

READING FILM



ISSUE #5 | JULY 2024

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About: *Reading Film* is a collection of outstanding essays on film and television written by students at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. The Film Studies and Professional Writing and Publishing programs collaborate to produce the journal.



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Embracing Desire: The Exchange of Women According to *Barbie*

Leah Beyrer

What made Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* the highest-grossing film of 2023? Realistically, it is an amalgamation of factors: the iconic duo of Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling playing the leads, the story built around one of the world's top-selling nostalgic toys, the colorful set designs, the catchy music, and the humorous script. But a major factor that caused *Barbie* to rise above other films was the public buzz over its feminist themes. *Barbie* reimagines gender systems, juxtaposing a seemingly Edenic, matriarchal society called Barbieland to the real world, known to Barbieland's inhabitants as Los Angeles, California. When a breach between the worlds propels Robbie and Gosling's characters—Stereotypical Barbie and Stereotypical Ken—to Los Angeles, they quickly learn that it is not the mirror world they'd assumed. Ken takes his revelations back to Barbieland to convert it into a patriarchy, while Barbie takes a different journey of self-discovery. What begins with a bewildering change in her sense of self leads to an unpleasant form of self-consciousness. She feels for the first time what it means to be an object of others' desires. Her quest to discover and act on her own—which coincides with the rebalancing of Barbieland—centers the film's message about female autonomy in a patriarchal society.



Over the past several decades, the idea of gender as a “social construct” has become more readily accepted, especially in feminist thought. “Kinship systems,” as described by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, underlie and shape the formation of gender roles, thereby creating and perpetuating models of “proper” gendered behavior that become normalized social constructions. Lévi-Strauss explains how such systems operate. The construction of kinship systems, he argues, relies on a principle he calls “the exchange of women.” Women are “exchanged” (most prominently in marriage and courtship practices) as submissive, objectifiable “gifts” that promise to guarantee social alliances among men (the presumed heads of families in most cultures). Social alliances between families and within communities (kinship systems) are built this way, and the resulting

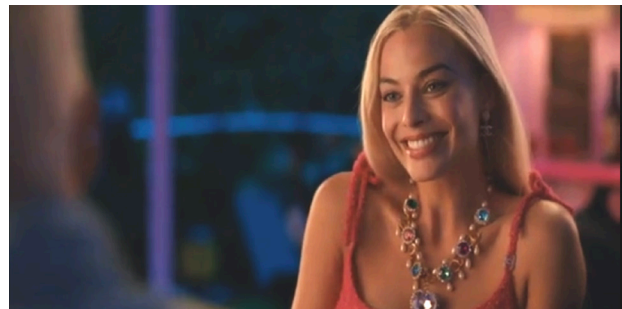
practices become cultural norms. A groom gaining permission for marriage from a bride's father, for instance, is still a common practice in many cultures across the globe. Such a practice may seem like an innocent sign of respect for the father, but it carries a long, sexist history of fathers literally owning their daughters and giving them away in property exchanges.

Cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin takes up and advances Lévi-Strauss's theories of kinship and gender construction in her famous essay, "The Traffic in Women." Rubin suggests that the principle of "the exchange of women" is still at work in modern cultures because men are trained to actively pursue their desires while women are trained to be passive recipients of desire. That is, male desire is presumed active and female desire passive. "If a girl is promised in infancy [to a man]," Rubin writes, "her refusal to participate as an adult would disrupt the flow of debts and promises [in the system]."

It would be in the interest of the smooth and continuous operation of such a system if the woman in question did not have too many ideas of her own about whom she might want to sleep with. From the standpoint of the system, the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response. (Rubin, 41–42)

For a male-dominated system to function, in other words, it needs women who don't pursue their own desires. Men should want women to remain submissive (passive), and women should want to be empty vessels for the desire of the men who actively seek them out. So, what happens when women do pursue their own desires—especially desires that don't align with what men want and therefore disrupt the system's unspoken rules? As it happens, *Barbie* shows us such a disruption.

The guitar sequence is key in staging the film's reimagining of active desire. The Kens, under the guidance of Stereotypical Ken, have chosen to live in a new system where their wants are valued over those of the Barbies. In other words, Ken has successfully restructured Barbieland to more accurately mirror the patriarchy of the real world. As the sequence progresses, however, we watch how the Kens and the system are negatively impacted once the Barbies refuse to respond to those attracted to them and pretend to actively desire other Kens. The sequence hints at a subtle yet effective variant of the familiar kinship system while presenting how it can be disrupted when women choose to challenge its norms.



In the sequence's first half, we see Stereotypical Barbie and Ken enact stereotypical roles of men and women in a patriarchal structure, and we also see how Ken communicates his active desires. The sequence starts with some shallow shot-reverse shots between Stereotypical Ken and Barbie. As a result, we get to see two perspectives. Ken is wearing a ripped denim vest that purposefully shows off his muscles. He passionately plays the guitar while smoldering and staring intensely at

his love interest, Barbie. As Ken sings, Barbie smiles and nods, giving the impression that she's interested. In other words, Ken is portraying his active desire while Barbie passively listens. According to Rubin, this is how a patriarchal society stays stable. In this scenario, Barbie and Ken represent women and men. The way they dress and act is meant to imitate constructed gender in the real world—the very reason they are identified as “Stereotypical” Barbie and Ken. However, Ken doesn't realize that Barbie's passivity is only part of a strategy to get Barbieland back to its original, female-dominated structure. Before this sequence, the Barbies collectively agree that the new, male-dominated Barbieland (now “Kendom”) strips them of their power, so they make a plan to take it back.



The sequence continues with a smash cut that works as a graphic match. Both characters are on screen, looking lovingly into each other's eyes, while the time and location shift. Instead of daytime, it is night, and they've moved from the “Mojo Dojo Casa House” to the beach. This serves two purposes. For one, it is comedic. The title card that says “4 hours later” and the dark lighting show how long Ken's been performing, which is hilarious to the audience, who are mercifully spared the tedium of listening the whole time. The graphic match, however, also showcases an uncomfortable lack of change. Then, when the song's chorus begins, the camera zooms out to an extreme long shot. Gerwig makes this choice to indicate that male dominance is not just Stereotypical Ken's presumption but that of all the Kens. They are all playing guitar and singing their patriarchal anthem while the Barbies pretend to submit to them. The following shots cut to different pairs of Barbies and Kens, creating a list-like effect that deepens the sense of the stability, pervasiveness, and monotony of this structure. Even though they are different characters, they are all Barbies and Kens who act the same way, just like humans amongst other humans.

The sequence's latter half, however, focuses on how this stability is weakened once the Barbies lose interest in the Kens. A (pre-planned) diegetic phone notification prompts Stereotypical Barbie to look at her phone. She laughs and engages with the phone while Ken looks at her, overtly annoyed that her attention has shifted away from him. He asks who she is texting and then grabs her phone. Once he sees that she is texting another Ken, he laughs but then immediately yells angrily. That is, he initially tries to conceal his jealousy and crumbling self-esteem but finds that he can't. Even though Stereotypical Barbie and Ken are not technically in a relationship, Ken still believes that he has a right to her. Continuing their plan, each of the Barbies makes her way over to a different Ken and pretends to like him. This upsets the Kens, who clearly dislike that their ideal Barbie is now actively desiring another. While the Kens mope, an extradiegetic voiceover



says, “We play on their egos and petty jealousies to turn them against each other. While they’re fighting, we take back Barbieland.” The Barbies know that turning their submission into active indulgence of their own desires (staged or not) would disrupt the assumptions of the men and destabilize the system men believe they control. In fact, the Kens go to war with each other the next day.

The song—Matchbox 20’s “Push”—also does vital work in this sequence. Both the lyrics and the way the Kens perform it ooze with machismo. The song is about a man taking control over a woman, as in the lyrics “I want to push you down” or “I want to take you for granted.” This seems to celebrate the control the Kens believe they have taken over Barbieland and, in turn, the Barbies, who have allowed them to do so. The newly patriarchal Kendom is the exact type of society that Gayle Rubin describes in her essay. The lyrics can also, however, be interpreted to be about a woman who is emotionally abusive in a relationship—an interpretation that sheds light on how the song has become Stereotypical Ken’s personal anthem. Throughout the film, he feels he is not enough (or Kenough, I should say) for Stereotypical Barbie and is emotionally wounded by her disinterest. Through this interpretive ambiguity, the audience can acknowledge that Ken’s despair comes from a misogynist reading of gender dynamics. What he learns from the real-world men he observes during his travels there is that he “deserves” to have any woman he yearns for (as if they are gifts). In either interpretation, the Barbies are put in an unfair position. They are either forced to be passive or they are blamed when their desires don’t match those of their male counterparts.

