

The Vision of the American History in Paul Thomas Anderson's Filmography

MATEUSZ MYSZKA¹

Abstract: This paper presents the reinterpretation of the history of the 20th century United States as shown in the chosen films by Paul Thomas Anderson [*There Will Be Blood* (2007); *The Master* (2012), *Inherent Vice* (2014)]. His filmography is presented as a valid historical narrative, which encompasses the American 20th century in its entirety. The notion of historical narrative is presented with reference to the writings of Hayden White. The modern American society is characterized by its atomization and impossibility of forming interpersonal relationships. Anderson's historical movies are treated as an attempt of finding the rationale for these societal conditions. The analysis refers to the traditionally American values of individualism and Emersonian self-reliance. Anderson's films show the modern reinterpretation of these values which degenerated into egoistic self-centeredness. This process is seen in the emergence of the hardline capitalism (*There Will Be Blood*) and is strengthened by the post-war shattering of human relations (*The Master*). This deterioration of values cannot be stopped, what is shown through the failed hippie revolution (*Inherent Vice*). Throughout the analysis the films are constantly contrasted with the narrative of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. This work is chosen as a point of reference because it was a significant reinterpretation of dominant historical narrative in itself, while still remaining scientific in its nature. The aim of this paper is to further the interdisciplinary research by showing that both historical and artistic narratives reinterpret the American history and have their tangent points.

Keywords: Paul Thomas Anderson, Howard Zinn, USA, 20th century

1. Faculty of Liberal Arts, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland, m.myszka@student.uw.edu.pl.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze the filmography of the American director Paul Thomas Anderson. Soon after his debut in the 90s he gained international recognition thanks to his original and unique style based, among other things, on his predilection for long takes and unconventional usage of music. At this point Anderson has helmed eight features. This paper will focus on three of them: *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *The Master* (2011), and *Inherent Vice* (2014), which will be treated as a singular and coherent historical narrative. *Phantom Thread* (2017) is disregarded altogether due to its British context and the first four films of Anderson (*Hard Eight* (1996), *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Magnolia* (1999) and *Punch-Drunk Love* (2003)) are treated primarily as a depiction of a more or less modern America. Thus, the conducted analysis can be treated as somewhat genealogical - its main goal is to reconstruct the roots of the contemporary society's flaws as perceived by Paul Thomas Anderson.

For the sake of this argument history will be treated as a primarily narrational form of writing. Being conscious of the obvious differences between the academic inquiry and the artistic creation, I intend to purposefully blur the aforementioned distinction. According to the assumed understanding of history, this branch of knowledge will be understood in a postmodern manner. This kind of approach can be reconstructed for instance with reference to Hayden White, who pointed out the similarities between writing history and writing narratives and defined a historical narrative as "a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative"²

Having established this kind of view of history, one can easily compare historical writings with Anderson's films. The main context used consistently throughout this paper is Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. This choice is made due to the fact that, on the one hand, this book exerted a significant influence among historians and is one of the crucial historical

2. Hayden White, "Interpretation in History," *New Literary History* 4, no. 2 (1973): 281.

handbooks in the United States. On the other hand, it is known for being vastly different from the traditional, conservative approaches to history - Zinn shifts the weight of his narrative from the great figures of history to the eponymous people, who can be associated with the ordinary men and women, oftentimes stemming from the working class.

What is more, Zinn himself admits the subjective character of his work, when he writes that "a historian (or a journalist, or anyone telling a story) was forced to choose, out of an infinite number of facts, what to present, what to omit. And that decision inevitably would reflect, whether consciously or not, the interests of the historian"³. Subjectivity stems not only from the choice of facts, but also from their interpretations, because "there is no such thing as a pure fact, innocent of interpretation"⁴. Zinn defines his approach to history as an attempt "to awaken a greater consciousness of class conflict, racial injustice, sexual inequality, and national arrogance"⁵ - he tries to give voice to those who was excluded from the historical narratives.

