

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER

HEROES, DEVILS and FALSE PROPHETS:

WHY THE NEW AMERICAN WESTERN DOESN'T BELIEVE ANYMORE

BY COURTNEY E. FELLION

ADVISOR: DR. MELINDA BARLOW

HONORS COMMITTEE MEMBERS: DR. JENNIFER PETERSON
MIA SEMINGSON

BOULDER, COLORADO

SPRING, 2008

Introduction

Between the pages of one of my mother's forgotten scrapbooks, among the yellowed family portraits and faded newspaper clippings, there lies a peculiar photograph without a caption. I stumbled across this photograph one bored summer day, and its mystery instantly captured my imagination. I stole it from the page and taped it to my wall next to photographs of my friends, as though a trophy from my past. This photo contains the face of a man whose name my family doesn't even remember. He has a severe jaw line and dark hair, and is simply clad in what appears to be Mexican gaucho ensemble, with a wide-brimmed cowboy hat. He is the spitting image



Fig. 1 The Unknown Cowboy

of Gregory Peck's villainous cowboy in *Duel in the Sun* (1946). Today I still don't know who the man in the photograph is, or how his image came to live among my family's collections of portraits, but I carry it with me, like a badge of the Old American West that somehow unlocks a mysterious part of myself. Although my college education has deconstructed the image of the cowboy as part of a greater national myth that exploited Western binaries in an attempt to condense history into a linear vision of progress and manifest destiny, I still believe there is a hidden message behind the grimacing man in this photograph. This message is not in the man and in his untold deeds, nor in my personal blood ties to him. As we come to view our world through a new postmodern lens, the message of this photograph is in the medium.

Thus, the provocative ideology within the Western image of film, literature or photography is actually discovered through realization of its own vehicle. In other words, the

recognition that a film is not just a 2-D picture but instead a cultural cognition is a postmodern concept that actually includes the viewer with the narrative onscreen. Our socially constructed narrative expectations and cultural ideologies contribute to shaping the way films are made, perceived, and later re-interpreted by future generations. Within this new depth of analysis, we may explore historical recreation film genres, such as Westerns and period films, not as shadows of a consistent and immutable past but rather as both agents and reflections of our greater social perceptions. We thus see that all films are ideologically driven, being influenced by the period in which they are created, and thereby projecting this ideology onto the past. We begin by recognizing the need and cultural function of ideology, as Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan's book *Camera Politica* describes:

The very necessity of ideology testifies to something amiss within society, since a society that was not threatened would not need ideological defenses. By attempting to pacify, channel, and neutralize the forces that would invert the social system of inequality were they not controlled, ideology testifies to the power of those forces, of the very thing it seeks to deny. By reacting against the structural tensions and potentially disruptive forces of an inegalitarian society, film ideology must also put them on display – just as excessively washed hands testify to offstage guilt.¹

Social critic Susan Jeffords in her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994) utilized this form of political analysis to look at masculine ideologies in films of the Reagan era. Drawing on popular culture as it intersects with political agenda, Jeffords concludes through her analysis of films from 1980 to 1988 that, “[Reagan’s] administration and [the films of his era] will propose yet another phase in the extended narrative of ‘American identity.’”² In this same vein of analysis we can critically evaluate the changing ideologies of what I will

¹ Philip John Davies and Paul Wells, eds., *American Film and Politics from Reagan to Bush Jr.* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 29-30.

² Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994) 23.

describe in the following pages as “Postmodern Westerns,” through two exemplary Western films from 2007: Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* and Andrew Dominik’s *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*.

A Brief History of Westerns

National heritage, as a discourse of personal and collective consciousness, is intrinsically linked to memory. As a uniquely engaging medium of experience, film is well suited to the task of memory recollection. Historical reenactment films are useful for presenting the greater narratives of our past in vivid, colorful detail. At the same time, American history has negotiated and even justified its own bloody lineage through the vehicle of good and evil narratives. A legacy built upon calculated Othering of ethnic peoples, indigenous cultures, and anything outside of Anglo-Saxon standards, American Western history in specific is situated within two narrow categories in an attempt to mask its violent past. “Othering,” in the discourse of Ethnic Studies, has been defined as a politically strategic process that allows a group of people to justify their dominance over another group through categorizing human traits as superior and inferior. Oftentimes this term relates to ethnicity, but it can encompass many angles of human characteristics, from gender to sexuality to religion. The danger of Othering is that it oversimplifies human characteristics into two binaries: black/white, good/bad, man/woman, etc. Binaries are therefore convenient for producing appealingly universal narratives in the literature sense of protagonist/antagonist and Homeric heroes and villains. Through a nostalgic lens that praised these simple binary terms emerged what has become a canon of American film narratives: the Western.

