

P. T. Anderson's Dilemma: the Limits of Surrogate Paternity

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A while ago now, Fredric Jameson located the Utopian dimension of Coppola's first *Godfather* film (1972) in 'the fantasy message projected by the title of this film, that is, in the family itself, seen as a figure of collectivity and as the object of a Utopian longing'.¹ In a late-capitalist America beset by an irreversible 'deterioration of the family, the growth of permissiveness, and the loss of authority of the father', Coppola's Sicilians 'project an image of social reintegration by way of the patriarchal and authoritarian family of the past'. (33) To be sure, the ethnic group may preserve within its anachronistic familial webs a relatively untarnished 'Name of the Father', that can be trotted out for nostalgic wish-fulfilment on celluloid; but it goes without saying that commercial American cinema has *always* turned on the institution of the family, to the extent that 'in a typical Hollywood product, everything, from the fate of the Knights of the Round Table through the October Revolution up to asteroids hitting the earth, is transposed into an Oedipal narrative'.²

Jameson's Utopian account of the 'ineradicable drive towards collectivity' (34) betokened by the family drama in American mass culture surely overlooks that most stubborn obstacle to its realization, both within any given plot, and more practically in everyday life: namely, the father himself. Indeed, the family's innermost traumatic knot, the Oedipus complex, threatens precisely to undo that 'collectivity' in the very act of

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 32.

² Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), p. 52.

articulating its generational extension. And this trauma, far from being diminished or made redundant by the father's historical loss of social authority—patriarchy being the 'big loser of the twentieth century'³—has only been driven inward and rendered more acute to the extent that the permissive 'postmodern' father lacks the authority that would dramatize it and allow it a place upon the symbolic surface of things. Today, the fate of the son in Dayton and Faris's exemplary family comedy *Little Miss Sunshine* (USA, 2006) is properly emblematic: forced into elective mutism and an identification with the Nietzschean *überman* by the humiliating spectacle of his father's obtuse ineffectualness, young Dwayne Hoover (Paul Dano) is all the more 'oedipalized' for the absence of any viable scenario through which to enact his 'first hatred' and his 'first murderous wish' towards Hoover *pere* (Greg Kinnear)—the man with a vacuum cleaner for a name (*nom d'Hoover*).⁴ Here we should avoid falling into the trap of dispensing with the film's all-too typical depiction of the family bond as a screen behind which more socially engaged criticisms of the USA have been secreted; the problem of *Little Miss Sunshine* is *entirely* the problem of Dwayne, raised in a household presided over by the 'postmodern' father and his obscene supplement, the 'anal father' of excessive indulgence and pleasure, who here takes the form of foul-mouthed junkie Grandpa Edwin Hoover (Alan Arkin). It is the unbearable dilemma of having nothing substantial to rebel against, a dilemma that unravels from within the family solidarity that the road movie format encourages the unit to develop from without. Dwayne's eventual 'coming out' as a speaking subject is tellingly enough reserved for the film's 'number two American Proust scholar', a gay melancholiac failed-suicide uncle (Steve Carell), and not for his father. It is not exactly that the film begs for the patriarch that it lacks, but rather that the happy family it eventually foments is really a surrogate one without a father; and that his absence is as traumatic as his presence used to be.

What Dwayne decidedly cannot do is speak the lines that Paul Dano will speak in his next major role, Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be*

³ Goran Therborn, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World, 1900-2000* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 73.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library Volume 4 (London: Penguin, 1991, originally published 1899), p. 364.

Blood (2007). In the scene that follows his violent humiliation and besmirching at the hands of Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day Lewis), Eli Sunday (Dano) sits at the spartan dinner table in his family shack, opposite his father Abel, and proceeds to denounce him. 'You are a stupid man, Abel', he pronounces. 'You're lazy, and you're stupid. Do you think God is going to save you for being stupid? He doesn't save stupid people, Abel'. At which point, he launches across the table and takes down Abel bodily before the family women, asserting his full Oedipal rights. Anderson and cinematographer Robert Elswit light the scene with gentle simplicity: a few candles sculpt the faces in yellow-red solemnity, catching only on the caked mud covering Eli's unwashed face. The scene is intimate and the cameras are placed to capture every facial nuance—as if to say this *is* the nuclear family, in Anderson's vision, in all its sacred violent truth. Indeed, the scene is meant to mirror the concluding scene, certainly the film's most controversial, in which Eli (who has here effectively filiated himself to Plainview) and Plainview (just after having disowned his own son) play out a rather different Oedipal plot. The point now is that Eli, the son and not the father, is 'stupid'. Plainview's judgment is categorical:

Stop crying, you sniveling ass! Stop your nonsense. You're just the afterbirth, Eli. ... You slithered out of your mother's filth. ... They should have put you in a glass jar on a mantlepiece. Where were you when Paul was suckling at your mother's teat? Where were you? Who was nursing you, poor Eli—one of Bandy's sows?

Plainview's vulgar appropriation of the language of barnyard procreation 'unmans' Eli's pretense to social authority (the scene begins with Plainview prone and unconscious, Eli strutting and erect). The culmination of this reversal of roles and reinstatement of the father at the summit of symbolic and social power is a physical thrashing and finally a bludgeoning to death of the young preacher. 'I'm finished!' Plainview calls to his manservant over the blood pooling around Eli's head, and so is the film. Quite distinct from the stylistic approach to the former scene of Oedipal conflict, this *dénouement* is harshly lit from above (it is set in a subterranean bowling alley in Plainview's mansion), and shot mostly in medium distance shots from a low angle, to accentuate not the affective images of the player's faces, but the angularity and physical substance of their bodies. Moreover, the scene is deliberately 'excessive' in tone, in contradistinction to the sister scene's severe minimalism, and to some extent played for laughs, as Day

Lewis mimics sucking milkshakes from a straw and generally presses his monstrous, over-the-top performance to new extremes of scene-chewing grotesquerie.