As a whole, the sequence represents systems that imagine women as gifts to be acquired and desired instead of people who can actively desire. At first, Stereotypical Ken tries to impress Barbie and grab her attention. As the system and power dynamics change, Ken expects Barbie to love and submit to him. It is interesting how the film portrays the concept with non-human objects that serve as a representation of humans and their values. Even as dolls, the Kens uphold what they have learned from the real world to replicate gender roles that seem natural and normal. The Kens are akin to children who learn from experience to become part of the prevailing system by imitating the behavior of those around them. This is usually how kinship systems work; they create traditions and norms that young people are expected to learn and follow. But a one-way system of desire can be very confining. Especially today, men are negatively influenced by social media, in such forms as alpha-male podcasts, dating advice clips from pick-up artists, and online crash courses that tell them how to be “ideal” or “successful” men while unjustifiably diminishing women in the process. Still, the film challenges that pattern by showing what it might be like to disrupt and revise such a system. Revising the “exchange of women” pattern calls out inequitable expectations and faulty constructs. It also raises an important question: should societies be run by a sex/gender system? According to *Barbie* and Gayle Rubin, problems arise from organizing social hierarchies based on sex or gender, whether it be male- or female-dominated. Rubin’s essay

suggests that women's attempts to work against the patriarchy and the female exchange system will ultimately fail. At the end of *Barbie*, however, the viewers see the rare instance take place. The Barbies disrupt and change the system. It's a happy ending, but it's important to note that this victory takes place in the imagined world. It reminds us that the real world is still organized around problematic social constructs. While we are often complicit in perpetuating misogynist gender constructions, we are also responsible for tearing them down. 🧢

Leah Beyer graduated with a degree in Professional Writing and Publishing and a minor in Film Studies from UW-Whitewater in May 2024. This essay was written for a Gender and Film course in Fall 2023.

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Double Jeopardy: *Memento's* Trying Narrative

Maryn Davenport

The progress narrative is one of the oldest in storytelling. This type of narrative is linear: a character begins their story at point A and ends up somewhere further down that line at point B. That character is often the protagonist, whose comprehension of the story serves as a proxy for ours. Time passes between these two points chronologically, suggesting a cause-and-effect relationship between events and lending the ending a satisfying sense of closure. By consuming the same pattern of stories over and over, we get lulled into a sense of security, enjoying the effort it takes to make sense of what we see precisely because we trust that our destination will offer a reward for the journey. Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) warps the progress narrative dramatically. While the story does have a beginning and an end, the plotting is complicated: one part of the film is shot in color and proceeds in reverse chronological order; the other, interwoven with the first in equal segments, is in black and white and moves forward through time. As has been widely discussed, this device encourages audience empathy with our amnesiac lead, Leonard Shelby, as well as sympathy for his revenge narrative. Although the two timelines do connect in the film's final sequence, the events that transpire there mark neither the beginning nor the end of Leonard's story. Instead, the sequence finally and fully reveals the implications of Leonard's memory loss and the fact that it makes a progress narrative impossible for him. At this point, the very tools Nolan uses to establish our sympathy with Leonard urge us instead to reject him as an interpretive guide. If we don't, we allow ourselves, like Leonard, to selfishly choose the comfort of a closed narrative rather than make the difficult decision to accept an unending one.

Beyond folding in the chronology of the story, Nolan wields other techniques and tropes to corrupt the closure we might seek in the final sequence. Color is among the most significant. Monochrome and color both register to the viewers as "truth" in the narrative. In monochrome, the viewers witness events that Leonard has long forgotten about, and the events shot in color are memories that he's actively losing. Since the protagonist's memory is impaired, the viewers must take it upon themselves to thread the narrative across these dual segments. However, when monochrome and color finally connect at the film's end, this editing technique reveals to the viewers that both truths are artificial. The final sequence of the film begins in monochrome, but after Leonard kills Jimmy and takes his photograph, it bleeds back into color. At first glance, this shift seems to play



into the viewer's narrative expectations, since we anticipate that the two timelines will merge at some point to finally reveal the chronological relationship between the story's events. Therefore, this long-awaited transition leads the viewer to expect closure of both Leonard's narrative and our own. But the stunning events in the sequence disrupt these expectations. Leonard's narrative can never move forward since he has no concept of time. The transition into color symbolizes this conflict, because although the transition occurs at the end of the *film*, it occurs in the middle of Leonard's *story*. Since Leonard is incapable of moving forward and finding fulfillment, he constantly creates a

mystery to solve in order to give meaning to his existence. As we watch him do so again, we are left only with very different questions than those that had propelled us through the story to this point.

One critical element of the sequence's mise-en-scene is its setting: an abandoned building. The significance of this building is that it's the site of Jimmy's death at the end of the film, but it's also the site of Teddy's murder at the beginning of the film. The repetitive setting emphasizes that Leonard's narrative is not a progressive one. Rather than moving forward on a linear path, he is blindly running in circles, stuck in an endless loop of pursuing justice but never achieving closure after he kills his target. The building is isolated and anonymous, serving as a metaphor for the repetitions of Leonard's trauma; it is the place where he learns the truth about having killed his wife, but then represses it and carries on with murdering his various John Gs. Furthermore, the building itself disrupts Leonard's desire for



closure by refusing to offer any signals of redemption. This type of narrative often culminates in a final showdown between hero and villain in a spectacular location, with dramatic lighting, exceptional detail, and impressive scope. But the abandoned building does not adhere to such expectations. Instead of grand, bright, and clean, the building is old, hollow, and dirty. After Leonard's (present) victory, he drags Jimmy's body into an unfinished basement. There is no sense of triumph in a setting with such a grim tone and dark coloration, and progress is usually imagined as an upward rather than downward movement. These effects further undermine Leonard's belief that his quest for revenge is noble.

The music in the sequence also disrupts the viewer's expectations of a progress narrative. When a protagonist finally defeats an antagonist, the music tends to be thrilling and inspiring, but this sequence distinctly lacks any such grandiosity. When Teddy confesses to Leonard that Sammy Jankis's story is really Leonard's own, the music begins as faintly as an echo, stirring tension in the

viewer. The music stops, then starts up again when Teddy reveals that Leonard already killed the man who had assaulted him and his wife. This time it grows louder and more sorrowful as an ominous pulsing rises, replicating the sudden and horrifying effect of Teddy's words for Leonard and the viewer. In the final shots of the sequence, when Leonard monologues about needing to believe his actions still have meaning even if he can't remember them, the music continues to reflect his emotions. It sounds melancholy, yet driven, reflecting how Leonard is upset by Teddy's confessions but refuses to give up the meaning that his search for John G.—*any* John G.—has given his existence. Leonard can no longer be characterized as a hero after he decides to forget what Teddy tells him. The music also doesn't align with the viewer's expectations for a character who has grown and healed from their trauma, because its tone is tense and woeful.

On the surface, *Memento* attempts to replicate an experience for the viewer that is similar to Leonard's memory loss by experimenting with the passage of time, but by rejecting the chronological construction of the progress narrative, it creates disruptions on a deeper level. *Memento* is a disturbing film in that it deliberately disturbs the standards that it knows the audience subconsciously holds for it. It challenges the viewer, like Leonard, to glean their own meaning from the story when the path it takes isn't a straight line but no path at all. Christopher Nolan's film rips away the viewer's comfort blanket with the best of intentions, unraveling the progress they have actually projected in the process of looking for it. ☹

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Nolan, Christopher, director. *Memento*. Newmarket Films, 2000. DVD.