In the past, Westerns have produced a reductive chronology that condenses American myth and history. In turn, these narratives perpetuate the binary code by which Anglo-Saxon narratives derive their meaning: the simple meta-narrative of good versus evil. Within this text,

certain vicissitudes emerge that undermine the uniformity of its device its reductive interpretation of history. For example, not every cowboy was white or male, yet these are the descriptions most commonly cast in films. Nevertheless, these Westerns continued to be the authority on Western history and myth for many, if not most, Americans in what Michael Coyne describes as the “golden age of Hollywood Westerns,” from 1939’s *Stagecoach* (John Ford) to *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah) in 1969.³ Coyne, similar to Jeffords’ analytic approach, notes the adaptability of the Western genre to “effortlessly absorb [the Vietnam War], reworking aspects of the conflict on the cinematic front.”⁴ The ability of Western narrative to “adapt” to the greater themes American warfare in Vietnam provided a convenient pro-war media for public consumption. In addition, the later half of the Sixties brought a wave of Revisionism from outsider perspectives, as the Italians lent their own creative whim to the aging genre to produce Spaghetti Westerns. Sergio Leone’s epic works, including *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) and *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966) are among the most notable in the revisionist genre, which decidedly revitalized Westerns as the definitive narrative in the making of a nation. Westerns eventually faded with failing American optimism in the aftermath of Vietnam, as well as the rising challenge of a new technocratic age that favored science fiction over the antiquated genres of the past.⁵ Yet the permanence of the myth was retained, and although its pronounced popularity is disguised in the lagging number of Westerns produced in our contemporary age, Western ideologies spring up in our language and national iconography, from political speeches to the conventions of landscape photography. In fact, the genre persists today with surprising global dimensions, such as the emerging genre of Weird Westerns including the Japanese cult

³ Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in Hollywood Western* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997) 5.

⁴ Coyne, 5.

⁵ Coyne, 189-190.

television show, “Cowboy Bebop” (Hajime Yatate, 1998). As Jenni Calder notes in *There Must Be A Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and in Reality*,

It is not necessary to belong to the West to enjoy this submission to the Western heritage. It is not even necessary to be American; millions of non-Americans respond to the re-enactment of the individual facing a gigantic challenge. The sheer scope of challenge in the Western is probably unique. That and the solitariness of the hero make the confrontation both elemental and magnificent. They are two of the essential qualities of classic myth and in one form or another audiences have been responding to them for centuries. If the Western long ago evolved a formula that seemed to make the constant re-expression of these qualities redundant it is still this that provides the clue to the great Western.⁶

In the year 2007, the Western genre returned to the mainstream of popular culture.

Within the genre itself, Postmodern Westerns have many similar motifs to the parent genre. Yet the “constant re-expression” of its genre’s devices reveal the ideological traps that it produced, and the critique of Westerns present in this new genre has provided a flourishing discourse on economics, politics, and social constructions that inform why we watch Westerns, and what is behind the man in the picture. It is these issues that I intend to explore in my analysis of *There Will Be Blood* and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. Utilizing the models proposed by postmodern authors including Jacques Derrida and Christopher Sharrett, and incorporating the political analysis of Susan Jeffords and Richard Dyer, I will provide insights on stylistic devices and narrative elements that mark these Westerns as unique.

⁶ Jenni Calder, *There Must be A Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and in Reality* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1974) 216.