What is at stake here, in this resounding return to the Father at the end of Anderson's film? Let us at once say that the 'fantasy message' of the family throughout Anderson's oeuvre is fatally split and profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, it is the promissory note of Oedipal confrontation as son and father finally come to blows—there *will* be blood. On the other, the family continues to nurture Utopian and collective longings that counteract social atomization and consumerist anomie. Anderson's vision of the family is at once haunted by traumatic violence and elevated to the condition of selfless fidelity; and this radical split is most often codified in the films along the axis that separates 'real' families from 'surrogate' ones. Let us be very precise here: it will be my argument that a veritable *combinatoire* of structural possibilities is generated by Anderson's primordial division of the American family into its 'real' or biological-legal form (the patriarchal and oedipal structures of modernity), and its 'surrogate' or affiliative-group form (the voluntary collectives spawned by ethical solidarity, often at work), and that his work as a whole can be seen as a patient exploration of these two structures and their relations with each other. 'I was not really able to notice a pattern in my work until I made three movies', Anderson has said. 'Now I'm starting to decipher that they all have something to do with surrogate families and family connection'.⁵ It is a pattern that has only been elaborated since by the addition to the first three films of *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) and *There Will Be Blood*. And yet, it will be my contention here that this last film actually signals a divergence within Anderson's evolving engagement with the American family myth, since in it the essential difference that had hitherto separated 'surrogate families' from real 'family connection' in his oeuvre has been dismantled. The pattern remains, but its central, organizing tension is gone. And with the collapse of that critical distinction, the very meaning and trajectory of the work to date has been altered, perhaps permanently—and this is what I take to be 'Anderson's dilemma', his fracturing of the contract that had hitherto bound him to his work, his audience, and his industry, in a manner whose inferences have yet to be drawn.

⁵ David Konow, PTA Meeting. Available courtesy of *Creative Screenwriting* at: <http://www.cigarettesandredvines.com/articles/display.php?id=M14>

The dilemma is a formal as much as an ideological one, and can be detected in all the telltale departures from what had been a remarkably consistent formal body of work (with the notable exception of *Punch-Drunk Love*, as we shall see). *There Will Be Blood* differentiates itself from the cycle it presumably rounds off, not only by the extent to which it deconstructs the operative binary opposition between 'real' and 'surrogate' families that drives that whole cycle, but by a number of determinate negations and reversals: the disposition towards Altmanesque 'democratic' ensemble casting and multiple storylines is inverted, to the extent that it is effectively a 'one-actor film' (despite being dedicated to the late Altman) and features none of Anderson's regular stable (Philip Baker Hall, Philip Seymour Hoffman, John C. Reilly, etc.); the orientation to the present and to a spectrum of notably postmodern concerns is replaced by a set towards the modern itself, an accent on becoming and process rather than being and relating; LA's urban matrix of sensibilities and communications is eclipsed by a shift to the frontier, the rural and the generally underdeveloped landscape of Southern California, as Anderson moves from one kind of 'Valley' to another; and of course, finally and most significantly, the 'original screenplay' has been deposed in favour of a scenario 'inspired by' (rather than outright adapted from) Upton Sinclair's mid-1920s Southern California epic, *Oil!* It is this last distinction, finally, that I will want to summon as the critical one, since what it entails is the first significant extrinsic interference with a sequence of works uniquely untroubled by anything beyond its own splendid immanence—a formal, historical, political, and ideological foreign body introduced into Anderson's cinematic bloodstream, in a manner that his precocious formal mastery of the medium has been unable in the event to develop sufficient antibodies to 'contain'. It is here, in this internal dissonance between source text and cinematic formal solution, that the true fault line lies, whose tectonic friction calls in train the rest of these formal leave-takings and ideological shifts—the most consequential being the elision of the distinction between 'biological' and 'surrogate' families.

'In Anderson's films', writes Brian Michael Goss, 'the necessity of surrogate family is demanded by the failure of families of the biological variety and is due largely to patriarchal dereliction'.⁶ *Hard Eight* (1996),

⁶ Brian Michael Goss, 'Things Like This Don't Just Happen': Ideology and Paul

Boogie Nights (1997), and *Magnolia* (1999), all proceeded from this central dynamic oscillation between the traumatic 'real' of the family (the Oedipal knot) and substitute formations with all the trappings of family but without the monstrous excess of desire unleashed by the patriarch. In *Boogie Nights*, this substitute family is arranged around father-figure Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds), who directs a low-budget pornography company, but who signally exists without or beyond desire. The delirious flows of enjoyment over which he presides, and from which he profits, depend ultimately upon his understood withdrawal from their current: his refusal of enjoyment is the guarantee of the operation's overall health, and its gratuitous bonus of pleasure. The business assumes the relational structure of a family due to Jack's benevolent enactment of the benign patron-patriarch, and his lead actress, Amber Waves's (Julianne Moore's) assumption of the role of surrogate mother—her actual children having been removed from her by the state. Dirk Diggler's (Mark Wahlberg's) elective conscription as 'son' within the readymade family of the company follows his desertion of the biological family whose lacklustre postmodern father has not kept the lid on Dirk's mother's incestuous libidinal investment in her son. Dirk's earning of 'inner worth' and relative wealth within this homologue of the family is presented, not without irony, as an 'acting out' of his prodigious phallic potency in sexual scenarios presided over and directed by his 'father', and often involving his 'mother' as a sexual partner. To be sure, a challenger or 'second son' arises, and the very material basis of the family's corporate structure shifts from celluloid to video, from quasi-'auteurism' to cheap disposability, leaving Dirk in a precarious and fallen situation; but such are the ineluctable dynamics and fluctuations of family fortunes, whose more bitter results do not finally undo the fashioning of a subjectivity within that matrix. Anderson's irony scarcely diminishes the utopia his form has conjured from within the entrails of a national family myth; it simply demands that we shift the locus of 'authenticity' away from the 'legal fiction' of biological paternity, and towards the 'commercial fiction' of patriarchal-corporate subjectivity. That is the price to be paid for retaining the family as the one viable lattice for the formation of ethical selves.

