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Toxic Masculinity and Capitalism in Paul Thomas Anderson's Films

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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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