Chapter 1

Father-Son Meta-Narratives

In this last decade, American cinema has traditionally presented a paradigm of familial structure and values through a nostalgic lens of American history. Susan Jeffords comments on this type of folk legend in her examination of the *Back to the Future* trilogy as representative of “a father/son dynamic that confirms masculinity as the relevant framework for subjective and social relations within U.S. culture.”⁷ Adoptive son narratives similarly attempt to confirm this masculine mythology, as films such as *About a Boy* (2002), *The Kid* (2000), and most recently *Martian Child* (2007) depict the motif of “adopted sons” as providing a necessary cathartic healing for their central white masculine figures. Furthermore, the theme of “sons-healing-fathers” becomes emblematic of a national narrative with the recent comic book film revival of *Spiderman* (2002), *Superman Returns* (2006), and *Batman Begins* (2005) that revisit our heroes as children and gives explanation to their cause as heroes. In each of the scenarios, the superhero avenges his/her slain father and/or parent figures. National regeneration or salvation depends on the reuniting of a father and a son, if only symbolically through the righteous actions of the son in tribute to the deceased paternal figure. What we see in the above group of films is the American family in crisis, its fractured nature, or rather, the splintering of traditional nuclear families that occurs with the rise of new American values and economic insecurity. This symbolic reparation of relationships through the father-adopted-son paradigm attempts to reclaim Old World values, and therefore repair the national myth of social security. This mythology is necessary to the function of everyday life in the social realm—people need to believe that they are safe and removed from the tensions of war that trickle into their minds from media depictions. “Social security,” in this context, refers to the idea that America is a strong,

⁷ Jeffords, 79.

masculine-led and defended country, and it is precisely this structure that actually allows the social freedoms of the everyday life.

This mythology of masculinity is performed and deconstructed within *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007) through the relationship of Daniel Plainview and his adoptive son, H.W. The utter neglect of fatherly ritual that occurs in the final scene reminds the viewers of the fallen role of the father in contemporary American society. While Daniel's motives in the narrative appear to centralize on his oil exploits, the secondary yet equally important factor in Daniel's actions is the well-being of his son. Therefore, by the final scene in which Daniel growlingly sneers at H.W.'s decision to start his own oil company in Mexico, Daniel believes that his son threatens his other life devotion: oil. Daniel's most valuable possessions, (his oil business and his son,) are then in direct conflict with one another and Daniel hisses at H.W., "This makes you my competitor." This narrative logic proposes the impossibility of repairing the father-son dynamic in a capitalist regime, and consequently offers a critique of the inability of white masculine identity to assert itself in postmodern, post-911 society. In a society driven by media-induced fear and consumerism, money contains higher value than family.

Daniel's neglect of his son is manifested on screen through physical interactions with the boy. The horrifying disintegration of physical contact that he displays with H.W. signals his detachment. The first scenes of the father-son interaction portray Daniel's curious yet affectionate interest in the baby through a scene in the train where he contemplates the newborn in his arms.⁸ Sunshine floods through the window, basking the two in a warm glow symbolic of fatherly protection and love. Notably, this sequence recalls nostalgia for the father, as in previously depicted in film narratives such as the *Star Wars* legacy, which centralizes around the

⁸ See Fig. 1.1, Appendix A

return and redemption of the father figure. In fact, the scene was filmed on a vintage 1910 Pathé camera with a specially modified low-resolution 43mm lens⁹. The effect created is that of hazy dreamlike stupor, both picturesque and surreal, that calls attention to its own device and almost never again repeated in the film. The sentimental nature of the scene is slowly undermined by Daniel's voice-over that begins, "Ladies and gentlemen..." This dialogue crosses into the next scene where we see Daniel manipulating his image as a self-described "family man" and convincing a small town to allow him to drill for oil on their lands. Immediately we note the insincerity of his formal tone, and when he introduces H.W. as his "son and partner," the act is revealed. Furthermore, the nostalgic father-son scene described above is ironically contrasted later when, following H.W.'s accident and subsequent deafening, Daniel abandons the boy to the same mechanism that once held him lovingly: the train. As a symbol of industry, the depiction of trains in Westerns usually refers to the impending presence of industrial modernity, another process of momentum in the nation-building legend.¹⁰ In context of *There Will Be Blood*, the train symbolizes the exterior modern world that will eventually come between H.W. and Daniel in their dueling interests to mine for oil.