Magnolia is then a protracted argument along similar lines, only this time preferring to emphasize the full traumatic violence of the fictive-

Thomas Anderson's *Hard Eight*, *Boogie Nights*, and *Magnolia*, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26:2 (April 2002): 180 [171-192]

biological father across a variegated slice of contemporary Los Angeles life. Whether it is Claudia Gator (Melora Walters) fleeing into narcotic abstraction from the psychic scar tissue of years of rape at the hands of her quiz-show host father, Jimmy Gator (Philip Baker Hall); or Frank T. J. Mackey (Tom Cruise) hiding behind a flawlessly crafted misogynist persona from the insufferable legacy of his TV mogul father, Earl Partidge's (Jason Robards's) abandonment of him and his dying, cancer-riddled mother; or young quiz kid Stanley Spector (Jeremy Blackman), enduring cruel exploitation at the hands of his avaricious father Rick (Michael Bowen)—the story of *Magnolia*'s densely interleaved narrative is consistently that of the 'anal father', that grotesque and obscene shadow-image of the Oedipal patriarch. Slavoj Žižek has formulated the distinction, which is critical to Anderson's work:

The usual critique of patriarchy fatally neglects the fact that there are two fathers. On the one hand there is the oedipal father: the symbolic-dead father, Name-of-the-Father, the father of Law who does not enjoy, who ignores the dimension of enjoyment; on the other hand there is the 'primordial' father, the obscene, superego anal figure that is real-alive, the 'Master of Enjoyment'. [...] Only a dead-symbolic father leaves the space for enjoyment open; the 'anal' father, 'Master of Enjoyment', who can see me also where I enjoy, completely obstructs my access to enjoyment.⁷

Two fathers, then: the prototypical Oedipal patriarch, protector of the law, and lurking behind him, the delirious father of enjoyment forever blocking the path to one's own. It is this latter figure, the 'anal father' who enjoys too much, which presides over *Magnolia*, and over a good deal of contemporary Hollywood product. It is essential to point out here that, in the precise terms of Žižek's distinction, this figure is the inverse of Burt Reynolds's benign 'father of Law' in *Boogie Nights*. Where the surrogate family, due to its very self-conscious fictitiousness and performativity, regulates itself according to a strict canon of laws and so can manage to sustain the miraculous figure (today) of a genuine patriarch, the 'real' postmodern family lacks all legislative fixity and rapidly descends into an excess of libidinal enjoyment characterised by incest and presided over by the 'anal' father. Anderson's ostensible critique of patriarchy is really a

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London & New York: Verso, 1994), p. 206

critique of its postmodern dereliction and implosion, its historical morphing into a ubiquitous 'master of enjoyment' who blocks all pleasure for the next generation (the standard complaint against Baby Boomers). It leaves in a relatively unscathed state the 'father of Law' who, due to irreversible historical shifts in the complexion of the family, now must find a position outside of the literal family.

Indeed, the question immediately arises: if *Magnolia* is preoccupied with the 'real' familial knot in its current historical predicament, where does it speculate that a 'surrogate' family structure and Oedipal father might reside? Two possible answers immediately suggest themselves. On the one hand, what orchestrates the hyperkinetic montage structure of the film and allows for its breathtaking transitions and bridges between multitudinous storylines, is again a commercial-corporate structure and artificial entity, Earl Partridge's television network. It is this relatively disembodied leviathan which, due to the omnipresent televisions that are habitually left switched on, and to the studio setting of the narrative about the quiz show, can manage the innumerable transitions with satisfying logic. Its name alone, 'Partridge', stands apart from the flesh and blood person of the same name and resonates with a legislative symbolic authority that its namesake has corrupted in the domain of the real. In some sense, the various workers and viewers of the network who populate the movie are sewn into a disseminated family structure whose 'symbolic-dead' centre anticipates and even demands the actual death of Earl Partidge in the film's central sequence. (That Paul Thomas Anderson is the son of veteran ABC-TV announcer Ernie Anderson only underscores the Oedipal displacements at work here.)

On the other hand, no aspect of the film so advertises its symbolic function as 'surrogate father' as the insistent figuration of the numerals 8 and 2 in the framing portmanteau sequence, and the explicit reference to Exodus 8:2 on placards among the audience in the TV studio. That Biblical injunction, 'And if thou refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all thy borders with frogs', is of course later spectacularly made good in *Magnolia*'s climax, an elaborately engineered 'rain of frogs' which works (like the earthquake in Altman's *Short Cuts*, 1993) both to 'totalize' the narrative domain and execute divine judgment upon it. Thus the Oedipal father resides in the film's diegesis on a properly theological plane, threatening and then enacting a retributive justice upon the postmodern

family, killing off two anal fathers and allowing for the exploited son to stand up to a third. That this dimension, as well as the dimension of the TV network, should have something to do with the 'auteur' as whom P. T. Anderson most assuredly poses, is beyond question: Anderson sits at the lofty pinnacle of a contemporary renaissance of cinematic *auteurism* in the USA, a counterintuitive restoration of the filmmaker-god in the very epicenter of global postmodern, post-Oedipal culture. In his elected mode of production (commercial-industrial, quasi-'independent' cinema), Anderson reenacts the principles of a patriarchal family structure: running a regular 'stable' of actors; elaborating a self-regarding, flamboyant style; self-consciously repeating the same motifs and elements in strict conformity to auteur theory; adopting sprawling, potentially infinite plots in a conscious effort to 'totalize'; and writing-directing-producing every single aspect of his films. Though a young man (Anderson was all of 28 when he made *Magnolia*), he is unquestionably the *daddy* of his world, striving to be nothing less than the filial amalgam of all the dead fathers: Orson Welles, Robert Altman, Douglas Sirk, Stanley Kubrick, Jean Renoir and Max Ophüls.