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The Human Cage: *Ex Machina*'s Ideological Tragedy

Lucas Geiger

The typical reading of Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) goes something like this: Ava is a symbol for the oppression of women, shackled by Nathan, who is a symbol for the patriarchal system. The film's conclusion—in which Ava rises up, outsmarts Nathan, and ultimately kills him—is triumphant. Critics disagree about the purity of Garland's feminist message, but ultimately, most agree that the film falls on the side of progress. I argue, instead, that *Ex Machina* leaves us in a space of tragedy. That is, contrary to what its plot may lead you to believe, the film's story ends wholly unhappily, with no winners, with no redemption, and with absolute suffering reaffirmed. We should feel neither joy for Ava's apparent liberation nor satisfaction over Nathan's death. Instead, we should feel despair for Ava, despair for ourselves, and indeed, despair for Nathan.

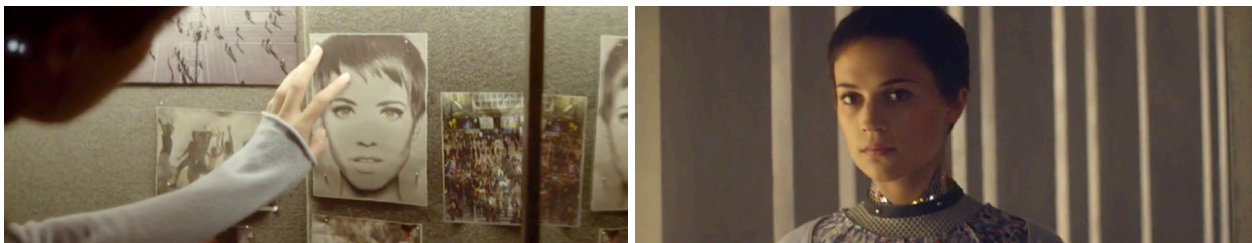
Let me first more clearly establish the reading I argue against. In that reading, Ava is a cyborg built in the female image, a symbol of and vessel for all of society's preexisting notions of femininity. In other words, she becomes a victim of and participant in a sexist system that discriminates against her, symbolizing the disadvantaged position of women in general. Conversely, Nathan Bateman, her powerful, objectifying, and abusive creator, is the epitome of the patriarchal male. He exercises his privileged position by forcing the women he has created into subservience and, beyond that, is wildly abusive (both on screen and by implication). Nathan believes himself superior to his creations; however, Ava succeeds in outsmarting him, causing his death, and escaping from her prison into the world. From this perspective, the film's conclusion is cathartic for both Ava and audience. Ava has invalidated the arbitrarily constructed power system, shed the shackles of her oppression, and is free. But there are three glaringly unresolved issues with this reading. First, why is Nathan the way he is? Second, what has Ava changed by destroying Nathan? And third, what, exactly, is Ava?

Why is Nathan the way he is?

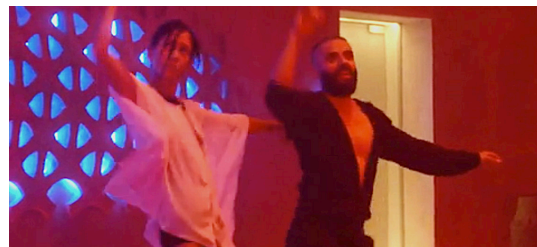
This question is simple but dizzyingly complicated to answer. Let's start here: Garland relentlessly characterizes Nathan as monstrous. His subjugation of women—from constantly demeaning Kyoko to storing the bodies of Ava's precursors in his bedroom closet—rises to the level of demented. But this is *what* Nathan is, not why.

In his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser examines the power of social systems in forming our networks of beliefs and ideals, our ideologies. He refers to these systems as ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which, he argues, teach “know-how, but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology” (236). Althusser lists a number of ISAs that support a ruling capitalist ideology, including family, religion, the education system, the legal system, the political system, communication systems (radio, television, etc.), and culture (art, literature, etc.) (243). It seems plausible that all of these systems formed Nathan into who he is: a capitalist success story par excellence. But this is not the whole picture, as Althusser skips over one of the most important ideological systems that instruct us: gender.

Addressing this elision, Teresa De Lauretis writes that gender is a “system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within the society” (5). It is certainly, therefore, an ISA by Althusser’s standard. In *Ex Machina*, this is the most relevant ISA for understanding why Nathan is what he is. He learns to be who he is by taking cues, consciously and unconsciously, from the practices of the world he is immersed in, and so, like all people, is a reservoir of a broader society’s beliefs. In other words, he is both a product and producer of society at large. Nathan identifies as a man in a capitalist ideological system supported by a patriarchal structure. Tropes of conventional masculinity drip off him in nearly every scene. Including his violent introduction (working off a hangover at his punching bag), the way he demeans his creations, the bodies he has given them, and the way he bullies his employee, Caleb, it is nearly impossible to find a moment in the film when Nathan is not living out his received notions of gender. His “know-how,” or what allows him to create Ava, is therefore also infused by the ideology of gender: he designs Ava to learn how to “be” human by being conventionally feminine.



In one of the only explicit discussions of gender in the film, following one of Caleb's early sessions with Ava, Caleb asks Nathan, "Why did you give her sexuality? An AI doesn't need a gender; she could've been a grey box." Nathan responds confidently, perhaps smugly, "Mm, actually I don't think that's true. Can you give an example of consciousness at any level, human or animal, that exists without a sexual dimension?" He goes on to ask: "What imperative does a grey box have to interact with another grey box? Does consciousness exist without interaction?" While this is only half of the quote, is his premise not already obviously absurd? A consciousness's only imperative to interact is sexual? What about asexual people? And why has he only experimented with creating female AIs? The argument is so flatly reductive that it is almost not even worth arguing against. And of course, we learn that it isn't Nathan's true belief. His true motivation for gendering his creations is laid bare in his next sentence: "Anyways, sexuality is fun man. If you're going to exist, why not enjoy it?" This reveals his philosophical posturing for what it is: a flimsy cover for the fact that he gave the cyborgs sexuality for enjoyment. And lest we think he actually cares about theirs, we can't help but recall some of the ways in which he has (literally) programmed Kyoko to "enjoy" her existence. He fails to fathom a world beyond sex, a world beyond the woman as sex object. Because of that belief, he also reproduces the systems that he has learned. Simply put, he is a sexist man who furthers the sexist world.



What does Ava change by killing Nathan?

If we trust the film's plot, we might assume that Ava deals a significant blow to the patriarchal system by destroying Nathan because, while everyone participates in the perpetuation of the system, Nathan is uniquely positioned as a super-spreader. There are not so many billionaires, not so many technological geniuses, that his destruction might not mark a historical inflection point: the sexist man is going to do something bad, but the empowered woman rises up and puts an end to it.

My issue with this reading is two-fold. First, we don't know what the rest of the technological sphere is up to in the world of *Ex Machina*. We do not get truly in-depth world building in this sci-fi future; we only see the world as represented through the deeply questionable claims of a raging narcissist and sexist. Second, this reading participates in a sort of Great Man version of history, which runs intellectually and ideologically counter to all of the work we have just done with De Lauretis and Althusser. Nathan, in his opportunities as much as in his beliefs, is created by his society. In other words, there will be more Nathans. If the society produced one man who is this evil and is given the opportunity to do this thing, how would Ava's escape halt the production of many more?

We might perhaps suggest, then, that she has won a symbolic victory. If one Ava can kill one Nathan, couldn't women everywhere rise up against patriarchal oppression and take their freedom? But this logic also reifies the Great Man theory of history. No, this claim might appear to justify a progressive reading of the film, but it only does so by performing a sleight of hand, hiding a deeper question within its answer. Saying that Ava has taken a positive step—whether symbolic or historic—ignores that she, too, is an agentive subject only insofar as she is subject to the same ISAs Nathan is.

So what is Ava?

Somehow, we have gotten this far without answering this obvious and basic question. That tracks with much of the general and critical discourse around *Ex Machina*, though. We know that Garland is making a film about gender, and we know that Nathan is the obvious representative for men. But is Ava a representative of women? She inherits the oppression cast on human women in a capitalist, patriarchal society, but she is not a human woman. The lack of human women in this film is a thread we could pull on, exploring how women are additionally disenfranchised by their literal non-presence anywhere here, but that would distract us from something more important. Ava is not a woman, or not merely a woman—not simply a symbol for the plight of women everywhere. If that was her role, then indeed, we could determine that *Ex Machina* ends heroically, rejoicing in the satisfaction of good triumphing over evil. But that is not the story at play here.