By the end of the film the only remains of Daniel's social construction of his family are old photographs, as the audience glimpses a picture of his mother and deceased brother between the pages of his journal.¹¹ This is notable because as a unique branch of domestic photography, family photographs construct a specific cultural ritual. Artifacts of both personal and collective consciousness, they reveal and actively create social spaces. They are simultaneously pieces of remembrance and active agents in the construction of home localities. When considering these

⁹ According to *imdb.com*.

¹⁰ Philip French, *Westerns* (New York: Viking Press, 1973).

¹¹ See Figs. 1.2, 1.3, Appendix A

photographs, the emphasis on materiality and mediality¹² marks them as signifiers and not stories. Roland Barthes tells us that a photograph always refers to something, the “Look” part of engaging, and therefore the actual object becomes invisible.¹³ When you look at a photograph you do not see it, but rather what it refers to. In this sense, Daniel doesn’t require H.W.’s physical presence in his life because he already has photographs as imaginary signifiers of his family. Even when the imposter brother Henry arrives from Santa Fe, Daniel asks him for “identification,” because for Daniel images and documents are more important than living people. From his first departure to deaf school, Daniel has replaced the need for H.W.’s physical presence with photographs and mementos, and this perspective is revealed when he sneers at his son in the final scenes, “You’re killing my image of you as my son.” Daniel’s need for family is fulfilled by images. In reality however, H.W.’s living presence is no longer the little boy in Daniel’s portrait, and the denial of Daniel to reconcile these two boys is his inability to value human life.

Psychologically, Daniel’s unwillingness to engage in father-son rituals depicts this character interaction as a form of what Jean Paul Sartre would call “bad faith.” Sartre often simplified this term as “lying to oneself,” where the lie that we construct is an attempt to escape the “anguish” of human existence by making ourselves into unfeeling objects.¹⁴ In turn, this phrase also means to deny the plural nature of human consciousness and instead assume a singular tract of action. The character of Daniel Plainsview, in other words, is described in the singular motif of money-lust: “I have a competition in me. I want no one else to succeed. I hate most people,” he confesses to Henry. “There are times when I look at people and I see nothing

¹² Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995) and Marianne Hirsch, “Family Frames,” *Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1980) 5.

¹⁴ Ronald E. Santoni, *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre’s Early Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) 4-5.

worth liking.” The outright denial of the complexity of humanity in this statement makes it akin to pure hyperbole that defines his character instantly in terms of Western religious binaries: Daniel is a figure of pure evil. Repressing the ability to feel compassion, Daniel’s character is confined to a singular definition. This is an interesting paradox in terms of traditional Western constructions of masculinity, and a situation that is better suited to Horror films.¹⁵ In films from that genre, audience point of view is aligned with that of the villain, and the perspective of evil is privileged over good. While the narrative winds through a languorous three hours of screen time, elements of Daniel’s behavior make little attempt to gain sympathy for the director’s creation. Daniel continually negotiates the lives of his oil rig workers through his business demeanor when he addresses their accidental deaths. When the drill bit plummets into the mine shaft and crushes a worker, (which is also metaphorically a phallic death and therefore further de-masculinizes the men,) Daniel tries to bury the bodies by cover of night and keep this event from the local townspeople so that his image is not tarnished. He continues his rampage of unfeeling murders, starting with the workers, following with his fake brother and ultimately his double Eli.

Western genre films possess the unique ability to depict social hierarchy drama through a simple meta-narrative of good versus evil. By deconstructing the perceived structure of the Western, Anderson’s film presents no clearly defined set of binaries via the hero-villain archetypes. In fact, the Horror-like quality of the film is in the realization that none of the characters are immune to “evil” attributes. Perhaps the most innocent of the film are the silent: the women and children. As theorized by Philip French in *Westerns* (1973), a typical Western hero is easily recognized and interpreted by screen audiences through visual iconography:

In that set of archetypes and expectations I have called the model western, the hero is the embodiment of good. He is upright, clean-living, sharp-shooting, a

¹⁵ Bruce Kawin, “The Mummy’s Pool,” *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*. Barry Keith Grant, ed. (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984).