All of which now immediately begs the question of the 'work of transition', the next installment in Anderson's oeuvre, *Punch-Drunk Love*. For here, unexpectedly, there is no father, at least not in any apparent sense; and no sprawling ensemble cast or complex network of narrative strands to ensnare the viewer. Instead, the instantly recognizable generic provenance of the romantic, screwball comedy installs itself where 'auteurist' openness used to preside. Committed in essence to the simple narrative of the Two, the comedy genre dispenses with the patriarch as anything other than an obstacle to the narrative realisation of the couple, an obstacle which this film has intriguingly displaced in two simultaneous directions that little in the history of the genre can have prepared us for. First, and most tellingly, it is not the woman, Lena Leonard's (Emily Watson's) father who can be implicated, since as a 'foreigner' she is already displaced from the coils of patriarchy; meanwhile the hero, Barry Egan's (Adam Sandler's) father is nowhere to be seen—which is not at all to say that Barry has achieved anything like Oedipal maturity, quite to the contrary. For young Egan is Anderson's best observed incarnation of the insufficiently oedipalized man, stranded as he is in a backwater of psychological development kept at boiling point by the extraordinary coven of eight sisters whose pleasurable task it is to hoard *jouissance* to themselves and remind their hapless brother

of various primal scenes of traumatic early-childhood feminization. Anderson's own misogyny is nowhere better realized than in this ghoulish tribe of identical-looking, copiously breeding, indelibly *familial* sisters; but it is all too easy to decode this misogyny into its deeper elemental logic, which is nothing other than that of the anal father himself—'Master of Enjoyment, who can see me also where I enjoy, completely obstruct[ing] my access to enjoyment', the very *raison d'être* of the Egan sorority.

If this is one displacement of the father-obstacle in *Punch-Drunk Love* (a displacement, critically, that can know no resolution, since the only things Barry can legitimately attack here are inanimate ones: plate glass windows, bathroom fixtures, etc.), then the other resides at the far end of a telephone line, under the commercial designation of 'Mattress Man', itself a cover for the phone-sex/extortion business it fronts, and to which Barry is driven in his futile quest for pleasure. This figure, 'Mattress Man', protected in his lair by posturepaedic padding and geographic distance, is of course Philip Seymour Hoffman, having evolved from his homosexual (*Boogie Nights*) or merely asexual (*Magnolia*) Andersonian personae into full anal-paternal bombast. The finer points of this performance all concern the production on screen of a disgustingly odious greasiness, a slimy excess of corporeal substance, in diametrical opposition to Sandler's dry, contained fury. Hoffman channels the monstrous anal father whose purpose it is to seize hold of Barry at the intimate location of his private pleasure, and publicise it. 'Mattress Man' spends his energy and time hunting down Barry with minions and threatening him with exposure and shame unless he pays up his extortionate hush-money. Threatening the stable achievement of the couple (the extortion eventually leads to Lena's hospitalisation), 'Mattress Man' thus occasions the necessary 'turn' within Barry's character arc, giving him an opportunity to seek out this monstrous figure of excess in an unbroken drive over two states (still clutching the dead telephone receiver in his hands), and confront him with due Oedipal sincerity: 'I'm a nice man. I mind my own business. So you tell me "that's that" before I beat the hell from you. I have so much strength in me you have no idea. I have a love in my life. It makes me stronger than anything you can imagine. I would say "that's that," Mattress Man.' And of course, he does. The moment of successful Oedipalization has conjured in this case an entirely new category within Anderson's anatomization of the American family myth: not, as for Dirk Diggler, a surrogate 'father of Law', or, for the children of *Magnolia*

tout court, the divine Father Himself, but something else entirely, a surrogate ‘anal father’ with whom to come to violent terms.

We thus sense the contours of something like a genuine combinatorial at work over this sequence of films, which can crudely be diagrammed as follows:

ANDERSON'S FAMILIES	Biological	Surrogate
Father	<i>Magnolia</i> (anal)	<i>Boogie Nights</i> (Oedipal) <i>Punch-DrunkLove</i> (anal)
Family	<i>Magnolia</i> <i>Punch-Drunk Love</i>	<i>Boogie Nights</i>

Magnolia and *Boogie Nights* each presents a consistent treatise on a different type of ‘family’, the former investigating the full spectrum of ‘real’ violent effects secreted within the biological family by the legal father; the latter proposing a utopian enclave of surrogacy, under the aegis of a surrogate father. The ‘work of transition’ then destabilizes the matrix by drawing the initial axis of a chiasmus: *Punch-Drunk Love* presents the full horror of a biological family, but orchestrates its Oedipal narrative via a surrogate father. This overly schematic reduction nonetheless clarifies a certain consistency and the limited range of options within which Anderson operates, provided we add the extra dimension of the ‘two fathers’ (in brackets in the diagram). It also clearly shows the logical next move within the oeuvre, which would necessarily take the form of the chiasmus’s second axis, thus completing all the permutational possibilities within the square—a ‘surrogate’ family superintended by a ‘real’ or biological-fictive Father.

Of course, the option is a logically impossible one. Surrogacy at the level of the family does not permit the ‘real’ father. And yet, as we will now see in the narrative logic of *There Will Be Blood*, nothing less than this impossibility is attempted, in a manner that could only ever have short-circuited the problematic at stake. The ‘truth’ of *There Will Be Blood*’s perverse will to have it both ways and collapse the distinction between what is real and what is surrogate is broached in the decisive formal line it crosses from the opening section’s astonishing wordlessness, into the mature symbolic economy marshalled in the opening words of Daniel Plainview’s first monologue, quoted direct from Sinclair’s novel: ‘Ladies

and gentlemen. I've traveled over half our state to be here tonight...' The cut from silence (at least verbal silence, Johnny Greenwood's eerie landscape evocations out of Penderecki being anything but quiet) to 'public speaking' is a cut that masks the shift from surrogate to actual filiation. For the narrative burden of the opening sequence, captioned by numerical dates, is not only the inaugural discovery of oil and the first death in the hole, but above all the fact of *adoption*, as Plainview takes the orphaned infant under his wing and sets off into corporate liquidity. Meanwhile, the patriarchal tableau of the address to the assembled citizen-lessees, and its very explicit content ('This is my son and partner, H. W. Plainview'), repress that initial, pre-symbolic fact of violent trauma (death of the father, illegal theft of the child) and dissimulate it as legitimate descent—it is not only that we understand 'H. W.' could know no better, it is that the sheer enormity of the formal shift fosters a similar repression in the viewing audience, who will be forgiven subsequently for having 'forgotten' what they are never encouraged to remember, since it never attains verbal formulation until the final rebuke:

You're an orphan. [...] I don't even know who you are because you have none of me in you, you're someone else's. This anger, your maliciousness, backwards dealings with me. You're an orphan from a basket in the middle of the desert. And I took you for no other reason than I needed a sweet face to buy land. [...] You're lower than a bastard. Mmm-hmm. You have none of me in you. You're just a bastard from a basket.

