

Textual Analysis Film: *There Will Be Blood* (2007)

Director: Paul Thomas Anderson

Sequence Run Time: 2:11:00 - 2:16:00

Word Count: 1743

The extract I have chosen is from the film *There Will Be Blood* (2007), directed by Paul Thomas Anderson and developed from the novel 'Oil!' written by Upton Sinclair. This western thriller is set in the early 20th century, and follows the rise of Daniel Plainview, a former silver miner who strives towards power, using the oil rich California state as a path to success. Through his pursuit of power and wealth, Daniel systematically exploits the people around him, sacrificing morality and relationships in the process. This film serves as a powerful exposition of capitalism, industrial ambition, and the consequences of uncontrollable greed: themes that are cleverly personified, by Anderson, through Plainview's complex character arc.

Anderson directed *There Will Be Blood* during a period in which there was a rising critique of corporate greed. In the early 2000's, many corporate scandals - such as Enron - exposed how ruthless and corrupt large companies could be. This led to widespread economic mistrust, which inevitably contributed to the global financial crash in 2008. In *There Will Be Blood*, Anderson explores the origins of this capitalist driven ideology in the United States, by using the character of Daniel Plainview as a microcosm for the ideology of capitalism and greed. This film serves as both a historical reflection and a contemporary warning, which highlights the consequences of unchecked greed, which are themes relevant to the present day's global context.

The director's willingness to use the film to confront the capitalist ideologies of the early 20th century, through his directorial choices, creates, "*a layered and violent*

interplay of primal elements." (Eli Friedberg, *The Film Stage*, 2017). As David Denby stated in his review, "*Anderson renders American history in eerie dream tones, never once reneging on the title's promise of deep, continuous dread*" (*The New Yorker*, 2007). However, Denby's point can be developed further: Anderson's perception of America's history is not only a conception that is otherworldly but rather a deliberate mirror held up to modern society. Anderson merely uses this historical backdrop to expose the everyday capitalist, and uses Plainviews perspective as a means to reveal what the consequences of unchecked greed results to. This allows Anderson to portray America's capitalistic origins, not as distant ideologies, but as active, forces shaping the present day society. Plainview is but a symbol for this overarching theme that is evident to today's backdrop.

My extract exemplifies how greed and capitalism lead to severe consequences. Anderson stated in an interview, "*Unfortunately, this story doesn't seem to be going out of style any time soon. It would be nice to see it as science fiction one day. Or an account of how truly insane we all once were.*" (Anderson, *The Guardian*, 21 Dec. 2019), therefore he intentionally portrays the collateral damage of capitalism on everyday society. Anderson employs a range of mise-en-scène elements: setting, costume, and lighting to create a harsh atmosphere that juxtaposes each character with their own moral dilemmas. These dilemmas symbolise key themes in the film, such as religion versus capitalism and the consequences of overwhelming greed. I believe that through this, Anderson is able to create a convincing story that reflects on different demographics of people in the early 20th century.

The extract I have chosen comes from the middle of the film, during the dramatic eruption of the oil rig. In this moment, Daniel Plainview is forced to balance the safety of his adopted son, H.W., with the urgent need to save the oil well. Plainview ultimately prioritises the oil, highlighting the ruthless capitalist drive visible in oil mining and demonstrating how overwhelming greed can harm those closest to us. In my analysis, I will explore the set design, lighting, and mise en scène that make this extract so powerful and how it connects to the broader themes of the film.



Fig 1: Start of extract – Daniel Plainview trying to save H.W from the oil explosion

At the beginning of my chosen extract there is a low angle dutch shot of Daniel Plainview desperately reaching for H.W. amidst the chaos of the oil rig explosion (Fig.1). The unstable framing of the scene visually reflects the disorientation and the dangerous element of the moment, hyperbolising the emotional intensity and uncertainty. The mise en scène further builds the tension when we can see that both characters are drenched in oil showing how integrated they are in the destructive consequences of Plainview's ambition. For Plainview, the oil symbolises how greed

has corrupted his morality; for H.W. It symbolises his role as collateral damage and a by-product of his fathers capitalistic urge for power. The lighting within this frame is very effective: as the harsh, high contrast lighting from the luminescent sky with the dark, smoky atmosphere created by the oil, emphasises this sense of danger and moral ambiguity. Therefore the loss of natural light also visually represents his loss of innocence, as high tone colours usually connote purity. As David Denby stated, the film explores, *"The driving force of capitalism as it both creates and destroys the future"* (*The New Yorker*, 2007). Evidently seen through the damage inflicted on H.W due to Plainviews's ambition.

In addition the use of non-diegetic sound in this scene is very effective as the constant rumble of burning oil and the roar of explosions emphasises the atmosphere of destruction. These sounds underscore the emotional impact of the scene and serve as an aural metaphor for the negative consequences of unchecked ambition. Anderson used this moment to evoke a sense of sympathy towards H.W., positioning him as a victim of an ideology that prioritises profit over human morality.



Fig 2: Daniel Plainview running to the oil rig after choosing to save the oil over staying with his harmed son.

In fig 2. There is a wide angle shot that captures the vast, dry Californian landscape with Plainview and his workers minturised by both the landscape and the erupting fire from the oil rig. The barren mise en scene: dry soil, rocks and working tents, metaphorically reflects the capitalistic systems, represented by the oil industry, that creates an environment hostile to human growth and emotional development, as the people working all look similar, meaning they all fit a certain mold created by this capitalistic ideology. The oil rig engulfed in flames dominates the right third of the frame, creating a strong compositional imbalance that draws the audience's attention to the instability, which symbolises the chaos created through unregulated ambition. Fire has dual meanings: on one side, it connotes destruction and the consequences of greed. On the other hand, it externalises Plainviews growing ambition, showing how his uncontrollable need for power has a collateral damage on the people surrounding him. The shot is hand held and moves around frantically, this evokes a documentary realism and immerses the audience in the panic. This clear visual chaos mirrors the moral collapse, central to the movie's narrative.