White Anglo-Saxon Protestant who respects the law, the flag, women and children; he dresses smartly in white clothes and rides a white horse that is his closest companion; he uses bullets and words with equal care, is a disinterested upholder of justice and uninterested in personal gain.¹⁶

Meanwhile, *There Will Be Blood*'s proposed "hero" character is closer aligned to French's definition of the villain:

The villain, on the other hand, is the embodiment of evil; he dresses in black, rides a dark horse and is doomed to die. He is often a smooth talker and has lecherous designs on women; he is only concerned with advancing his own cause but beyond that has a positive commitment to destruction.¹⁷

Given these definitions, Daniel might be categorized as the anti-hero of Western binaries: a figure who embodies the conflict with heroic, white, masculine identity. Daniel's double via this construction is the faith-healer Eli Sunday, a character possessing similarly selfish aims and manipulative traits.

The parallel between Eli and Daniel is first constructed in the scene depicting Daniel's first oil rig endeavor, where the process of oil mining is portrayed in allusion to Judeo-Christian religious iconography: the architectural sketch of the rig in similar shape of a cross, how Daniel's raised hand after touching his oil-covered drill bit resembles a preacher's "Hallelujah" gesture, and the way that H.W.'s real father smears some oil on the forehead of his baby as though ash during Ash Wednesday.¹⁸ Just as Eli might be construed as a false prophet, exploiting his masculine white power as the head of the Church of the Third Revelation to gain money and respect, Daniel is also guilty of misleading the townspeople in his quest for oil. Their similarity complicates the binary structure of good and evil categories because each character reflects the evil of the other, and the audience is left to ponder which character is relatively more "good" than the other.

¹⁶ French, 30.

¹⁷ French, 30.

¹⁸ See Figs. 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, Appendix A

The ultimate motif of the Western, as Richard Dyer notes in *White*, is “imagining that moment on the brink of making a society.”¹⁹ Therefore, the “tarnished” white must be sacrificed in the name of progress, and furthermore, in the name of whiteness. The railroad executives in conflict with Daniel represent the progressive vision of expansion (the railroad) and modern law, whereas Daniel typifies a useless archetype that must be discarded in order to move forward. However, in this Postmodern Western world, this is not the case. Good does not triumph and evil is not eradicated for the progress of society. Perhaps the only cathartic release of this anxiety of evil that permeates the narrative is the murder of Eli Sunday at the finale. In fact, given Dyer’s formula, we not only sympathize with this brutal slaying, but also are supposed to believe that it is necessary for a functioning society. Daniel’s own redemption is found in the ritualistic murder of a character who is in every sense his equal, and through this device, the film subverts the construction of the Western ending to reveal its fallacy. White does not prevail over the Other, man doesn’t prevail over weaker man, good does not triumph over evil: these are mythologies that America once believed but now refuses to “drink [it] up,” as Daniel hisses in the final scene.

Postmodern values are now constructed in negatives, and postmodernism in general aims to deconstruct the past. The traditional paradigms of Westerns are deconstructed in this sense by Anderson’s film through the relationship between Eli and Daniel, emphasizing the patricentric structures of power in religion. As John O’Neill noted, “The postmodern condition, as I shall take it, is one marked by a certain disinheritance, the collapse of patriarchy as an effect of a series of defeminizing strategies which simultaneously expand statism, consumerism, globalism and, of course, postmodernism itself.”²⁰ O’Neill then goes on to describe the event of a woman capitalizing the idea of womanhood in the face of men, and says, “These events cannot, of

¹⁹ Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 33.