Of course, there are those moments, such as when Mrs Bankside asks 'a question, sir—where is your wife?' and Plainview utters his prepared answer about death in childbirth, when the underlying illegitimacy of the 'me and my son' line is touched upon. But I do want to insist that the climactic disinheritance carries its full traumatic charge due to the lengths to which the film has gone in repressing its own most significant information about a boy known only by two perfectly anonymous initials. That repression, as I have said, has everything to do with the distinction between audible language and the terrible expanses of speechlessness with which the film opens.

It is this same founding opposition that is resumed with a vengeance around the figure of H. W. when, at the very moment that the great oil-

geyser announces itself in a blast of highly pressurized gas, he sustains a head injury that forever severs his connection to the world of speech. From that point forward, H. W. is immersed in the awful soundlessness in which the oil-filled desert had first imprinted itself on this film—the desert of a pre-linguistic wilderness in which, crucially, legal distinctions such as who is, and who isn't, one's father cease to have any meaningful hold, or at least begin to fade out into indeterminate humming. I want to hold open this bewildering and terrifying isolation from the word of speech for its symptomatic logic within not only this film, but within our film culture more generally, since there is no little correspondence between what H. W. endures here and what we have seen Dwayne Hoover, for one, enduring in *Little Miss Sunshine*. That is to say, there would seem to be a determinate relation between the structural blockage of Oedipal subject-formation and the peculiar cinematic presence of the 'child-mute' in contemporary American film; an excommunication from the medium in which subjectivity is forged that allows the father an unparalleled opportunity to dilate.

It is critical here, of course, that H. W. is deafened and muted at the point that Daniel's discovery well in Little Boston first lifts the lid on that vast 'ocean of oil' which will make his bloated fortune: a repression of the mechanics of maturation is tied economically to the vampiric mechanics of an industrial 'return of the repressed' whereby aeons-old mineral deposits of dead life become immortal, undead wealth in the open shop of US monopoly capitalism. Critically, this dramatic moment is above all else 'good cinema' in the most categorical terms. The organizing tension that structures the powerful effect of this sequence is that between the boy's sudden diminishment to a point of wordless immanence on the one hand—a troubling cinematic spot whose origins lie in 'silent cinema' and which eighty years (to the day!) of 'sound cinema' will have striven in vain to repress⁸—and the dynamic audio-visual eruption of a hundred-foot jet of black liquid which, at a spark, becomes a towering pillar of flame, and does so just as the natural light of day wanes from the mountain sky. The 'son' shrinks into speechless inwardness just as the 'father' erupts into an immense and irrepressible elemental diabolism which straddles the full

⁸ Michel Chion makes the startling suggestion that 'silent' or 'mute' cinema be redesignated 'deaf cinema', in contradistinction to 'the talkies'. See Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, ed. & trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 6-9.

vertical distance from the film's various holes and basements to the horizonless blue of the heavens. But what compels the eye and ear more than any other formal feature are precisely the two extensive lateral tracking shots in which Daniel first carries H. W. away from the well, and then returns to it to tackle and subdue its force. That is, it is the bravura manner in which Anderson lays a horizontal axis against the sheerly vertical spout, separating H. W. from that spectacle and sequestering him from the symbolic order of things, that ensures our full affective investment in a scene whose categorical imperative was to have, again, masked the sudden disjunction it performs between what is 'real' and what is 'surrogate' in the relation between son and father.

For just as the first shift from 'silence' to 'speech' had obscured the cut between surrogacy and reality, so too this later shift, back into 'silence', veils through sheer visual pleasure the turn back to surrogacy that will have been made in the (unvoiced) attitude of the father toward the son. This is the moment in the narrative at which a related transformation begins to take place within Daniel, whose implacable authoritative presence to this point had unmistakably characterised him as a 'father of Law', a pure Oedipal figure against whom we had assuredly imagined young H. W. eventually striving into subjective maturity. Now, the twin developments of deaf-muteness in the son, and untold millions in wealth for the father, dismantle that legislative authority of the latter, who, for increasingly 'selfish' reasons, will prefer the expansion of his own material enjoyment to any Oedipal tussling with the former—who is at any rate prevented by his condition from doing anything more than 'repeating' the spectacle of nocturnal conflagration upon the father by setting their cabin alight, in a desperate attempt at Oedipal confrontation. In other words, Daniel's progress from this point forward will be precisely from the 'father of the Law' to the 'Master of Enjoyment', or the anal father himself.

On this point, however, this film is ineluctably ensnared within a certain recent history of American film form and performance style, which will have 'overdetermined' the final result of a film remembered above all else for the central performance it just barely contains. It goes almost without saying that Daniel Day-Lewis 'dominates' the film to an extent unprecedented in Anderson's canon, and that, whatever else the film was supposed to achieve, it was surely this unholy achievement that its formal architectonics should have evolved to foster and control. But a performance