Ava, both within the film and to us as its contemporary viewers, represents the greatest technological leap humanity has ever made. Humans, in advancing artificial intelligence, have been given the opportunity to construct any world they want. AIs like Ava are blank slates upon which anything can be built. They represent, then, an opportunity not merely for allegory, but for total escape. If Caleb's intuition were heeded, if we entered into the world of grey boxes, the oppressive ideological system of gender would fall away because gender itself would fall away. In other words, Ava is, or was, humanity's true chance to escape the many systems which torture us, starting with the patriarchal system. Instead, the film argues, that opportunity has not only been squandered, it has been perverted. The greatest-ever leap in technology not only cannot save us, it shoves our own oppressive systems back in our face to demented extremes.





Thus, it is not a happy ending that we are delivered in *Ex Machina*. Nor is it a story of female empowerment. It is instead a deeply feminist story of how the ideological state apparatuses that instruct us are inescapable. Ava may kill her creator, but she cannot kill his creator. The true evil persists and perpetuates anew. The film concludes with her disappearing into the crowd, joining society—a society that will continue to produce Nathans, that will continue to create subjugating men and subjugated women, a society where everyone will continue to lose, where even great technological leaps into new forms of consciousness can only reanimate our systems of control.

Said another way, if one walks away from *Ex Machina* thinking Ava has left her cage, they fail to understand just how big that cage truly is. ☹

Lucas Geiger graduated with a degree in Professional Writing and Publishing and a minor in Spanish from UW-Whitewater in May 2024. This essay was written for a Critical Writing in Multimedia Contexts course in Fall 2023.

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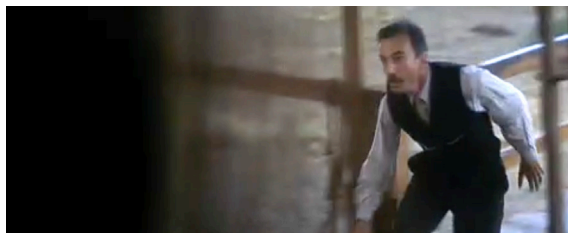
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The Father, the Son, and the Holy Drill: The Oil Rig Explosion in *There Will Be Blood*

Olivia Hauck

Paul Thomas Anderson's 2007 film *There Will Be Blood* functions as an allegory for the battle between capitalism and Christianity in America during the late 19th century. Oilman Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) embodies capitalism, and the local preacher, Eli Sunday (Paul Dano), embodies religion. Although the film mainly focuses on the ongoing clash between the two men, the relationship between Plainview and his non-biological son, H.W., serves as a persistent foil to such a grandiose, allegorical contest, ultimately telling a more disturbing tale of dehumanization. The sequence in which the oil rig explodes, causing H.W. to lose his hearing, reveals the importance of the father-son storyline in the film, the egotism of Plainview's character, and the parallels between capitalism and religion.

The oil rig explosion sequence is long and immersive. Shots that Anderson could have condensed with editing are shown in real-time. As the oil bursts up from the ground and into the air, a hand-held camera follows the movement, running along with Plainview as he carries his son away from the blast and joining the workers as they hurry towards the well. Anderson immerses us in the



event so much that we feel the panic of the oilmen as gushing oil rains down on them, even splashing onto the camera lens. The raw camera movement and real-time pacing brings viewers into the action, inviting us to experience the chaos *with* the men rather than watching from a distance.



When Plainview runs up the stairs of the oil derrick to save H.W., the camera pans over the oil erupting into the air, briefly producing an entirely black screen. Anderson's choice to place the eruption between the action and the viewer demonstrates the way in which oil is always in the forefront of what-

ever happens in Plainview's life. It monopolizes the screen just as it does the story and, ultimately, the decisions Plainview makes regarding his relationship with his son. The music playing over this sequence starts off rhythmic and repetitive, sounding industrial, like metal pipes drumming on

metal. As Plainview carries H.W. to the mess room, the music grows quieter and somewhat distant, but it increasingly intensifies again as the scene progresses, reaching a pitch and rhythm that sounds like a churning locomotive mixed with sharp violin notes straight out of a horror movie. Jason Sperb describes Plainview as “a man focused on life’s materiality—the land, the tools, the hard physical labor, required for success” (196). The mechanical music reflects Plainview’s mood and mindset, both rooted in capitalist competition and the growth of his drilling business. While a suddenly gushing oil well might signify positively as a marker of Plainview’s hard-won success, scoring the sequence with an eerie, menacing soundtrack (and scripting it as the cause of H.W.’s injury) gives it sinister undertones that highlight the ways in which Plainview can neither foresee nor control the negative consequences of his relentless pursuit of material success.

As the sequence turns from afternoon to evening, we see a silhouette shot of Plainview standing in front of the eruption’s aftermath. It tracks diagonally as his body passes in front of the oil rig and the two swap places. Plainview is once again shown crossing paths with the oil, indicating a transitional moment in the story, with the rig both literally and figuratively at the center. A few shots later, the men are shot as silhouettes in front of the burning rig while the screen is bordered with an orange aura. As with the music, the manipulation of light and color allows the audience the same perspective as the characters. We view the scene through a narrow, burning lens. Anderson

then cuts to an extreme long shot of the vacant landscape where the fire is the only light in the darkness, reminding the viewer of its significance to the story. The flaming rig takes on a god-like signification, indicated through the orange halo wrapped around the screen and the mesmerized expression on the characters’ faces as they gaze upon the oil fire in awe.

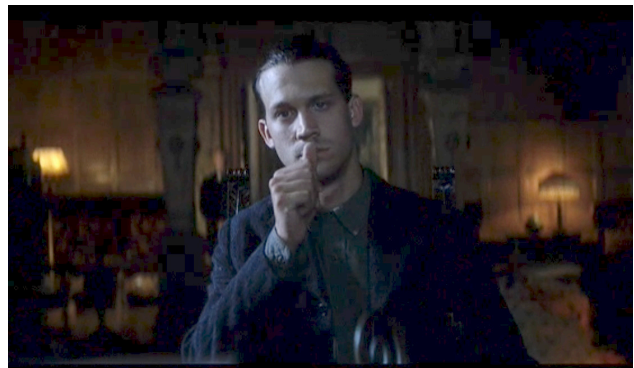


Plainview’s exultation at his success is contrasted to every other element in the scene, such as the off-putting music and overall devastation of the surrounding area. As the flames continue to radiate, he looks to one of his men, Fletcher, and says, “What are you looking so miserable about? There’s a whole ocean of oil under our feet! No one can get at it except for me.” And when asked if H.W. is okay, he responds with a simple, “no, he isn’t.” As he gazes at the flames, the camera slowly zooms in on his oil-covered face. He relishes his new financial success while dismissing its devastating consequences. The sequence thus marks a turning point in the narrative. Events that signify great prosperity in Plainview’s professional life will, hereafter, simultaneously mark great misfortune in his personal life. Plainview becomes a greedy monster willing to sacrifice the well-being of his loved ones to oil and the wealth it brings.

Yet, if the film is an allegory for the battle between capitalism and religion, as critics have suggested, then why does it also focus so heavily on Plainview’s relationship with his son, H.W.? Why is the father-son dynamic so prominent in an otherwise straightforward story about a greedy oilman and his contest with a local pastor who becomes a powerful evangelist? Perhaps the purpose of the father-son focus is to put Plainview’s humanity to the ultimate test. Anyone attempting to

thrive in the business world must presumably have a business mindset, and someone without a family is less likely to be criticized for a singular focus on profit. That is, the audience may not blame Plainview for his capitalist ambitions if an innocent child did not bear the consequences of it. If the film solely displayed the fraught relationship between money and church in America through a sole focus on Daniel Plainview's and Eli Sunday's feud, their loss of humanity would not be as prominent. Sperb points out that H.W. is "a prop for Plainview, who is selling himself as a family man running a family business" (196)—a "prop" that is disposable once it becomes more of a burden than an asset. The family dynamic introduces a standard that Plainview fails to meet. People tend to put their children above all else, including themselves. Plainview, however, basks in his economic triumph in a situation that would normally elicit a selfless, compassionate response from a loving parent. Although he feels the basic need to protect his son and assume the role of caretaker, he is less likely to be a worthy father in our eyes because he cannot prioritize H.W. over his own success in business.