Anderson's filmography cannot be interpreted as a political project aimed at giving voice to the excluded masses. Nevertheless, common ground between the narratives of Zinn and Anderson may be found in their insistence on describing history with relation to the ordinary people. The discussed movies are consciously avoiding references to the actual historical figures. The director focuses on his characters and the history of the United States is always perceived from their unique points of view. Having established the possibility of this comparison, it should be stated that it will not be proportional. Anderson's movies will be treated as the main focus of this paper and the usage of Zinn will be treated as a context-giving instrument which sheds light on the analyzed plots and characters.

There Will Be Blood

The first movie of Paul Thomas Anderson which will be discussed is *There Will Be Blood*. It is a movie which instantaneously gained international

3. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 3rd editio (London and New York: Longman, 2003), 683.

4. Zinn, 684.

5. Zinn, 686.

recognition and is treated as Anderson's *opus magnum*. When it comes to its critical reception, one can refer for example to one very telling commentary of Scott Foundas, who claims that "Paul Thomas Anderson has taken a stab at making *The Great American Movie* — and I daresay he's made one of them"⁶. The words of the critic signify that the discussed film is American through and through and as such can be treated as a valid point of entrance when it comes to analyzing the American history of the 20th century.

The movie presents the story of Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) who gradually accumulates wealth thanks to oil drills. The plot presents few decades - from 1898 to 1927 - during which the main character becomes the oil tycoon. The plot of the movie focuses primarily on Daniel's stay at Little Boston, which becomes the main scene for the events. Among the crucial plotlines one should mention Daniel's conflict with Eli Sunday (Paul Dano), the self-proclaimed priest of the local church. This conflict indicates the tension between secular and religious powers. The character of Plainview can be defined in terms of his greed, which seems to be one of his constitutive characteristics. Daniel's need for money turns into obsession and is the only goal of his life. In consequence his greed leads to his eventual demise: he rejects his adopted son after the boy loses his hearing and becomes a murderer - first when he kills an impostor who claims to be his long-lost brother and later on, in the last scene of the movie, when he kills Eli. The figure of Daniel Plainview can be treated as a metonymic representation of the rampant capitalism which organized the oil business - and the entire country - in the early 20th century. The main character of the movie cannot be treated as a singular character, because he is a representative of his kind. The film might present a history of just one man, but the meaning of this one story can be treated as commentary on the entire American epoch.

It is worth mentioning that *There Will Be Blood* is inspired by Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* The book and the movie differ vastly, and the discussed film cannot be treated as an adaptation, but the choice of this particular source is quite telling. Anderson refers to Sinclair who was a politically engaged

6. Scott. Foundas, "There Will Be Blood Is Anderson's Citizen Kane," *LA Weekly*, 2007, <https://www.laweekly.com/there-will-be-blood-is-andersons-citizen-kane/>.

figure and belonged to the group of muckrakers, who unmasked the wrongdoings of the American industries and cared for the wellbeing of the American workers. Using Sinclair, the ardent socialist, as a source material means that the left-wing perspective is assumed. This kind of approach is in alliance with Zinn's view as well.

The film begins with a long sequence in which Daniel discovers a silver ore. Throughout the entire sequence there is no dialogue. This voiceless approach may be seen as a distant echo of the silent cinema (with Chaplin's *Gold Rush* being an obvious association), which would be a valid historical context. This subtle meta-commentary can be understood as comparison between oil and movies. Filmmaking should be treated as an artistic endeavor, but it was demoted to the level of industry; it is done in accordance with the perspective of films being financially beneficial. This kind of connection shows that greed, which can be easily observed in oil industry, permeates the American culture in its entirety.