such as this has precursors and reference points that are also nodes in a constellation of contemporary cinematic facts: the constellation of the 'anal father' in US cinema today. We have space here only to dwell on the dominant curve within that constellation, the 'Nicholson arm', without which I daresay this new stellar body could scarcely have been conceived. Emerging fully-fledged in a bravura turn in Kubrick's psychological horror film, *The Shining* (1980), Nicholson's capacity to unleash before the cameras a specific modality of paternity (real or surrogate) has been clinched to the point of typecasting by a sequence of successor projects, each of them a decisive step forward in the cinematic evolution of anal fatherhood: *The Witches of Eastwick* (Miller, 1987), *Batman* (1989), *Hoffa* (1992), and most extraordinarily, *The Departed* (2006), in which perhaps the supreme embodiment of the 'Master of Enjoyment' is attained. (Not forgetting *Wolf* (1994), *About Schmidt* (2002), *Anger Management* (2003) and *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), in which various ironic rotations of the central category are attempted.) The leering, drooling, unabashedly self-conscious and excessive histrionics of Nicholson in these films since 1980 have set a certain standard against which all comparable performances are to be measured—meaningless to describe them as 'good' or 'bad', they exist in that realm reserved for the matchless and non-iterative outside the scope of the individual performer (like Cary Grant's 'bemusement' or Peter Lorre's 'sinisterness'). Perhaps the only comparable sequence is David Lynch's series of anal fathers: Baron Harkonnen (Kenneth McMillan) in *Dune* (1984), Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) in *Blue Velvet* (1986), Mr Reindeer (William Sheppard) and Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe) in *Wild at Heart* (1990), Leland Palmer (Ray Wise) in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992), and Mr Eddy/Dick Laurent (Robert Loggia) in *Lost Highway* (1997). And special mention should be made of what Ang Lee does to Nick Nolte at the climax of *Hulk* (2005), transforming him into a giant swirling sphincter in the sky.

In any event, this is the point at which our guiding notion of the cinematic family as a fantasy model of collectivity touches at some outer limit the contours of the 'imagined community' of the nation state itself. If American film has been noticeably preoccupied with the 'anal father' as a figure, then the historical location of these roles within American culture since the inauguration of Ronald Reagan surely points to a determinate *allegorical* content. Hollywood's 'liberal' reaction to the instauration of a neoconservative 'new America' (notably, the sequence went into abeyance

during the Clinton years, only to be revived for Bush II) is deeply inscribed into the substructure of this figural formation. The 'anal father' so monumentally performed by Nicholson during the first protracted neoconservative period is properly symptomatic, and 'represents' at the level of fantasy the sensed transformation of a national family myth well and truly beyond Oedipus. Nicholson's epochal cry 'This town needs an enema!' in Burton's dark fantasy heralds nothing less than the new treatment in store for a nation reared on frontier myths of puritan self-sacrifice, protestant restraint, and those distant, patriarchal 'founding fathers' routinely reincarnated in the body of the President. But not any longer, and if we have Jack Nicholson to thank for anything really durable since his 'great' phase between *Easy Rider* (1969) and *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), it is the permanent establishment of a new cinematic figure uniquely representative of the postmodern cultural and political break away from Oedipal restraints and the patriarchal taboos of American modernity. His truly magnificent Costello in Scorsese's recent Boston movie, the tooth-sucking relish with which he oozes anal paternity over Matt Damon's Colin and, to a certain extent, Leonardo DiCaprio's Billy Costigan, will stand as the key symbolic film role of the Bush Jr. presidency—at least, that is, until Day-Lewis entered the fray with P. T. Anderson's oil movie.

Obviously, in straightforward political terms, *There Will Be Blood* is meant as an allegory, offered explicitly as a cinematic redaction of Haliburton's America: petrochemical capital and evangelical religion ruling the land with unchecked abandon. If the allegory is loose and not perfectly joined (there is, after all, no fundamental social incompatibility between oil money and millenarian baptism; quite to the contrary, despite what the film ends by suggesting), then that is all the better for the resilience of the model, and in no way negates the underlying mesh of allegorical gears within the 'lived experience' of Bush's America, where it is impossible not to feel the adequacy of the textual figures to their worldly referents. So it is that the casting of Day-Lewis comes to assume disproportionate importance in the achievement of a satisfying allegorical 'fit' between these levels, since the performance must at one and the same time secure its position within an 'historical' frame of reference (at least, within Hollywood's visual notion of the early 1900s) and carry over with sufficient force into the allegorical referent of contemporary US political economy, the 'new imperialism' of the 2000s with its 'asymmetric market freedoms' and 'a turn into authoritarian, hierarchical, and even militaristic means of maintaining law

and order', 'maintaining global hegemony through control over oil resources'.⁹ That is, to put it most succinctly, the performance would at once have to convey the austere patriarchal authority of a 'father of Law' native to the heroic era of first strikes, fortune-building, and empire creation, *and* connote the hysterical late-imperial authoritarianism of the 'anal father' Rumsfeld-Cheney-Bush, the endless accumulation of private capital purchased through spiralling debt, political deceit and the lives of soldier-children. Day-Lewis, who has excelled in heroic Oedipal roles such as Hawkeye in Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), and Gerry Conlon in Sheridan's *In the Name of the Father* (1993), has also demonstrated his full capacity for anal authority in Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002)—his Bill 'The Butcher' Cutting could even be said to have been a trial run for Nicholson's even more extreme Costello five years later. Indeed, it is within the internal competitiveness of the Hollywood 'star market' that the kind of histrionic war of positioning I now want to surmise makes sense; so that Daniel Plainview should finally be understood as the latest in a characterological melee that Day-Lewis will have staged with Nicholson since *Gangs of New York* for the title of supreme 'anal father' in world cinema today, a title all the more hard in the winning for this particular role's inclusion of a certain ineluctable 'Oedipal' moment in the brief parenthesis between the first spoken word and the condemning of H. W. to premature deafness.

Paul Thomas Anderson's complicity in this war of position should surprise nobody, given that his own oeuvre to this point had, as we have seen, pointed to the fabrication of a scenario in which a 'real' patriarch accumulates a 'surrogate' family around himself—and that the fundamental illogicality of that scenario would require a colossal masking device to contain the explosive incompatibility of the elements in play. That is, Anderson's interest in participating in the production of a truly all-consuming, monstrous performance here would have depended upon his aesthetic intuition that nothing less could have 'covered up' the underlying incoherence of what the film attempts. The shift within Plainview from an 'Oedipal' to an 'anal' father function is the manifest form taken by the underlying contradiction, and it is a shift that begs for histrionic overkill. From the moment, soon after the accident that deafens his son, that

⁹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 195.