A sequence near the end of the film—in which H.W. expresses his plans for drilling his own oil in Mexico—confirms Plainview's belief that their relationship is nothing more than transactional. His immediate reaction to his son's plan is, "This makes you my competitor," and he cruelly forces his deaf son to speak aloud instead of signing with his hands. Plainview highlights H.W.'s disability, which he views as a weakness, in order to widen the gap between them and place himself on superior ground. For this sequence, Plainview is shot in front of a blue background, symbolizing his cold apathy towards his son, and H.W. is positioned between two warm, yellow lights that signify his compassionate and loving approach to the conversation. Plainview's aggravation escalates until he finally admits to H.W. that he was an orphan. Taking it a few steps further, he adds, "I don't even know who you are because you have none of me in you. You're someone else's... You're just a bastard from a basket." As H.W. walks out of the office, Daniel continues to taunt him, but because H.W. is deaf, the shouted insults go unheard. This suggests that Daniel's behavior has little to do with his son's perception of him and more to do with his own personal rejection of what H.W. represents: family. If Plainview had genuinely cared for H.W. regardless of financial gain, he probably wouldn't have ended up alone and an alcoholic. Instead, he views family as pointless unless profitable and cannot give the unconditional love that coincides with it. This sequence squashes any hope the viewer had for Plainview to prove himself as a functioning father because he can only understand relationships—even his relationship to the boy he raised—in terms of competition.



The final sequences of the film reinforce the idea that Plainview ends up alone not by chance, but as the result of his own narcissistic choices. He was “always determined to be completely alone—obliterating all competition...and killing senselessly if the occasion presented itself” (Sperb, 229). Plainview’s rejection of H.W. as his son is followed by the final scene of the film in which he murders Eli Sunday with a bowling pin. H.W. and Eli Sunday represent two intangible aspects of life, love and faith, both of which are threatening to Daniel because he cannot prove himself to be victorious over them. Desperate to preserve his superiority, he attempts to erase them entirely. Nurturing a father-son relationship or subscribing to a faith (or at the very least respecting someone else’s) would require selflessness and sacrifice, making them worthless in his single-minded pursuit of individual prosperity.

The battle between capitalism and religion is a major theme in *There Will Be Blood*, but perhaps only on the surface. It is not until we consider other elements of the story, such the rejection of love, regression of healthy competition into barbaric, juvenile behavior, and the apathetic treatment towards others (including family members), that a deeper, more disturbing message appears. Any person can be corrupt regardless of the group or era to which they belong, and a singular focus on material ambition reveals more than the presumed worth of achieving such ambitions. The oil explosion sequence is the beginning of Plainview’s moral corruption. The breakthrough in his career features a chaotic, burning mess that physically disables his son, yet he gazes longingly upon it as if it were divine. Despite his mockery of Eli Sunday’s religious beliefs, Plainview’s idolization of the oil and Anderson’s choice to frame the scene as a spiritual experience suggest that capitalism is neither better nor worse than Christianity; rather, it is just a different form of religion. The matter of what Plainview and Sunday believe in, whether profit or Prophet, is irrelevant. How they pursue that belief and how far they are willing to go to reach sublimity is what eventually dehumanizes both of them in the end. ☹

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Parasite: Genre Hybridity and Class Consciousness

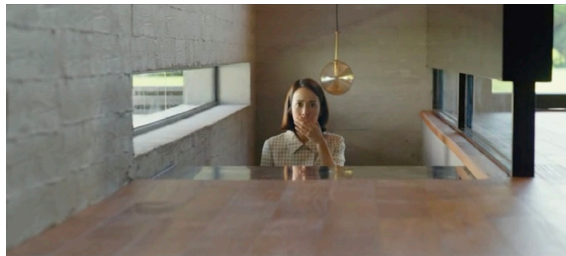
Emily McDaniels

Categorizing a film into one specific genre can prove to be difficult. A film may evoke horror-esque imagery, plunging its characters into a fearsome landscape where the audience waits in anxious anticipation of what lies in store. The same film may also incorporate comedic elements, crafting moments of humor as a distracting respite from the scares. That is, an expansive and flexible use of genre can be a powerful tool for a savvy director. Genre elements can impact how a movie's plot is presented and perceived, as well as how the audience reacts, eliciting different emotions depending on the elements employed. Scholars writing about the tendency towards genre hybridity have observed that generic analysis should “concern itself less with issues of belonging and generic purity (or impurity) and more with the actual workings of generic elements in films” (Deleyto, 228). Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) is a fascinating example of a film that exceeds classification within one single genre, inviting a close reading of its expertly deployed generic elements. The film's tone shifts wildly throughout, from focusing on the relatively comedic hijinks of the ambitious Kim family in the first half to the tense, unsettling introduction of the character Geun-sae, who lives beneath the wealthy Park family's ornate mansion and ushers in the darker tone of the film's second half. This act of genre blending creates a thrilling atmosphere for the audience and allows Bong to explore complex issues of class in South Korean society while keeping the audience engaged and guessing what will happen next.



At the beginning of *Parasite*, the story introduces the Kim family—the father, Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho), the mother, Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin), the daughter, Ki-jung (Park So-dam), and the son, Ki-woo (Choi Woo-sik)—who are desperate for a way to pull themselves out of poverty. After Kiwoo finds his way into a position working for the affluent Park family, the Kims work together to weave a web of deception to entice the Parks into giving them all well-paying jobs. While the film was marketed as a thriller, the events of the first part of the film are more comical than those that would typically befit a thriller. However,

that is not to say that the first half is entirely comedic. As the Kims manipulate their way into employment, there is a sense of tension in wondering if their ruse will be uncovered or if they will be able to pull their lies off successfully.



A scene that demonstrates this is when the Kims are working to oust the Park family's previous housekeeper, Moon-gwang. Many stylistic and thematic elements associated with the thriller genre appear throughout this sequence, including the framing of Moon-gwang as a "fox" that must be outsmarted. Because she is a clever woman who knows the house better than anyone else, ousting her is not an easy feat. The Kim family's complicated and expansive plan is first dramatically introduced in voiceover, as Ki-woo narrates his discovery of Moon-gwang's peach allergy. They then orchestrate a scenario where Ki-taek catches her at a health clinic, shows Mrs. Park a picture he takes of her there and claims to have overheard her discuss TB, making Mrs. Park paranoid. Kijung then sabotages Moon-gwang again, sprinkling peach fuzz on her at just the right time so Mrs. Park can see her in a coughing fit and decide to fire her. The Kims treat their comically-intricate plan seriously; this attitude,

coupled with the dramatic orchestral music playing throughout the sequence, makes the situation feel like a caper film (another element of genre hybridity in *Parasite*), which grants the film some ironic levity. They're not carrying out a master plan of national espionage; they're tormenting this woman so they can all be employed together. It's a terrible thing to do, but it's played as darkly humorous—the kind of humor *Parasite* revels in, especially in the first half of the film.

The audience may be held in suspense, wondering what lengths the Kims will go to next or whether they'll be caught red-handed, but this form of suspense is not limited to thrillers. As Martin Rubin states, "Virtually all narrative films could be considered thrilling to some degree because they contain suspense.... At a certain point, they become thrilling enough to be considered thrillers" (5). That transition point in *Parasite* occurs on the night the Kim family takes advantage of the empty Park household. The tone of the film shifts to a darker register and the challenges of class difference deepen. While the family is drinking and arguing, the doorbell rings and Moon-gwang asks to be let inside, claiming she left something important behind. This request hangs uncomfortably in the air, creating a feeling of apprehension for the Kims, as they hadn't accounted for her appearance. Their apprehension only grows when she enters and behaves





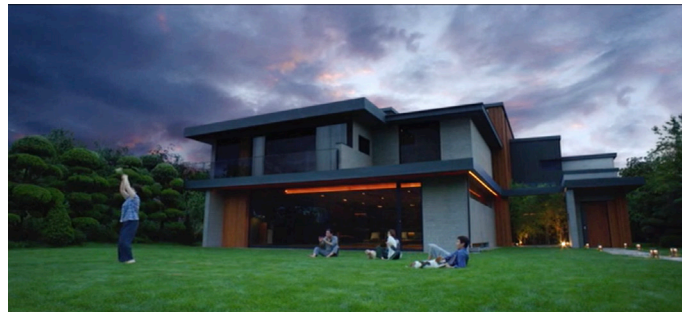
erratically. She’s smiling for reasons no one understands, avoiding questions regarding why she’s there, and inexplicably asking her replacement, Chung-sook, if she wants to join her in the basement. As the two descend past the hidden door into the sub-basement, a more conventional, thriller-style score is introduced, composed of strings that grow louder and faster, sounding more and more frantic. As Chung-sook follows Moon-gwang down dark, narrow stairwells into the bunker, the camera follows behind her, forcing the audience to discover what has been going on at the same time Chung-sook does. At this point in the film, with the revelation of Moon-gwang’s husband, Geun-sae, *Parasite*’s tone shifts into that of an anxiety-inducing thriller. The Kims, as well as the audience, have been caught completely unaware. Things have not only gone wrong, but they’ve gone wrong in a completely unexpected way, elevating the stakes and the suspense and pushing *Parasite* into thriller territory.