The opening scene is crucial from a different standpoint as well. In this sequence Daniel Plainview breaks his leg and for the rest of the movie he limps. This kind of disability is traditionally connected with the devil⁷. Thus Plainview - and all the values and norms he represents - may be seen as truly infernal. After all his defining characteristic of greed is one of the seven deadly sins. The Biblical context can be developed in the context of the title. The phrase "there will be blood" echoes one of the scourges, which was announced by a similar phrase "there shall be blood"⁸. And blood indeed appears - the titular prophecy is fulfilled in the last scene, when Daniel kills Eli and "fulfils in an extreme fashion the prophetic imperative of the film's title"⁹. One may treat blood as visually analogical to oil as well.

However, it seems that the vision of capitalism in *There Will Be Blood* is more nuanced. It is a potentially perilous force, but it is not evil in the infernal sense. The context of the devil should be understood rather in light of the Mephistophelian claim - the devil of capitalism is "the part of that

7. Maximilian Rudwin, *Diabeł w legendzie i literaturze* (Kraków: Znak, 1999), 60.

8. Exod. 7:19 ESV.

9. George Toles, *Paul Thomas Anderson* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 83–84.

power which would / Do evil constantly and constantly does good"¹⁰. It can be said that the rampant capitalism is based on greed and is potentially destructive, but these motivations are not bound to be reproduced in their effects. In spite of its dubious moral foundations, economic development significantly benefitted the everyday comfort of society. Zinn admits that "there was some truth to the standard picture of the twenties as a time of prosperity"¹¹. This, however, doesn't change the fact that "prosperity was concentrated at the top"¹². What is more, it can be claimed that this kind of structure prohibits any possibility of change, because "there were enough well-off people to push the others into the back-ground. And with the rich controlling the means of dispensing information, who would tell?"¹³

In the final scene of the movie, after killing Eli, Daniel Plainview utters the phrase "I'm finished". On the literal level it merely announces the end of the violent argument with Eli. It can be treated as a meta-commentary as well - murder completes the plot and is synonymous with the end of the movie. Daniel is left in a position of the utmost demise, which gives no chance for retribution. All possibilities of starting anew are nihilated by the overbearing end titles. This phrase may be seen as a sign of Daniel's self-proclaimed end or - referring to the discourse of economy - his moral bankruptcy. His story is finished, and he has no future. He gained opulent riches, but at the same time lost his humanity.

The very scene of the murder is filmed in a way which alludes to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). When Daniel hits Eli with a bowling pin, he looks just like Kubrick's monkey, which kills his enemy. This visual quote - in the context of one of the most famous movie cuts in a following scene, when a bone changes into a spaceship - presents Daniel's story as yet another fragment in the perpetual cycle of history-governing violence. In the moment of murder Daniel represents the innate violence connected to humanity's development. In this scene he represents the American economic development at its fullest.

10. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part One*, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

11. Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 382.

12. Zinn, 382.

13. Zinn, 383.

If Plainview shall be treated as a metonymic representation of the entire mode of culture, then his fall must be treated as relating to the entire society. This fall may be seen as a degeneration of one of the crucial American notion - that of Emersonian self-reliance¹⁴. The conviction according to which each person is capable of shaping their own fate got distorted. Once it was understood in terms of an introspective insight leading to subjectification, and now it is equal to egoistical pragmatism. Individualism got replaced by a purely economic greed. One "relies" on himself only to attain riches - this kind of approach cannot be treated as a noble method of living. Living life in accordance to business-like model leaves no free space for those things which escape the discourse of economy such as interpersonal relationships. Plainview objectifies every single person he meets and uses them in accordance to financial opportunities.

Capitalism may be seen as one of the crucial elements of the notion of America. Zinn explains this notion with reference to Du Bois, who "saw the ingenuity of capitalism in uniting exploiter and exploited-creating a safety valve for explosive class conflict"¹⁵. The historian describes how the exploiting and the exploited are united by nationality. Economic benefit of the country is treated as an ideological method of creating a community. Capitalism is a crucial condition for shaping the national identity. However, this kind of community is very feeble. Using extreme forms of individualism as a template for the citizens is beneficial for the ruling class, because it distorts class distinctions and prohibits the lower classes from assessing their social position. In the discourse of individualism everyone thinks of himself as a (potential) millionaire. This uncertain perspective is tempting enough for the citizens to refrain from creating a real community.