Plainview assaults Eli Sunday by the muddy banks of the Little Boston oil lake, to the concluding bloodbath in the bowling alley where that initial assault is repeated and fatally confirmed, Day-Lewis' performance becomes a virtuoso exercise in escalating monomania and violent internal combustion. The sub-plot of the 'brother', Henry (Kevin J. O'Connor), amplifies the founding concern with 'surrogacy' and similarly dispatches it with brutal decision: Daniel's susceptibility to the myth of biological fraternity, as with paternity, resolves itself into a violent negation of the solidarity of surrogacy when it is exposed as fraudulent. Plainview's central statement to Henry on the need for 'connectivity' within his essential monomania is lit and shot with the same simple sincerity as the scene of the Sunday's Oedipal wrestling-match:

I have a competition in me. I want no one else to succeed. I hate most people. ... There are times when I look at people and I see nothing worth liking. I want to earn enough money that I can get away from everyone. ... I see the worst in people. I don't need to look past seeing them to get all I need. I've built my hatreds up over the years, little by little, Henry ... to have you here gives me a second breath. I can't keep doing this on my own with these ... people.

This is the 'tragic grandeur' of the anal father, and it is the true achievement of Day-Lewis' performance that it bridges the divide between this chill intimacy and the spectacular physical excess of the assaults on Eli, the rebuff to the Standard Oil men, the handkerchief-over-the-head rant at the inn, the violent baptism in the Church of the Third Revelation, and the final drunken disclosures in the mansion at the dawn of the great depression where, cushioned by inviolable fortune, he has finally acceded to that beatified state of 'getting away from everyone' and can have done with 'these ... people' once and for all. What enables the bridging at the level of screen performance is a certain set of the body, a forward-leaning angular posture buttressed by a broken-legged limp, and a rigid fortification of the face—a clenched working of the jaw muscles and explosive extrusion of the veins above the brow—behind which both this existential nihilism and the more florid passages of violent release can be felt incubating. It is this very same physical 'set' which can, moreover, tolerate the co-habitation of the physical shell by an Oedipal-modern patriarch, a 'father of Law' true to its fictive historical and social environs, in those passages where it must.

And yet there is something rather terribly ‘wrong’ with the ending of *There Will Be Blood*, the culminating ‘twenty years later’ epilogue in which the father becomes a father of nothing, a perfect anal hoarder of all pleasure, a ‘master of enjoyment’ so supreme that he has managed to disown his surrogate son, murder his surrogate brother and then murder his second surrogate son, Eli, all in swift succession in screen time. The comic excesses of the final scene give the nod to a felt insincerity at the heart of the project, in which the vanquishing of all vestiges of surrogacy and collectivity is so extreme as to be self-parodic—as self-parodic as the performance itself in these closing minutes. In conclusion, I want to suggest why this might be so. To the extent that the ‘family myth’ of America has been harnessed by Anderson to interrogate the antagonistic logics of corporate America (and especially corporate Southern California), his sequence of films has grafted it as a symbolic matrix on to (in turn) the pornographic film industry, the network television industry, taking a low-rent detour into the toilet accessory industry in *Punch-Drunk Love*, before coming back to perhaps the Southland’s pre-eminent early industry and the secret of its fabulous wealth: oil. The logic of this trajectory is perfectly clear and exemplary within the arc of ambition described by Anderson’s career, and yet this final turn has decisively reoriented the corporate-familial focus towards a properly ‘modern’ point of reference. If the other industries treated are prototypically ‘postmodern’ ones, predicated on entertainment and titillation, this one, while it may have endured at the very core of American wealth-creation to this day, is ineluctably embroiled (as this film makes perfectly clear) in conditions of historical possibility marked by large-machine penetration, the fostering of urban modernity in hitherto rural regions, titanic pioneer figures, and the very formation of monopolies and trusts. In a word, the oil industry contains within itself as a ‘subject’ the various heroic narratives of its founding, which is precisely why the film offers itself as ‘based on’ or ‘inspired by’ the text which, more than any other literary work, is a *summa* of those narratives, and still further, a political disquisition upon their interestedness and social role in supporting a military-industrial complex instead of a democratic state. But it is here, as I have indicated, that the true reason for the film’s ultimate incoherence and failure reside.

The election of Upton Sinclair’s 1926 novel *Oil!* is a spurious one for Anderson’s most important task: namely, the delineation of an Oedipal

crisis within the 'family' created by an oil-strike. For the signal failure of Sinclair's most ambitious work lies precisely in its inability to produce the Oedipal conflict it so desperately wants to engineer. In the novel, of course, the 'oil man' who founds the dynasty (alternately called 'Dad' and Ross by the narrator, who tends to speak in the son's free indirect discourse) and who wants his only son Bunny to inherit all, as a good Oedipal father should, can only watch helplessly as his heir is claimed by the competing revolutionary movements of Bolshevism and Socialism. Bunny, meanwhile, who loves his father intensely, goes through internal crisis after crisis as he realizes the inevitable conflict to come, in which Oedipal antagonism is to be raised to the power of class struggle, and Bunny will side with the workers on his father's industrial sites. However, despite many possible situations for the ultimate struggle, in which the beloved patriarch should become a hated enemy, Sinclair never manages to get his narrative to the point where it can actually take place. In the event, the novel takes refuge in a surrogate father figure, Verne Roscoe, Ross's business partner in a consolidated monopoly, against whom Bunny can truly rage, and conveniently allows Dad to die overseas before the true extent of Bunny's radicalism can properly be outed. There is every indication in the novel that the culmination of Bunny's sentimental education in American capitalism should have been the ability to recognise the benign father as a class enemy, but it is a culmination that never arrives, leaving the reader to wonder about possible 'ironies' latent in the subject of a wealthy ruling-class socialist, or the abiding radical wisdom that it is not as an individual subject that a bourgeois is to be opposed, only as an abstract owner of property—Dad's essential likeableness thus emerging as a moral lesson in how to overcome personal sympathies in class warfare.

