

AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

The Sacred and the Profane: Visualising Patriarchal Capitalism in *There Will Be Blood*

When I first read Mircea Eliade's book, *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), it felt like I had finally found the terminology necessary for explaining the origins of organised human life. Or at the very least, I could explain all those shots of bell towers in my favourite westerns. After all, the genre is filled with visual examples of sacred and profane space: a stagecoach travels across a desolate, horizontal landscape eventually arriving in a town whose verticality alone feels like an appeal to the heavens above, a testament to the unseemly ideals of manifest destiny. But the more one tries to apply these concepts, the more one realises how complicated this division of sacred and profane, organised and chaotic, centralised and decentralised, really is. How to explain the Overlook Hotel, for example? Or, better yet, Paul Thomas Anderson's Southern California?

In studying Paul Thomas Anderson's work, I realised the filmmaker's oeuvre covered many decades of Southern California history. In *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) and *Magnolia* (1999) we have a very contemporary and postmodern vision of the San Fernando Valley. Rewind a little and we have *Boogie Nights* (1997): VHS and cocaine on the cusp of the 80s. Rewind again and you're in the land of *Inherent Vice* (2014), a



convoluted Pynchon plot following another turn-of-the-decade event: the Manson murders.

Rewind even further and you have *The Master* (2012), a pseudo-historical account of L. Ron Hubbard's establishment of the church of scientology – that uniquely Los Angeles institution. Rewind for the last time, and you're at the turn of the century – Daniel Plainview and the oil derrick – the subject of this video essay. In applying Eliade's concepts to *There Will Be Blood* (2007), we discover a complication of sacred and profane space that challenges not only Eliade's terminology, but also common criticisms of the filmmaker's own thematic concerns.

In an early essay on Anderson's work, Brian Michael Goss asserts that while capitalism and a dominant patriarchy are typically portrayed as socially disruptive in Anderson's films, 'the narratives also posit, at least tentatively, that the market furnishes the materials for their solution' (2002: 171). One thinks of Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) returning to Jack Horner's (Burt Reynolds) arms at the end of *Boogie Nights*.

Jason Sperb affirms this view in his book *Blossoms and Blood* – a study of Anderson's filmography up to 2013 – observing that the films 'often end on a more cautious note of

reconciliation that implies patriarchal capitalism is the solution to the same problems it created' (2013: 3). But is it really the case that Anderson's work, in revealing an intense awareness of patriarchal capitalism, is ultimately submissive to said systems of oppression?

In this video essay I aim to challenge these criticisms of Anderson's work, through a close reading of the sacred and profane image system of *There Will Be Blood*. By pairing the film's visual appeals to sacredness and profaneness – and all the transformations and complications of said appeals – with a voiceover analysis that blends Eliade's constructions with Anderson's themes, I reveal a layered and coherent system of meaning within the film. Eliade's compelling articulation of the processes by which humankind establishes its place in the universe enhances our understanding of this image system, thus deepening our appreciation of Anderson's filmography while alluding to the darkness that lurks within it.

<https://vimeo.com/457938690>

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Works cited

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