oil from the ground that both

Plainview and Sunday so ardently desire, a cinematic translation of oil to emotion.

The dynamic between Eli and Abel Sunday does not exist solitarily within *There Will Be Blood* as the sole example of a challenging family dynamic, and as Daniel Worden explains, the film “is also a meditation on how oil and blood become equivalent in our social imaginary” (Worden 457). The other featured relationship within the film, ingrained with challenge and complexity, is that of Daniel Plainview and his “son” H.W. In the final scene that H.W. appears in, he boldly states to his father figure, Daniel, that he is, in fact, glad to not be related to the tyrannical oil fiend. Yet H.W. remains an “oil man” like Daniel, only relocating to Mexico in hopes of separating himself from his father and starting his business elsewhere. *There Will Be Blood* invites the audience to consider relationships in terms of economics, and this is true of Daniel Plainview more than anyone, who takes advantage of an orphaned boy solely for the appearance of having a “family business.” After he’s maimed by the oil fire, H.W. is conspicuously sent off on a train to a school for deaf children, and



Daniel in turn exploits his “brother” as his business partner before getting rid of him, too, albeit in a deadlier way than H.W.’s disappearance. For Daniel Plainview, relationships have no meaning outside of their fiscal significance. However, a moment of emotional vulnerability after killing his “brother” reveals that Daniel may have some degree of suppressed acknowledgement of family. Yet, this avenue remains unexplained and unexplored by the film. Instead, Daniel Plainview persists as a character whose emotions are consumed, almost to the point of nonexistence, by oil. The decay of familial bonds within the film echoes the decline of the ideal image of the family within American society.

There Will Be Blood oil’s subsumption into demonic industry and domestic normativity becomes increasingly unstable, as petroleum consumption and the family both become widely recognized problems in the late 1970s. Following the successes 1979 oil crisis, oil connotes scarcity, and the American family loses its idyllic, paternal stability following the successes of the women’s liberation movement and the passage of no-fault divorce laws in most US states by the early 1980s. Accordingly, the pillars of fossil-fuel futurity, “the availability of petroleum and the happily reproductive, middle-class family— become unstable by the late 1970s, throwing the connections between oil and the future into crisis” (Worden, 453). While interpersonal relationships, especially familial units, are not typically thought of according to oil, *There Will*



relationships as they are affected in reality.

Be Blood illuminates this overlooked influence upon what are often the deepest and most significant bonds of human existence and mirrors the implications of oil on these

A primary emblem illustrating the intersection between emotion and oil in *There Will Be Blood* is the function of religion, reflecting within the parameters of petrofiction the pervading influence of oil into all aspects of emotional living. *There Will Be Blood's* narrative appears to pit the oil industry and religion against each other, two seemingly opposing industries grappling with a challenging coexistence. But although Eli expresses resentment at the prospect of his family's land being sold to Plainview, he is arguably as equally motivated by oil as Plainview is. The Christian imagery and overtones within the film provide insight to the affective nature of oil within the context of religion. Eli Sunday's church is coined "The Church of the Third Revelation," a reference to the old and new testaments, the first and second revelations, respectively. The third revelation exists as a modern source of spiritual inspiration for members, with Eli acting as the contemporary prophet. In the final scene of the film, Plainview



forcibly demands Sunday to sell out as a religious leader, telling him to say, "I am a false prophet and God is a superstition." Motivated by the prospect of financial opportunity, Eli yells the phrase multiple times, revealing his dependence on oil as a preacher. Moments before he murders Eli with a bowling pin, Plainview bellows, "I am the third revelation! I am the third revelation!" This exchange of religious authority between the preacher and the capitalist mongrel presents oil as the new modern prophet, a force that governs religion, business, and the intricacies of human life.

The third revelation can also refer to the third chapter in the Book of Revelation in the Bible, where the apostle John writes, "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy

nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see” (King James Bible, Rev. 3.18). This verse presents Jesus Christ’s voice encouraging the reader to immerse himself in resources such as gold and clothing, a theme consistently present within *There Will Be Blood*. This verse directly reflects the lives of both Eli Sunday and Daniel Plainview, who are both consumed with money to the point it corrupts their morals and destroys their identities. In this sense, the third revelation is a departure from religion as a spiritual institution, but rather one dedicated to the accumulation of money, in other words, the oil industry as religion. The inclusion of fire within verse eighteen further perpetuates its significance to *There Will Be Blood*, which is rife with fire symbolism. While walking with H.W., Daniel Plainview expresses to Abel Sunday he wants to work with H.W. on making a fire. H.W. later on sets “Henry” Plainview’s bed on fire. The image of fire is essentially oil set into motion. The religious implications of fire are often associated with baptism, most notably when John the Baptist writes in Matthew 3:11, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.” A baptism by fire within the film refers to the oil fire, as well as the literal baptism of Daniel Plainview into the Church of the Third Revelation, an insincere act of repentance incited by the local congregation, of which Eli is the preacher. Again encouraged to engage in this performance of confession, and covered in water, this baptism mirrors the rebirth of the oil fire that acts as a point of redirection for Plainview and a destruction

of the old. Plainview's culminating assertion of his claim to the third revelation thereby reveals oil's dominance over the spiritual.



As evidenced by Daniel Plainview's progression throughout *There Will Be Blood*, from a silver prospector to an oil man and outright murderer, another facet of oil's emotional capacity is the ability to influence the human identity, for better or for worse. In reference to his hometown of Alberta, Geo Takach writes that the city "illustrates the power of petroleum to fuel the culture of a place as much as it powers the growing fleet of tank cars clogging its primary paved artery...Oil has shaped the province's sense and representation of self—its identity—with significant repercussion" (Szeman et al., 189). As oil shapes the identities of the land it impacts, it concurrently molds the individuals that inhabit it as well. Indeed, Daniel Plainview's self-proclaimed identity as a family man is completely fabricated by oil, yet this assertion is the foundation of his business, life, and identity as an individual.

"I'm not a businessman, I'm a business, man!" a lyric penned in 2005 states. The line, from Kanye West's song "Diamonds from Sierra Leone - Remix," seems to echo the sentiments

of Daniel Plainview and the growth of monopoly culture in big business, with individuals and brands having supreme power over most industries. Produced in Los Angeles, similar to *There Will Be Blood*, the song explores the unethical, environmentally hazardous practices of harvesting blood diamonds, an industry that shares comparable risks as oil. As the center of popular culture, California exists as a landscape shaped and consumed by oil, disseminating the image of the corrupting nature of capitalism and natural resource harvesting, while simultaneously engaging in this image for profit. These practices translate into emotional, personal, and tangible consequences for individuals, whether actively involved in the oil industry or passively receiving benefits. Released ten years ago, *There Will Be Blood* presents a poignant, yet intense, meditation on the affective nature of oil within the human paradigm and emotional landscape that is as relevant as ever. Imre Szeman writes, “Greater attention to fossil fuels in literature and culture generates changes in how we name and frame energy,” attesting to the pertinence of this resource in imaginary and real worlds alike (Szeman, 390). The focal character of *There Will Be Blood*, Daniel Plainview, echoes sentiments of modern capitalists in his endorsement of competition and his successful stifling of religion, placing oil at the highest level of social, physical, and emotional hierarchies in and out of fiction. Whether blood religion, coal, or oil, these resources fuel the economies of modernity, and the emotional, spiritual, and familial oilscapes of humanity.

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