²⁰ John O’Neill, “Law and gynesis: Freud v. Schreber,” *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, eds. (New York: Routledge Press, 1992) 238.

course, leave the Judeo-Christian narrative untouched. However, rather than assume that everything goes dead with ‘the death of God’, I think it is more likely that we are experiencing a re-figuration of the ‘Holy Family’ in which the paternal, maternal and filial positions are being redefined. In this process, the new children will adopt both patriarchal and metrical arguments, celebrating their own parthenogenesis.”²¹ In this case, the “death of God,” symbolically enacted through the murder of the pastor, is necessary to the postmodern condition. Because Eli and Daniel are doubles for one another and therefore equally false prophets, Daniel doesn’t feel the remorse of acting godlessly because, as he makes Eli admit, “God is an illusion.” The need for “re-figuration” in the case of Eli’s church is the removal of the patriarchal and hypocritical leadership. Postmodernism allows for the rights of the individual to be expressed over the pre-supposed “natural order” of society, and the audience is almost relieved at the death of the false prophet. Thus, audiences may sympathize with someone as villainous as Daniel because his murder actually reveals the flawed model of masculinity within Westerns. Eli’s murder is cathartic for Daniel because it symbolizes his own disdain with the masculine role that Daniel himself embodies.

Film Style of the Postmodern Western: Neo-dystopian Imagery

Dyer further supports his examination of the American Western as a paradigmatic narrative of whiteness through the vehicle of film setting, noting the white historical mastery of space and time and the Western’s ability to depict landscape in a similarly conquered fashion.²² What is interesting about *There Will Be Blood*’s so-called conquered landscapes is the message of inverted power relationships between man and nature operating within them. Western films often illustrate the concept of space and filmic landscape as indicating power of man over nature.

²¹ O’Neill, 238.

²² Dyer, 34.

Oftentimes, outside natural landscapes are shot through the frames of doors and windows and thus ultimately symbolize the actions of manifest destiny and western sprawl. In the spectrum of Western imagery, Anderson's framework recalls John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) in its use of door and window frames devices of filmic self-reflexivity. Frequently called a trademark of Ford's Western style, the mise-en-scène of *The Searchers* utilizes doorway arches, window frames, and hallways in creating a frame within the frame of the film. In one scene, for example, John Wayne's iconic cowboy image is silhouetted by an embellished door frame as he walks away from the family cabin and into the amber sands of Monument Valley. This device is conscious of its own idealized imagery by making the frame visible within the scene. Anderson also employs this device in his cinematography for a cinematically adept audience. Daniel and Eli often confront one another in the immense doorframe of Eli's church.²³ It provides a means to visually mirror both character, as each stands opposite in the frame, and therefore furthers the concept of them as doubles of one another. This film calls attention to the historical depiction of the landscape, and in doing so, subverts the traditional ways of representing landscapes, thereby creating Anderson's dystopian vision of the West.

In this retro-dystopian construction, Anderson creates film scenery devoid of warmth other than that provided in the yellow-hued filters artificially imbuing the grassy plains with light during surveying scenes. While not the typical dystopian scenario, the blood and oil-soaked miners coupled with the motif of underground worlds converts landscapes into symbolic realms of human horror. The imagery doesn't feature traditional Western landscapes alone, but also depicts an apocalyptic world of hellish purgatory. The characters are constantly lit in the flames of fires: through the eerie illumination of moonlit silhouettes of oil-steaked miners' bodies and

²³ See Figs. 2.1, 2.2, Appendix B

Daniel's own devilish demeanor flickering in fire as he laughingly remarks on the inflamed oil rig. As Christopher Sharrett notes in *The End of Cinema as We Know It* (2001),

Apocalypticism's basic thematic was furthered by the rise of religious fundamentalism since the rightist backlash of the Reagan era. The apocalyptic became associated with the rise of male hysteria reacting against gender equality, gay liberation, and the supplanting of male authority by various phenomena, including the cybernetic revolution.²⁴

The crisis of masculinity manifested in and through apocalyptic motifs is present in this way in *There Will Be Blood*. The theme of godlessness is mirrored in the godless landscapes on screen. As the narrative evolves, the characters move further from the sunlight fields of traditional Western film landscapes and Daniel is literally submerged underground in his mansion. To make a religious parallel, he falls deeper and deeper into his own hell. His mansion is a cavernous construction of tunnels with minimal natural light, and his final conversation with H.W. is sinisterly lit as though he were on his death bed. A final irony of the so-called conquer of Western landscape is evidenced in the final scene which takes place in Daniel's basement, and notably an icon of modernization and family values: the bowling alley. In this way, *There Will Be Blood* suggests that the progressive vision of modernity, with its expanding cities and industrial amenities, is actually a one-way ticket to hell.