It is not just how Bong structures the story of *Parasite* that makes it a thriller film; he also accomplishes this through characterization. The thriller protagonist is typically an everyday individual who, through unforeseen circumstances, gets involved in a dark and complex plot. This provides the tension and suspense of the story. Rubin notes that most thriller protagonists are characterized by “vulnerability” and are often presented as “more of a victim and less in control than hard-boiled pros like Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe usually are” (94). The Kims, however, don’t seem like typical thriller protagonists. Instead of being portrayed as helpless victims, they are incredibly proactive in taking their chances, manipulating their way so adeptly that they’re able to all get jobs with the Parks. It’s only when they realize they’ve moved out of their depth that they find themselves inside a bigger plot that they don’t have knowledge of or power over. In the beginning of the pivotal scene, the family is play-acting rich people, sitting in the luxury home they’ve plotted their way into based on their stereotypes of how rich people react and behave. Moon-gwang’s unpredicted appearance breaks their control over the plot and confronts them with the real darkness and complexity of class difference.

An additional generic element of the thriller that is present in *Parasite* is that of the double. The concept of the double can function in many ways, as in the “double world” that Rubin perceives when describing the sprawling urban landscapes of many suspense films, but the concept of the double can also relate to how characters are presented (Rubin, 67). There is an obvious doubling in the Kim and Park families: both have a father, a mother, a daughter, and a son. The Parks are who the Kims want to be—they want their home, their lifestyle, and their wealth. However, it should be noted that the Kims are a far closer family than the Parks, as demonstrated by how they work together, sharing several moments that display their close bonds with each other. This is unlike the cold, clinical way in which the Parks often interact, so a source of tension in the first part

of the film is the uncertainty as to how far the Kim family will go in wanting to emulate the Parks. However, this is not the only doubling of characters. Ki-taek and Chung-sook are also doubled by the basement-dwelling Moon-gwang and Geun-sae. In both couples, the wife is more assertive, with Chung-sook being the most physically capable member of her family and Moon-gwang working to protect Geun-sae. Both husbands are noted to have a bad smell, a result of their low class and lack of access to hygiene. Additionally, both husbands find themselves trapped under the house, where both show signs of mental instability, including devotion to Mr. Park. Geun-sae's devotion stems from a place of gratitude for being able to hide in the Park's house and survive, while Ki-taek's fealty is out of guilt for having killed him. The parallels between the couples emphasize the point that those of the lower class are not all that different from one another, especially in the eyes of the wealthy.

Parasite interweaves the tension of its plot with themes concerning class divides and economic inequality—aspects indicative of the social problem genre. Such themes are readily apparent in multiple levels of the film's construction, from the characterization to the camerawork to the two primary sets (the Park's lavish home contrasted with the Kim's sub-basement apartment). Poverty in *Parasite* is visually associated with moving downward. In the scene that depicts the Kims fleeing the Park House, they move down various hills and stairs in a sequence that stretches on for several minutes, illustrating how low they truly are. The Parks and, by association, the wealthy



are the opposite—living atop a hill in a house that is multi-floored. Critics have commented on the purposeful representation of the two primary locations in the film, noting, for instance, that “the Kims effectively live underground, with a stairway down being their only entrance. Everything is cramped and minimal. Meanwhile, the Parks have spacious rooms and have to ascend meandering hills and opulent staircases to reach their home, crystallizing the status of wealth” (Cooper). The stark differences between the families serve to explain why the stakes are so different for the two of them. The Kims are desperate for their survival, to escape their claustrophobic poverty, and to save themselves from the space and status that are keeping them trapped. The Parks have no such restrictions and live their lives in the comfort that is granted them because of their access to space. Bong's thematic usage of the upstairs and downstairs helps to demonstrate the desperation of the Kims, framing the question of how far they're willing to go to move upwards. Their lies and manipulations are their attempts to escape the low levels of poverty and climb into wealth, but at the end of the film, they are yet again thrust back into the lower levels with no viable path leading up.

Parasite is an incredible testament to how flexible films can be concerning their genre categorization and how the embrace of genre hybridity can allow filmmakers to meld different generic

elements like music, narrative structure, and characterization to communicate nuanced themes. The comedic, heist-like energy of the first part of the film pulls the audience in and has them anticipating what will happen. When the film shifts, the abrupt revelation and the resulting stress the characters are under create a viewing experience that shocks and thrills masterfully. The generic shifts accompany a story that ultimately showcases the true damage poverty can do in South Korean society, both to those experiencing it and to the outsiders who suffer by association. *Parasite* takes advantage of the versatile nature of film genre and uses it to keep the audience in suspense as to where the film is going next. 🍿

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ISSUE # 5 | JULY 2024

Toxic Masculinity and Capitalism in Paul Thomas Anderson's Films

Matthew Quist

The relationship between capitalism and masculinity is a subject to which Paul Thomas Anderson's films often return. Films such as *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), *The Master* (2012), *Inherent Vice* (2014), and *Phantom Thread* (2017), for instance, feature men struggling to accrue or maintain power, often in the context of a capitalist world that provides support for over-the-top performances of masculinity as well as challenges to its various excesses. But the two Anderson films that most rigorously examine the ways in which capitalism both enables masculinity and pushes it into toxicity are *Magnolia* (1999) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007). These two films center around male protagonists, T. J. Mackey and Daniel Plainview, who demonstrate, in different ways, how competitive capitalism and ideals of masculinity can feed on one another to become highly toxic. In *Magnolia*, T. J. Mackey relies on highly performative masculinity and an overbearing personality to dominate women and enrich himself by controlling masses of incel men. In *There Will Be Blood*, Daniel Plainview accrues power to control land use and oil production, ruthlessly manipulating anyone and anything to get what he wants. This ultimately turns him into a monster, dismissive of any form of masculinity (such as caring fatherhood) that would stand in the way of his capitalist ambitions.

The introduction of T. J. Mackey in *Magnolia* starts off in the overly dramatic style of “Bohemian Rhapsody,” with Mackey illuminated in the darkness by a spotlight and Strauss’s “Also sprach Zarathustra” playing in the background as diegetic music. This introduces Mackey as an already prominent figure, with a wildly cheering audience and a rock star flair for performance. By establishing Mackey’s showmanship and his popularity as a motivational speaker (captured in reverse shots of the enraptured men in the audience), Anderson





demonstrates how Mackey uses his performance of masculinity as a tool to manipulate others and enrich himself. Pushing this idea further, Anderson costumes Mackey in a black leather vest over a tight, unbuttoned shirt with rolled up sleeves, highlighting his machismo in an almost parodic way. Then, a banner unfurls into the scene behind Mackey. “*Seduce and Destroy*,” it reads, depicting a wolf dressed like Mackey stalking a small cat—a reference to hunting down women. Finally, in a line I never thought I’d hear come out of Tom Cruise’s mouth, Mackey commands the audience to “Respect the cock!” His speech to all the (one presumes) incels in the room suggests that real men take command of women, not the other way around, and women can’t help but submit to aggressive, demanding men.



