Dismantling the American Dominant Ideology: Anderson's "There Will Be Blood"

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Dismantling the American Dominant Ideology: An Analysis of Paul Thomas Anderson’s

*There Will Be Blood*

Every film is subjective because each is an offspring of the filmmaker and their culture. The filmmaker aspect is the basis of auteur theory, and the culture aspect is the basis of ideology theory. “Ideology” encompasses the vast belief system that operates over every person all of the time. Robin Wood explains that the American dominant ideology includes a rigorous work ethic and belief in heterosexual monogamous marriage (593). Since the ideological conditioning of the filmmaker is inescapable, the critics Comolli and Narboni proclaimed that “every film is political” (688). They stress that there are different approaches to the treatment of ideology in a film, which range from embracing the ideology in full to challenging it in terms of content and/or formal elements (camerawork, editing, lighting, etc…). A particularly transgressive film in its formal depiction of reality can “sever the tie between cinema and its ideological function;” it must disrupt the sense of reality in a startling and uncomfortable way (Comolli 689). Category (e) films, though not explicitly political, throw obstacles in the way of the prevailing ideology, and the film simultaneously reinforces and undermines the ideology through its content or formal elements. Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* (2007) falls into category (e) because it promotes, and then challenges, the prevailing American belief that a hard working, progressive man can succeed in this individualistic, capitalist system while maintaining the virtues of integrity, family, and community.
Since films are a commodity to be bought and sold in a capitalist system, and the number of attendees determines the monetary success or failure of the film, most films fall into category (a). Category (a) films are “imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form, and give no indication that the filmmakers were aware of the fact…the ideology is talking to itself; it has all the answers ready before it answers the questions” (Comolli 689). They are the least challenging psychologically and intellectually to the typical viewer, so they become the most escapist, most entertaining, and most profitable in the commercial film system. The dollar becomes a ballot, voting to reinforce the system: “audience demand and economic response have been reduced to one in the same thing,” making the consumer feel comfortable and complacent in the dominant ideology (Comolli 689). Comolli and Narboni aptly summarize this idea by saying “‘reality’ is really nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology” (689).

Robin Wood describes the values and assumptions of the American dominant ideology that were continually expressed in Classical Hollywood Cinema. The first three key principles are (1) personal initiative and personal ownership, (2) the value of marriage and family, and (3) the importance of ‘honest toil’ to a man’s work ethic. The latter two validate the first one because in marriage, a man gains the possessions ‘my wife,’ ‘my child,’ and the implied ‘my house.’ Through his initiative and hard work, he has developed morally admirable capital (money). Wood goes on to list that rural lifestyle and the frontier are idealized in America, or in his words, “nature as agrarian; the virgin land as Garden of Eden” (593). In regards to wealth, two contradictory paradigms exist simultaneously: success and wealth are valued and glorified, yet money isn’t everything and it can corrupt (what he calls the Rosebud syndrome). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, “America is a land where everyone is, or can be happy; all problems are solvable within the system” (Wood 594). The resolution of crisis is most commonly manifested in the happy ending, in which all conflicts are resolved and the status quo is restored. Wood uses the example of It’s a Wonderful Life, when George Bailey questions himself, his family, his community, and God, then through a magical event, his faith in
all four of these entities is renewed. The film becomes “a convincing and moving affirmation of the values of Bourgeois family life” (Wood 598). Though George Bailey questions the American dominant ideology, the ideology comes to his rescue and solves all of his problems, re-establishing his belief in the system; the film falls into category (a).

This sense of restoration and renewal does not occur in *There Will Be Blood*; on the contrary, the protagonist rejects family, community, and humanity in his wild pursuit of material wealth in the most lucrative business of all: oil. The film begins with Plainview persevering alone in an oil mine, surviving a near death experience, then becoming a profitable self made entrepreneur. He is confident in his skills and seems honest, straight forward, and moral: “if I say I am an oil man, then you will agree. You have a great chance here, but bear in mind, you can lose it all if you’re not careful…I’m a family man- I run a family business. This is my son and my partner, H.W. Plainview.” He has worked very hard and risked a lot in the dangerous drilling operations, and he does seem to truly love and care for his son as seen through a touching moment where Plainview plays with baby H.W. on the train. Plainview’s morality is first challenged when he and H.W. (now about 10) talk about their deal with the Sunday family over the property cost of buying and drilling on their land. He says “I won’t give them oil prices…I’ll give them quail prices,” meaning that he plans to exploit the family for profit. He preaches idealist values of growth and prosperity to the naive community that he begins to drill in:

I encourage my men to bring their families as well, it makes for such a more rewarding life for them. Family means children, and children means education…let’s build a wonderful school!!…to my mind it is an abomination that any man, woman, or child in this great country of ours should have to look on a loaf of bread as a luxury…we’ll have crops and more grain than you’ll know what to do with…agriculture, roads, employment, education…if we find oil, this community will not only survive, it will flourish!
Plainview’s promise doubles as the promise of capitalism, and cleverly, the mechanism of the growth in this case is oil. The entire modern American civilization is based upon oil: the automobile, plastic, planes, abundant crops, and national and international trade. Since the film is set in 1910 but was made in 2007, the movie is really about 2007. When his promise fails, and Plainview alone reaps the benefits of the oil, it reflects the modern day American disenchantment with capitalism, a system that seems to have become more greedy and self-serving than ever. Plainview’s reckless pursuit of oil and money, disguised as a community growth initiative could be a direct critique of the greed of the Bush administration’s venture into Iraq which had become extremely unpopular at the time the film was released.

The first scene that radically disrupts the American ideology, both in content and form, is the scene where they strike oil. H.W. plays on a platform twenty feet above the drill while Plainview sits hundreds of feet away, oblivious. The drill shakes violently and then explodes with air and oil. H.W. is knocked backward and injured, and Plainview runs to help him. While both covered in thick, black oil, he carries H.W. to safety in a jarring and bizarre long take tracking shot while Johnny Greenwood’s...
strange and unsettling percussive music swells. H.W. has been stricken deaf, and he clings to his father, terrified. Plainview leaves H.W. aside to go fix the drill, and H.W. begs him to stay, desperately repeating “I can’t hear my voice.” After containing the drill, Plainview excitedly turns to a co-worker while admiring the flaming mess and says: “what are you so miserable about? There’s a whole ocean of oil under our feet! No one can get at it except for me!” The sun has set, and lit only by the fire, his face coated with blotches of reflective black, he looks completely demonic. The burning rig crashes and Plainview laughs and rejoices as the music turns even darker and more ominous. The man asks “is H.W. okay?” and Plainview simply replies “No he isn’t.” The man runs to go see the boy, and Plainview seems indifferent; he stays to admire his new wealth, his face visually stained black and shiny with symbolic greed. The scene challenges the ideology because Plainview abandons his family simply to admire his own riches. His son’s well being has been devastated literally (through the explosion) and figuratively by his own lucrative pursuits. The extreme music and camerawork depicts cinematic reality in an uncomfortable and experimental way. It becomes clear through content and form in this scene that the film has radically changed: “[in terms of the ideology] there is a noticeable gap, a dislocation, between the starting point and the finished product” (Comolli 691). This example affirms the film’s placement in category (e); Anderson “corrodes the ideology by restating in terms of his film” through this critical depiction of the excesses of American capitalism (Comolli 691).

*There Will Be Blood* moves beyond “values and assumptions” that “success and wealth are valued” and that “money isn’t everything” (Wood). Plainview becomes a monster of capitalism, a brutal, destructive force who later tricks his deaf son (a burden) out of his life by sending him to a school for the deaf. Plainview claims that “I look at people and I see nothing worth liking,” and he becomes a drunken hermit, cocooned in his empty mansion, rejecting humanity and human interaction. The community to which he promised wealth is still poor and underdeveloped while his fortune grows by the millions. Plainview is a misanthrope, a despicable human being who taunts his son for being an ‘orphan’ and a ‘bastard in a basket,’ claiming that he only adopted H.W.
because he needed a pretty, trustworthy face for his oil pursuits, using and discarding his son for profit. At the same time; however, he is a relatable antihero. The idea of ‘getting away from everyone’ is a tempting subconscious thought that an individualistic, materialistic society produces. The brilliant performance of Daniel Day Lewis becomes darkly comic when the audience rejoices in the character’s maniacal rejection of his son, then the taunting and murder of his rival, Eli Sunday. The closing music, the triumphant Brahms concerto, and the famous last lines “I am finished!” are victorious and powerful. Plainview has won at capitalism, succeeded in the system and gained immeasurable material wealth, though in every sense of human morality, he is an abomination. Daniel Plainview is a metaphor; he is a whirlwind of greed, a black hole of isolation, abandoning social norms and ideological paradigms. In the context of Wood and Comolli/Narboni, There Will Be Blood is rich with ideological commentary about the American dream, capitalism, family, greed, and individualism.
Works Cited