The mythic depiction of an underground hell has lent itself to several film landscapes, including John Huston's Western masterpiece, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948). Anderson mentions that this film has a large influence on the style and themes of *There Will Be Blood*, and even claimed to have watched the film every night during production.²⁵ In this early frontier film, Humphrey Bogart plays the American beggar, Fred C. Dobbs, whose only aims in life are to gain money and fortune. His luck changes when a little Mexican boy helps him win

²⁴ Christopher Sharrett, "End of Story: The Collapse of Myth in Postmodern Narrative Film," *The End of Cinema As We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*. Jon Lewis, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 320.

²⁵ *Imdb.com*

money in a simple bet, and Dobbs is presented with the opportunity to use his new fortune to mine for gold in the Sierra Madre mountains with the help of old-timer miner Howard and the honest Bob Curtin. Dobbs meets Curtin and Howard in Tampico, when the three men are recruited by a swindling businessman as poorly paid laborers. Although the three men are united in their quest for money and success in the gold mines, their submergence into the underground mines serves as a parallel for the fall into sinful greed. Evil is thus depicted as the seeds of temptation and moneylust that lure the men into the mines. This theme is evident in the film's tagline, "They sold their souls for... the Treasure of the Sierra Madre." The men must indeed sell their souls in order to go below the earth to find their fortunes. In the same way that Anderson's film employs Daniel Plainview's mining as an evil pursuit of capitalism, Huston's film also reflects the desire for gold as a destructive trait in his film's characters.

Huston's film constructs a hierarchy of white males in relation to indigenous people of Mexico that follows the traditional whiteness hierarchy that Richard Dyer proposes in *White*. Essentially, per Hollywood standards, the good archetype in Westerns represents the purest form of whiteness, and the evil represents the tarnished, ethnic Other. In Richard Abel's essay, "Our Country/Whose Country? The 'Americanisation' Project of Early Westerns" (1995), Abel examines how Western narrative formulas were aligned with "the prevailing discourse of 'Americanisation.'"²⁶ In historical antiquity, the Western arose as a major genre of American film and literature in conjunction with the release of famous texts that distinguish the project of Americanisation as specific to Anglo-Saxon raced history, including Josiah Strong's *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885), John Fiske's "Manifest Destiny"

²⁶ Richard Abel, "Our Country/Whose Country? The 'Americanisation' Project of Early Westerns" *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western* (London: British Film Institute, 1998) 81.

(1885), and Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* (1889).²⁷ Abel notes how these foundational texts from renowned politicians and economists attempted to persuade American readers of the primacy and need for Anglo-Saxon dominance in the settlement of the West. It is precisely this kind of idea that contributes to the negative attitude of early frontier settlers against the indigenous peoples who threatened their plans. It is an attitude that is voiced in the film when Dobbs remarks to Curtin one day, "You know, if I was a native, I'd get me a can of shoe polish and I'd be in business. They'd never let a gringo. You can sit on a bench 'til you're three-quarters starved... you can beg from another gringo... you can even commit burglary. You try shinin' shoes in the street, peddlin' lemonade out of a bucket, and your hash is settled. You'll never get another job from an American." The opinion that Mexican American workers were "stealing" jobs from the white workers was a common fear that is driven by underlying ideologies of manifest destiny and Anglo-Saxon superiority around which Westerns such as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* are constructed. Additionally, as the characters evolve into their roles representative of good and evil, (Curtin and Dobbs respectively,) careful lighting and costume help designate these oppositions as signifiers of white versus ethnic racial categories.

Anderson's film stylistically recalls Huston's in its approach to dramatic lighting from fires. In both films, this device is employed to demonize a character through flickering high contrast light that emphasizes the whites of the eyes against the darkened shadows of the face.²⁸ However, while lighting design in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* helps define each character as good or evil, the lighting design of *There Will Be Blood* does not attempt to distinguish between characters. Similarly, it is notable that Daniel's entire world is void of actual ethnic Others, and that all of the characters of the film are Anglo-Saxon. Historically, southern California would

²⁷ Abel, 81.