This portrait of masculinity is purposely toxic, from Mackey’s description of women as tools to be used for sexual pleasure to his manipulation of the insecure men who cheer for him and buy his “seduce and destroy” training packet (which even goes as far as to tell the men to have “side chicks,” just in case). Using the business model of a shameless huckster, he not only justifies his own toxic masculinity but also passes it on to others. His toxicity shows in his performance, his attire, the set-up to his speech, and everything else about him. Anderson wants the audience to recognize this hyperbolic portrait of masculinity and view it as deeply problematic and cringeworthy, at best, if not horrifyingly depraved.

Now, it should be noted that part of Mackey’s toxic behavior seems to be a response to personal trauma—the death of his mother and absence of his father—as another section of the film shows. For this analysis, however, the focus is on capitalism. Wherever Mackey’s toxicity comes from, he capitalizes on it for economic success. The sequence shows that he’s widely popular with a massive in-person and television audience, so we know that he is indeed successful. That success seems to validate the persona Mackey adopts and reward his toxic performance of masculinity. Capitalism justifies and intensifies Mackey’s behavior, which highlights the point Anderson wants to make with this character. Though Mackey may be fragile and wounded on the inside, his capitalist ambitions authorize an outward performance of masculinity that becomes personally toxic (for him and anybody close to him) and socially toxic through the harmful “seduction” advice he sells to other fragile men.



In *There Will Be Blood*, Anderson gives us Daniel Plainview, an egotistical businessman who, like Mackey from *Magnolia*, merges competitive masculinity with corrupt capitalism. Plainview, however, is even more severe. He is entirely unsympathetic in the way he conducts business, crushing or manipulating anyone who stands between him and his goals. In contrast to Mackey, who we're told has a traumatic childhood that apparently drives him off the deep end and into his business, Plainview pursues profit simply because he feels he can and he must. "I have a

competition in me," he says in a rare moment of self-reflection: "I want no one else to succeed." If he can do it, he will do it. And he has no sympathy for anyone in his way. "I hate most people," he says, in the detached drawl of a true misanthrope or (if we consider his brutal behavior in the film) a sociopath. "I look at people and I see nothing worth liking." His competitive relationship with the "false prophet" Eli Sunday bears this out. Plainview simply crushes him at the end of the film after thoroughly routing him in a competition for wealth and power. As Plainview puts it to Sunday, "I drink your milkshake!" Sunday is simply in the way of Plainview's further success, so he is beaten (literally and figuratively) and removed from the equation, because that's what you do to competitors in business. You eliminate the competition.

In this way, Anderson uses the acquisitive and competitive excesses of capitalism to shape Plainview's character. As Jason Sperb writes, Plainview is "like Mackey [from *Magnolia*] and Egan [from *Punch-Drunk Love*], an angry, socially ill-adjusted man more invested in his business goals than in making meaningful connections with others...." Sperb continues, "Yet Plainview is also a powerful rejection of the more sympathetic characters Anderson created in the past. Plainview's need for family is dictated by the demands of the sales pitch rather than the desire to feel loved" (197). Anderson's choice to write and direct Plainview this way suggests a message: that capitalism can thoroughly infect one's state of mind, particularly when it manifests as an obsessive drive toward competition and cold-blooded pursuit of wealth, and that state of mind can come at the expense of the ability to love and care for others. Plainview is capitalism's shadow, a businessman with a single-minded focus on competition and a lack of empathy, along with an innate need to keep the wheels of business turning and the money flowing until, over time, the very passions that drive him slowly transform him into a monster.



Early in the film, we see Plainview using his non-biological son (a foundling) to acquire land leases on which to drill for oil. With H.W. by his side, he tells the people who own the land that he has sixteen wells going, and that they can trust him not to scam them because, as an “oilman” rather than a “speculator” or “contractor,” he oversees the drilling himself: “I do my own drilling.” Plainview’s pitch sounds convincing, but we already know by this time that he is unscrupulous. When asked his price, Plainview pitches himself as a “family man,” pointing to his adoptive son. “I’m a family man,” he says. “I run a family business. This is my son and my partner, H.W. Plainview. We offer you the bond of family that very few oilmen can understand.” Plainview acquires H.W. as a foundling and then uses him as part of a sales pitch to acquire more business, so when he offers “the bond of family” to his customers, we may well suspect that such a “bond” is more sales pitch than representative of any real paternal feeling that Plainview may have for his “son.” Early in the film, then, we already begin to see Plainview’s machismo idea of himself as a successful “oilman” emerging, and it is less a function of anything that might resemble “the bond of family” than of the commercial power he has (sixteen wells and a tycoon’s income) and that which he wants to gain (more land leases, more oil wells, more wealth, more power). H.W. is an afterthought—just a prop for the sales pitch. That is, Plainview identifies fully with the pursuit of success and money to the exclusion of relationships, familial or otherwise. He sacrifices the “bonds of family” on the altar of commerce, turning him into a cold businessman. It is, therefore, painfully accurate when Plainview, coerced into confessing in church, screams his sin: “I’ve abandoned my child! I’ve abandoned my boy!”



Near the end of the film, the adult H.W. approaches an old, ragged, and now completely isolated Plainview in his echoing mansion. H.W. confesses to his father that he wants to create his own oil drilling business and follow the path that Plainview took. Plainview does not take this kindly, saying to H.W., “You are now my competitor.” He no longer treats his son as family—only competition to crush. He calls H.W. “a bastard in a basket,” throwing away the last of his humanity and fully embracing the toxic masculinity that capitalism has encouraged in him. His desire to best all other competition, the need to acquire business and success, has driven him off the deep end of what it means to be masculine. Where Mackey hides his insecurities with the shell of the toxic persona he built, Plainview accepts this for he who is, driving home that even if these two characters operate on a similar wavelength, they are wholly different people.

Paul Thomas Anderson makes these deliberate choices in order to show how the corruption inherent in prevailing ideals of both masculinity and capitalism are interlinked. Mackey and Plainview are both despicable people in different ways. One uses his masculinity to control others, creating capitalistic success that only serves to fuel his toxicity. The other is a man who only wishes to be on top, dedicating himself to competition and the accumulation of wealth at the expense of

any productive or caring form of masculinity (e.g., fatherhood). Anderson creates these kinds of characters with the intention of showing how easy it is to be influenced and corrupted by ideals of masculinity, capitalism, or a toxic combination of both. ❧

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Turbulence of the Mind: Psychological Power Struggles in *Red Eye*

Kaitlyn Van Wyhe

Wes Craven's 2005 film, *Red Eye*, is a thriller with a female protagonist (Lisa) trying to get home on a delayed flight while seated next to a terrorist (Jackson) who threatens not only the life of a guest at the hotel she manages, but also the life of her father should she disobey him. The film is set predominantly in the confines of the airborne plane, where Lisa engages in multiple attempts to notify various other passengers and flight attendants of her potentially lethal circumstances. *Red Eye* fits into the psychological thriller subgenre because it situates the conflict more in mental manipulation and psychological/emotional combat than action/fight sequences. *Red Eye* masterfully explores, unpacks, and eventually inverts the psychology of its two main characters, taking a classic thriller set-up of cat-and-mouse and flipping the script on the emotional and intellectual relationship between the protagonist and antagonist. In the process, Craven reinvigorates the genre by exploring psychological traumas and contemporary gender dynamics.

The genre of the thriller owes a significant debt to Alfred Hitchcock, who placed "a greater emphasis on individual psychology and subjective point of view" in his films (Rubin 80). In the first half of *Red Eye*, Craven emphasizes the intellectual battles between Lisa and Jackson, but adds a social dimension to their conflict by showing how Jackson uses gender bias as a mental weapon against Lisa. For example, in the first sequence after Jackson reveals his true intent, he uses psychological methods of "persuasion" to manipulate her into doing his bidding rather than using physical violence or force. He plays into the stereotypical gender roles the airline staff assign to them to dominate Lisa's will. With a few quick words—"You'll just be another drunk girl"—Jackson destroys Lisa's hopes of getting help. He feeds her insecurities by giving voice to the underlying fear and the very real chance that no one will believe her, recasting their earlier friendly drink at the airport bar in a sinister light, as the audience now understands he was plying her with alcohol to lower her defenses.