The Master

The process of destruction will be finalized with the World War, which will destroy the order of the world. Post-war America, which is still impacted by the extreme capitalism, will soon be forced to redefine itself. This process

14. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance* (White Plains, N.Y.: Peter Pauper Press, 1967).

15. Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 363.

is presented by Anderson in the next movie which will be discussed - *The Master*. It can be seen as continuation in two senses - it follows *There Will Be Blood* chronologically both in terms of plot and in terms of Anderson's filmography. The movie depicts the story of Freddie Quell (Joaquin Phoenix), who cannot find himself in the American society after returning from the war. He falls victim to the manipulative Lancaster Dodd (Philip Seymour Hoffman), the leader of a sect. The relationship between these two characters is the main pivot of the film. Freddie treats the sect as a surrogate family, which fulfils his communal needs. This form of community is bound to fail and Freddie eventually escapes this toxic relationship.

When it comes to the historical context the main events of history are omitted. One can observe the influence of the World War, but actual combat is never shown, because the film begins with the end of war. Freddie is depicted as a fully uniformed soldier, but this scene is just a glimpse and is used in order to signal Freddie's dependency on the army. It seems that Anderson does not care for the event itself. He seems to be preoccupied with its impact on the people.

Freddie can be described as traumatized and broken due to his experience of war. His state manifests itself in few ways. First of all, he has problem with proper relationships with women. In one of the first scenes he copulates with a sand figure - this shows his inability of forming a relationship with an actual woman. In this kind of relationship, a woman is reduced to the lifeless figure deprived of her subjectivity. In the end of the movie Freddie seems to partially work through his problem - he has an actual intercourse. Anderson, however, decided to return to the image of a sand woman in the next scene - creating a full-fledged relationship remains impossible for Freddie.

Freddie's brokenness is expressed through his drug addiction as well. Throughout the movie he prepares certain mixtures. His addiction stems from his military past - it is shown in an obvious way, when he prepares his drink on the basis of antifreeze stolen from the army. His addiction can be interpreted as a form of escapism. Drugs not only allow him to escape, but they also give him a false sense of control. In one of his hallucinations he imagines all of the women in the room as naked - this gives him a sense of dominance.

The situation of Freddie is manifested by his inability to control violence as well. This is seen at best during the arrest scene. When both Freddie and Dodd are arrested, Anderson positions them in two cells next to each other. Dodd is presented as calm and stone-like figure, whereas Freddie seems to be unable to control himself and destroys the cell entirely. This dichotomy presents Freddie as inferior and subjected to emotions, while the eponymous master occupies the position of dominance.

Inner disturbance of the protagonist leads to his alienation, which seems to define the entire post-war period. Anderson himself defines the typical psychological state of these times as "confused, and heartbroken, and soul bent"¹⁶. This alienation is so painful that one is willing even to connect themselves with a sect in order to alleviate it. On the surface the movement of the master seems to be inclusive - it provides a sense of belonging and offers a group identity.

The post-war society is shattered, and this lack of singularity is seen in the structure of the movie. While the pre-war period could have been presented through one larger-than-life persona, in the case of the years after the war it is no longer possible. Anderson uses two contrasted characters in order to present the dynamics of interpersonal relationships after the Second World War. Neither Freddie nor Lancaster can function without each other - the former desperately needs a surrogate father figure and the latter needs someone to manipulate. This relation is not based on a sincere bond. The church of Lancaster Dodd remains rooted in the capitalist ideology. The master plays the role of a religious leader, because it is beneficial financially. He treats his believers as a commodity. Anderson no longer criticizes capitalism in itself, but presents how detrimental it was when it comes to interpersonal relationships. Every human can be reduced to the role of commodity.