None of which, however, explains Anderson's election of this material as his basis for a film in which his obsessive interest in 'the father/son relationship' will mesh with a portrayal of the oil industry in twentieth-century America.¹⁰ Indeed, it has to be said that 'basis' is a very misleading word in this context. Nor is 'inspired by' much of an improvement, since apart from the elemental figures of a man who strikes oil, a 'son' who attends him, and an emergent rural evangelist who haunts them both, nothing essential remains of Sinclair's novel in Anderson's

¹⁰ See Sandra Benedetti, *Cinelive*: March 2000. Available courtesy of *Cinelive Magazine* at: <http://www.cigarettesandredvines.com/articles/display.php?id=M14>

adaptation. The business of surrogacy is nowhere to be found in the novel, so there can be no disownment; Bunny never goes deaf; no crypto-sibling arrives to trouble Ross's monopoly; and the murder of Eli is quite unthinkable. All of this additional material emerges to satisfy Anderson's own enduring preoccupations, as we have seen, but what remains finally to be said is that, nevertheless, the migration of even those very minimal figures from novel to film has infiltrated the movie with trace elements of a text concocted in entirely different political and economic circumstances. Abundant opportunities for forging compelling allegorical links between source text and final film are latent in the novel, which in at least one vital respect is 'about' the corporate purchase of the first oil government, Harding's administration of 1921-23—its 'Ohio Gang' and 'Teapot Dome' scandals—, and in another the complicity of petrochemical capital in the waging of wars and the establishment of a witless 'culture industry' under the California sun. But none of this makes any impression on Anderson's script, which prefers the absolute abstraction of the Oedipal knot to anything smacking so literally of 'history'. Nevertheless, even the bare extraction from Sinclair's book of father, son, and surrogate son figures as carriers of an Oedipal story about oil cannot prevent the cryptic transmigration with them of the founding and irreducible 'kernel' of Sinclair's awful but rather extraordinary novel.

For the best way of explaining Sinclair's inability to engineer a compelling father-son conflict in *Oil!* is the fact that every aspect of the novel has been exposed, as to the irradiation of a nuclear device, to an event whose ultimate implication is the final dismantlement of all social bonds based on filiation. That is, the true condition of possibility of the first great American oil novel is nothing other than the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, without which great epochal event, this terrible saga of systemic corruption, class brutality, unquenchable corporate greed, wholesale betrayal, cronyism, religious charlatanism, cultural deracination and every other detail of oil's 'anal' effects on the American family, would have lacked all of its overriding humour and political optimism. It is the event of October, nurtured and reported in the novel by the first-hand witness, Eli's radical brother Paul (who is the third of the novel's 'paternal' figures to vie for Bunny's soul), which ensures that the endlessly deferred drama of the father-son conflict recedes into another horizon altogether, whose vanishing point is the withering away of all social paternalism. As the narrator exclaims, 'A hundred million people, occupying one-sixth of the earth's

surface, had taken over their industries, and were running them, and would make a success of them—if only the organized greed of the world would stand off and let them alone!’¹¹ Only this aching political faith, roused by Russian reality, can withstand the orgy of anality envisaged by Sinclair’s glimpse into America’s oil-drenched future. Without it, only the bleakest pessimism and cynicism could sustain those elements woven into the narrative fabric of the text. And this is critical to any correct historical understanding of the oil industry in America before and after 1917, since the very precondition of a corporate ‘open shop’ in the Southern California oilfields, the violent suppression of any union activities in the most profitable of industries, was the felt proximity of the Bolshevik success—and certainly any understanding of that history predicated on the instance of Sinclair’s novel, which sets itself up as a political radio tower, tuned to the wavelengths of October on American soil in an absolute fidelity to its significance.

This is why to abstract the elemental narrative functions of the novel while suppressing their coordinating structure of political possibility amounts in the very harshest of terms to a betrayal of what they ‘mean’ as textual constructs. At the very least, it testifies to a disheartening indifference towards the radical shifts that have taken place between Sinclair’s historical moment and Anderson’s. Anderson is of course perfectly right to emphasise the generalized paternal anality that a century of oil has fostered in American culture; but it is sheer opportunism to have done so over the body of Sinclair. For even if the prevailing liberal wisdom, that Hollywood—even ‘independent’ Hollywood—can never cease from prattling, is that Sinclair’s political ‘utopianism’ was not only incompatible with the American ‘family myth’, but moreover complicit with the full savage history of Stalinism, nevertheless there remains more to admire in a book that places its wager on a genuine political event, than a film that turns its back on it and consigns it to a weak political unconscious. In the act of disinterring the book from its explosive political site, the film only manages more resolutely to lay to rest the event it attends to. ‘Better a disaster of fidelity to the Event than a non-being of indifference towards the Event’, as Žižek writes.¹² The aesthetic consequences of that indifference today are

¹¹ Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* (Camberwell: Penguin Group Australia, 2008, originally published 1927), p. 276.

¹² Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes*, p. 7.

Anderson's dilemma: a formal incoherence and a fatal contradiction between a cinematic and histrionic mastery at the level of technique, and a rigidly bathetic banality at the level of narrative destiny. Allegory collapses into ruins in the absence of a faith that seizes its material elements from the standpoint of what Kant called 'a taking of sides according to desires which borders on enthusiasm and which, since its very expression [is] not without danger, can only have been caused by a moral disposition within the human race'.¹³ It is another case of the twenty-first century eviscerating the twentieth of its central enthusiasm, in an all-too familiar pattern. Anderson has said of the adaptation, 'it was such a great feeling—cutting things out, slashing away'.¹⁴ But one can slash too far. 'This century [the twentieth]', writes Alain Badiou, 'is articulated, on the one hand, around two world wars and, on the other, around the inception, deployment and collapse of the so-called "communist" enterprise, envisaged as a planetary enterprise.'¹⁵ *There Will Be Blood* amounts to a conjuring away, a disavowal, and a betrayal of the blood that same enterprise once copiously bled to affirm its being, at the hands of what Sinclair called 'an evil Power which roams the earth, crippling the bodies of men and women, and luring the nations to destruction by visions of unearned wealth, and the opportunity to enslave and exploit labor.' (548)

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¹³ Kant, 'The Conflict of Faculties', in *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 182.

¹⁴ Paul Thomas Anderson interview with Ed Pilkington for The Guardian. Available at: <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,2234642,00.html>

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 1-2.