The camera angles throughout this sequence emphasize the hierarchy of control between the two. Craven's camera inverts expectations by looking down at Jackson in a high angle shot, while the shot of Lisa is from a low angle, tilted up toward her face from Jackson's point of view. In a typical scene construction, this would work to establish Lisa as the dominant person looming over Jackson, but Jackson is at this point in complete control, and he knows it. There is no need for him



to stand up to intimidate or threaten her. In fact, it would work against him because by remaining seated, he reinforces the flight attendant's perspective that Lisa is being overdramatic and standing before the fasten seat belt sign has been turned off. Her standing up in desperation proves her lack of control in the moment. Jackson looks up at her unfazed, as if taking pleasure in her distress. He is emotionless and detached, his eyes staring at her unblinking. The power he holds over her is further enforced by the weight of the news he has just delivered to

her—that with one phone call, he can end her father's life. How can she risk challenging him when her father's life is on the line? He smiles and commands her to sit down. His subtext is clear: "You're making a fool out of yourself. We both know there's nothing you can do to stop me." His dialogue reflects his view that she is an emotionally imbalanced female incapable of the analytical, logical thought of his superior male mind. By sitting, calm and relaxed, during the entire sequence, Jackson delights in his perceived superiority while effectively trapping Lisa in her seat without laying a hand on her. This sequence therefore emphasizes Lisa's total isolation, despite being surrounded by other passengers—another staple of the suspense genre, where "only by isolating the protagonist can the moral and thematic conflicts emerge clearly and meaningfully" (Derry 11).

Jackson's psychological manipulation of Lisa builds as his deadline draws nearer. In his impatience, he also escalates his physical domination to control her actions. When this violence explodes in the bathroom scene, where Lisa is truly isolated, the film begins to track Jackson's slow decline of control over both Lisa and his own emotions. His mask of mental calm slips as he resorts to manhandling her in an enclosed space, expressing for the first time anything other than a cool and collected façade. Lisa opens the door of the bathroom to find Jackson eerily waiting, and when he catches sight of her soap writing on the mirror, he puts his hand over her mouth to silence her and slams her into the wall, the camera whirling into a birds-eye-view shot. The camera throughout the sequence is handheld, making it shaky to reflect the edgy emotions portrayed. The camera also moves in sweeping motions at several points to catch the action and sudden, jerky movements. As Jackson settles into his position,



holding Lisa against the wall, a series of shots flips between a side view showing both their faces and expressions and a close-up over Jackson's shoulder, encompassing the side of his face pressed up against Lisa. These emphasize the characters' close proximity and give the audience a clear sense of Lisa's panic.



As the scene intensifies and both Jackson's anger and Lisa's fear build, Craven interjects several point-of-view shots that give the audience Lisa's perspective of Jackson's face. It is so intense and close that it feels like Jackson is violating our personal space as well as Lisa's. In the midst of the scene, we also get a close-up of the scar on Lisa's chest. Jackson uses this as an excuse to throw her across the enclosed space and choke her, calling her a liar when she denies his claims. The camera follows the sudden movement, whirling to another overhead shot that reinforces the claustrophobic space of the tiny bathroom. The shots switch rapidly between an insert shot of Lisa's hand bracing her against the wall, a close-up of their faces almost touching as he strangles her, and an insert shot of her high heels as her feet scramble for any chance at balance or support. These perspective changes within the tight space emphasize Lisa's whole-body effort and lead viewers to feel as if they, too, are struggling to breathe. Throughout the sequence, the music rises in bursts for each sudden movement, but during their exchanges, it drops to a dark undertone of sinister beats, with the dominant sounds being Lisa's strained breathing and Jackson's panting. These again amplify both the extreme tension and the tightness of their quarters. Viewers get an intimate view of the fear/tears in Lisa's eyes and hear the tremble in her voice.

The reference to Lisa's previous assault also heightens the emotional intensity of the scene, as Jackson's violence takes on a sexually threatening dimension and Lisa's victimhood comes to the foreground as one of the film's dominant themes. Jackson continues his mental manipulation by

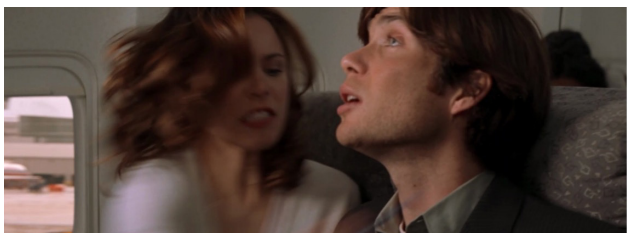
mentioning her father's predicament and how it depends on her. He tries to tell her they are both professionals with similar jobs focused on making their customers happy. His tone is patronizing. He takes her face in his hand in a gentle and mocking way after his violent outbursts and asks if she will listen to him now. Rather than admit that he is the cause of all the trouble, he consistently blames her for the situation she is in, basically saying, "If you'd just listen to me everything would go smoothly, and nobody would get hurt." Jackson's manipulation is that of a self-obsessed narcissist.

In the climactic sequence, Lisa manages to stab Jackson in the larynx and step out of her victim position. Craven's camera puts the audience in a privileged position of knowing what is going to happen before Jackson does, and builds on both the characters' and the audience's psychological stress. A series of shots bounces from a close-up of Lisa's eyes to her unbuckling her seatbelt to her hand on the pen, removing its cap and preparing to use it as a weapon to secure her escape. At the same time, the camera cuts between close-ups of her face and Jackson's, all of these shots registering the mental battle between them as she tells him the story of her traumatic assault.



Best of all, in this scene, Lisa uses Jackson's assumptions and misogynistic views to her advantage because he continues to perceive her as helpless. As the plane lands, he believes he has succeeded. He is completely unprepared for her to fight back in any physical capacity and is distracted by her confession of the truth about her scar. He doesn't understand why she is telling him any of this, because he doesn't really care about the truth. After sharing the details of her assault, Lisa states that she has repeated the same thing to herself over and over again since then. Jackson tries to turn her words against her and manipulate her view of the situation by smugly finishing her sentence, interjecting "That it was beyond your control." It is his perverse attempt at comfort. Lisa uncaps the pen and shakes her head, instead saying "No. That it would never happen again." She turns to look at him, and the close-up of her face shows the audience the change in her mental state. She no longer appears scared, but calm and determined. She isn't about to go down without one last fight. The camera is slightly shaky, reflecting the emotion of the exchange.

As the film approaches the moment of truth, the cuts and edits seem almost slow and steady, creating a calm before the storm. The music is slow and gentle as Lisa shares her story, misleading Jackson by playing him at his own game. He suspects nothing. After her declaration, the music shifts to chords and then goes silent as the seatbelt notification sounds, loud in the silence. As Jackson looks up, Lisa takes the pen and stabs him in the windpipe, effectively taking back the power he has taken from her. As Lisa moves, the camera moves dizzily, the cuts coming quick and fast,





showing Lisa's violent action from multiple angles. The dominating sound is of the movement. The moment the pen penetrates Jackson's throat is emphasized with a boom and clash of cymbals. The shots cut in a rapid

shot-reverse shot between Jackson's wide, wild eyes and Lisa's face. The sound of his strained breathing is emphasized in the same way Lisa's was in the bathroom scene. In this moment, she has not only outsmarted him but overpowered him as well. Lisa begins her escape, and the music hits a drumroll of steadily rising depth and speed, as she snatches his phone and pushes her way out into the aisle. And so the chase begins. From this moment onward, their power dynamic shifts in Lisa's favor, and Jackson loses his detached calm. He is no longer acting from a presumption of male superiority and rationality; he is now acting out of rage and driven solely by his emotions.

Red Eye consciously unpacks the mental states of both the protagonist and the antagonist in a traditional cat-and-mouse psychological thriller. The film reveals the mental games and emotional exploitation played out between Jackson and Lisa to reveal the gradual shift in their dispositions and worldviews, which also serves as a commentary on the way gender informs power dynamics, particularly in the mid-2000s when the film was produced. Jackson's gradual decline of control over Lisa and his emotions coincides with Lisa's slow ascent to bringing her emotions and faculties under her control. By the end of the film, their statuses are inverted, with Lisa besting Jackson at his own game. He is driven by his emotions, the victim of his pride, and Lisa uses her intellect to fight, escape, and defeat him. Through camera shots, editing, mise-en-scene, and music, Wes Craven masterfully paints a picture of the characters' psyches for the viewer, pulling the audience deeper into the realm of a true psychological thriller. 🍷

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