In his analysis George Toles refers to Kenneth Gross' reinterpretation of Simmel's notion of a dyad. This concept treats the relation of two partners as a basic foundation of society. Gross observes that "the relation indeed enhances rather than blocks the individuation of its members", because it

16. "Director Paul Thomas Anderson on This Fall's Most Buzzed-about Film, 'The Master,'" Cigarettes and Red Vines, 2012, <http://cigsandredvines.blogspot.com/2012/10/interview-cbc.html>.

“creates peculiar conditions of mutual exposure, since it represents a relation in which one member cannot hide from the other” and cannot “pass responsibility (...) onto a larger group or impersonal ideal”¹⁷. Freddie’s relationship with Dodd eventually forces himself to consider his own subjectivity as independent. He must deal with his psyche and cease to mask it by means of escaping into the group identity.

Zinn observes that the war was a stimulus which initiated the rebuilding of capitalism after the Great Depression. The historian writes that “the unemployment, the economic distress, and the consequent turmoil that had marked the thirties, only partly relieved by New Deal measures, had been pacified, overcome by the greater turmoil of the war”¹⁸. Zinn refers to Wittner, who claims that “the war rejuvenated American capitalism”¹⁹. According to Kolko “the American economic war aim was to save capitalism at home and abroad”²⁰. The American goal seems to be fulfilled. Some benefits were shared by the workers and therefore the system was not only defended, but also acknowledged by the overwhelming majority. This common acceptance of capitalism leads to its absence in the historical narrative of Anderson - the economic effects of individualism are substituted with its influence on interpersonal relations.

The detrimental effects of the American form of individualism are observed not only from Zinn’s left-wing perspective, but also from more conservative standpoints. Bellah underlines the importance of language, when he writes that the individualistic language, which can be understood as a primary discourse of the American self-knowing, limits the ways of thinking²¹. In this case there is no contradiction between the authors - they might be focused on different things, but they agree that social separation of individuals may be connected with culturally and linguistically transmitted values.

17. Toles, *Paul Thomas Anderson*, 126.

18. Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, 425.

19. Zinn, 425.

20. Zinn, 413.

21. Robert Neelly Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, ed. Robert Neelly Bellah (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 290.

Post-war America presented in *The Master* looks like an environment alienating the members of the society. Traditional individualism still shapes the minds and renders the creation of positive community impossible. What is more, it is no longer embraced by everybody. There are people who are desperate for contact with others, but their attempts are bound to fail. These needs are catered for by the pathological communities, which exploit the shattered post-war generation of young people and require full and unconditional submission. In post-war America there is a society, but there is no community. People who were scarred by the war cannot find help in interpersonal relationships.

Inherent Vice

The last movie discussed is *Inherent Vice* based on the novel by Thomas Pynchon. It depicts the story of Larry "Doc" Sportello (Joaquin Phoenix), a private detective and a hippie, who uncovers the dark side of Los Angeles in 1970s. Anderson again decides to omit the historical context of the Vietnam war. The government is presented as potentially perilous - this depiction may be connected with the mindset of the times, because - as pointed out by Zinn - "in the early seventies, the system seemed out of control - it could not hold the loyalty of the public"²². The plot of the film is very dense and oftentimes hard to grasp. The main plotline can be described as a detective story about a real estate tycoon named Mickey Wolfman (Eric Roberts), who is kidnapped. However, the plot is constructed in a specific manner, which translates Pynchon's writing on screen - the number of characters and subplots seems to grow exponentially, and it seems that the kidnapping is a part of an omnipresent conspiracy, which controls the entirety of the American life. The sense of confusion is created consciously - the viewers are lost in the plot just like the main character.

Even when Doc finally finds Mickey Wolfman, the intrigue is not resolved. The enormous scale of conspiracy is never revealed. The system seems to control everything and everyone. Wolfman is yet another example of a capitalist, who seems to represent the notion of being American. He has

22. Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 541.

no independent position - capitalism morphed into an impersonal system of financial connections. The capitalist mindset is so common that a man who wants to share his wealth with the poor is treated as insane. Mickey is put into asylum and is forced to "wake from his bad hippie dream". The figure of Mickey shows American reaction to the hippie movement - in the long run it was disregarded as a temporary lack of reason. Individualistic ideology was so strong, that the attempted revolt was instantaneously prohibited.