Fig 3: H.W. asking Daniel to stay after losing his hearing

Furthermore, just before Fig.2, Plainview has to make the conscious decision to either save the oil rig or nurture his wounded son (Fig. 3). This moment contrasts Fig.2 with an intimate close up of H.W, his face is coated with crude oil, as he looks up at his father. The low key lighting and tight framing isolates H.W. from the surrounding, intensifying the emotional impact, directing the audience's attention to the psychological consequences of Plainviews capitalistic choices. The oil acts as a visual scar, a literal manifestation of the harm that capitalism has on innocence. His damaged hearing creates another sense of detachment from H.W. and Plainview, as greed has led their relationship to become more and more distant, which can now clearly be seen by them not being able to communicate. The camera cuts between the two characters very often in this segment and this could be a way of Anderson depicting this tension as this is a pivotal turning point in the movie as this action alone will alter the outcome of their relationship. As stated by Margeret Case, “*the pinnacle of his unconscious submission to the ideology of capitalism, which ultimately destroys his personal relationships*”. Clearly seen through the collapse of Daniel and H.W.’s relationship.



Fig 4: Eli Sunday looking at the oil rig

Other than the theme of the consequences of overwhelming greed, the ideological battle between capitalism and Religion is a central assertion explored by Anderson in *There Will Be Blood*. Near the end of the extract we see that Eli Sunday is observing the burning oil rig (fig.3) and this single frame exemplifies the collapse of religious authority in the face of industrial power. The use of a close up, frames Eli's expression as he observes in silence, allowing the audience to witness his inner conflict. The use of Chiaroscuro lighting is used to reflect his moral duality, as the dark shadows that overwhelm the frame represent his religious emptiness and moral corruption. We can also see an orange glow cast on his face, which comes from the burning oil rig, symbolising the corrupting influence of capitalism and his own suppressed greed. Furthermore, on the left side of the frame, a subtle yellow candle light flickers beside him. Possibly acting as a visual metaphor for christ: its faint presence compared to the overwhelming fire connotes that Eli's connection to religion is fading away, and being overtaken by capitalistic desires. Anderson's use of mise en scene here is very effective in presenting Eli as a character isolated in darkness, both literally and metaphorically. His passive nature underscores his lack of control as his character has always been presented as someone who puts minimal effort towards achieving their goals, which could symbolise the difference between capitalism and religion as capitalists, such as Plainview, work hard for their overarching goal. The film critic, Joe Jokinen, wrote that the film is about, ' *a story of the triumph of commerce over religion.*' (*Literary Review of Canada*, Dec. 2019) which accurately depicts how Eli loses his religious high ground and succumbs to greed. Furthermore, the sense of suspension is further emphasised, as the harsh non diegetic sound continues though this scene, which depicts this penalising nature enforced over Eli, as he watches his own land become something outside of his

control. Therefore, Anderson depicts that capitalism inevitably wins over religion, as in a present day point of view, we see the world run by capitalists.

In conclusion, *There Will Be Blood* (2007) explores the corrupting power of capitalism and its impact on both human relationships and societal expectations. Anderson delves into how greed seeps into religion and innocence, using the oil boom as a metaphor for the moral cost of ambition. A theme still relevant in today's context.

Bibliography

Coughlin, Patrick. “*There Will Be Blood* and the Poetry of Paul Thomas Anderson’s Elegant Magnum Opus.” *The Film Stage*, 22 Jan. 2018, <https://thefilmstage.com/there-will-be-blood-and-the-poetry-of-paul-thomas-anderson-s-elegant-magnum-opus/>.

Ebert, Roger. “*There Will Be Blood*.” *RogerEbert.com*, 24 Jan. 2008, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/there-will-be-blood-2008>.

Harrop, Joe. “The Political, Personal, & Prophecies of *There Will Be Blood*.” *Perisphere*, 21 Mar. 2025, <https://www.perisphere.org/2025/03/21/the-political-personal-prophecies-of-there-will-be-blood/>.

“*There Will Be Blood*: Paul Thomas Anderson’s Epic Take on American Identity and the Day-Lewis Performance of a Lifetime.” *Cinephilia & Beyond*, <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/will-blood-paul-thomas-andersons-epic-take-american-identity-day-lewis-performance-lifetime/>.

“Watch: Philosophical Analysis of *There Will Be Blood*.” *The Movie Waffler*, 1 Feb. 2017, <https://www.themoviewaffler.com/2017/02/watch-philosophical-analysis-of-there.html>.

Stone, Tom. “*There Will Be Blood*.” *Boston Review*, https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/stone-there-will-be-blood/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Jackson, Meaghan. “*There Will Be Blood*: Capitalism, Religion, and the Death of the American Dream.” *RWU English Theses*, Roger Williams University, 2017, https://docs.rwu.edu/english_theses/85/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

There Will Be Blood (2007)

McKay, Adam. "Oil and Holy Water." *Literary Review of Canada*, Dec. 2019,
https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2019/12/oil-and-holy-water/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Shoard, Catherine. "Paul Thomas Anderson: 'I Don't Even Know What My Last Film Was About.'" *The Guardian*, 21 Dec. 2019,
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/dec/21/paul-thomas-anderson-i-dont-even-know-what-my-last-film-was-about>. Accessed 13 June 2025.

Jokinen, Tom. "Oil and Holy Water: Bearing the Cross of a Natural Resource."

Literary Review of Canada, Dec. 2019.

<https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2019/12/oil-and-holy-water/>