America cannot be reformed, and the only positive perspective can be found in an escape. Sortilège (Joanna Newsom), the narrator of the movie, refers to a ship, which suddenly disappeared: "May we trust this blessed ship was bound for some better shore (...) - risen and redeemed. Where the American fate mercifully failed to transpire". The United States are bound to be restricted by their foundational values. There is a deep need for re-signifying it and creating a new American worldview. History shows that this kind of notional revolution was not possible, and the hippie culture was assimilated by capitalism. Zinn observes that "never in American history had more movements for change been concentrated in so short a span of years. But the system in the course of two centuries had learned a good deal about the control of people. In the mid-seventies, it went to work"²³. The societal change introduced in the late sixties was never completed, because the movement was overwhelmed with the government's power and the conservative backlash.

The world depicted by Anderson is governed by the gigantic network of interconnections, which construct a view of life which could be labeled as an embodiment of conspiracy theories. This non-understandable structure represents the complicated and omnipresent order created by the state. The authority of the ruling class is so impenetrable, that there is no possibility of starting a revolutionary movement. The movie ends with a scene of Doc and Shasta driving away. They don't have any destination, but it is not important. What is crucial is from where they drive - it is an act of escape from the American society. This postulated escape is possible only on a small scale, there is no potential for a large movement. The final escape seems to

23. Zinn, 539.

be judged positively by the director. Doc's face is illuminated by an unexpected ray of light, which falls on his face. Given the spatial order of the scene, the light must be located in front of the car. Thus, it can be stated that they are driving at good direction. The sanctity of light forms a jarring contrast with the infernal character of Daniel Plainview in *There Will Be Blood*. The potential for a small-scale revolt seems to be crucial, especially given the fact that - for the time being - *Inherent Vice* completes Anderson's depictions of America. The affirmation of escapism is a gloomy diagnosis, but still it provides us with some sense of hope.

Summary

America in the 20th century may be defined by the lack of interpersonal relationships. O'Brian writes that "The America where we live (...) is a country of deep loneliness - that same loneliness that permeates all of Anderson's films. (...) All his films ... have found their way to the heart of a peculiarly American disconnectedness"²⁴. Anderson seems to be not so negative and gives some of his characters hope - in spite of this lack of connection, a positive perspective can be found in interpersonal, oftentimes romantic, bonds.

Anderson's world seems to stem naturally from the ideological foundations of this country. From the very beginning it was built on the basis of strong faith in the individual. The history of the 20th century shows the gradual degradation of the ideas which were once praiseworthy. The culturally conveyed remnants of distorted self-reliance are connected to the capitalist system and in consequence are detrimental for the members of the society, who are unable to form bonds with each other. The historical process results in modernity of disconnectedness: in which "millions of people have been looking desperately for solutions to their sense of impotency, their loneliness, their frustration, their estrangement from other people, from the world, from their work, from themselves"²⁵.

24. Toles, *Paul Thomas Anderson*, 2.

25. Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 636.

The vision of the 20th century America presented by Paul Thomas Anderson is coherent and convincing. The director is consistent in focusing on the interpersonal relationships and how they are hindered by the American axiology. His filmography can be treated as a valid and interesting historical narrative, which – even if subjective – sheds new light on the historical facts which are shown from a new angle.

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MATEUSZ MYSZKA graduated from the department of the British Studies at the University of Warsaw and remained an MA student at the department of “Artes Liberales” at the same institution. He is primarily focused on literature and film studies, especially with reference to the philosophical context. He took an active part in a number of conference conferences. He has also authored a published paper on Julian Barnes’ *The Sense of an Ending* (“ Julian Barnes’ The Sense of an Ending in the context Martin Heidegger’s philosophy”).