²⁸ See Figs. 3.1, 3.2, Appendix C

never have such a selective ethnic group, and such an artistic decision allows the audience to place the whiteness of characters in relation to one another and makes “whiteness” itself an ambivalent and relative category. While Dobbs is marked in his greed and dirty makeup as the ethnic Other and made visually akin to the Mexican workers, Daniel Plainview must be measured without the aid of ethnic binaries, because in postmodern terms those binaries are prefabricated and false. Daniel must be measured against equally white males, such as Eli, and the distinction between good and evil is no longer as singular as the binary opposition between white and ethnic Other.

A second category of gender emerges when examining the binary roles within Westerns. Nature has often been historically portrayed as feminine in landscape paintings,²⁹ from its Hellenic Greek origins as “mother-like” and termed, “Mother Nature.” Throughout the nineteenth century, the elegiac works of Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, and Albert Bierstadt depicted this relationship between man and the land and regarded nature as heavenly benevolent and saving.³⁰ This relationship is paralleled in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, when Howard says, “We’ve wounded this mountain. It’s our duty to close her wounds. It’s the least we can do to show our gratitude for all the wealth she’s given us. If you guys don’t want to help me, I’ll do it alone,” to which Bob Curtin replies, “You talk about that mountain like it was a real woman.” In these lines, Howard has identified woman as the bestowing power of wealth, and the gold is therefore like mother’s milk, a gift of sustenance. To transgress against nature is to violate women, and this act almost always assures a swift death in terms of traditional Western narrative. Dobbs’s character is marked in terms of this disrespect because he views the gold of

²⁹ Steven Adams and Anna Gruetzner Robins, eds., *Gendering Landscape Art*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

³⁰ Martin Friedman, “As Far as the Eye Can See,” *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century*. Mildred Friedman, ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994) 11.

the mountain as possessing the ability to bring him women, saying, “This is the country where the nuggets of gold are just crying out for you to take them out of the ground and make 'em shine in coins on the fingers and necks of swell dames.” Dobbs transgresses nature and the feminine by this assumption that wealth will bring women. While the other members of the group acknowledge woman (the mountain) as the source of wealth, Dobbs sees them as something he can buy. This theme is thrice referenced at the end of the film when Curtin agrees to bring money and comfort to the wife of a deceased friend. His respect for women marks him as the righteous Western male, pure in whiteness and deed. In contrast, Dobbs meets an untimely end at the hand of Mexicans who attempt to steal his donkeys.

The character of Daniel Plainview likewise shares this denial of the feminine in his connection to the exterior world: he is motherless, daughterless, and without a wife. His only son was born to him without the assistance of a woman (via adoption). His entire world consists of his son, miners, and railroad businessmen, and he is therefore suffocated by the patriarchal hierarchy of a white male society. Instead of even acknowledging the role of women in this film, Anderson’s narrative renders them almost invisible, except in crudest symbolic form. Daniel’s oil rig is a symbolic phallus that “rapes” the earth of its oil. The one female character to receive attention on screen is the little girl that H.W. will eventually marry. But instead of representing her character as a three-dimensional person within the narrative, she is relegated to the role of the sacred feminine whom Daniel must protect and H.W. desires. While the audience learns that Daniel protects the girl from the beatings of her father through his own intimidation tactics, he simultaneously exploits her feminine “good” by using her as a tool in his propagation of the oil rig as a beneficial new part of the community at the opening day ceremony. He grabs the girl’s hand and has her stand next to him on the platform as he delivers his speech because as a skilled salesman he knows he can use the girl to exploit the town’s hope of innocence and the promise

of the future. This scene resonates within the greater political propaganda of the Western genre that was traditionally disguised by its greater claims of virtue: the making of society according to white Anglo-Saxon ideals. To return once again to Dyer's description of the ultimate motif of the Western, the sacrifice of "tarnished" white men in the name of white society's progress produces the narrative. In *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Dobbs is sacrificed so that the wealth can be restored to the good whites so that they can continue to uphold the themes of family and virtue; in *There Will Be Blood* Daniel Plainview actually survives by exploiting these themes and virtues. This indicates a paradigmatic shift in American ideology away from its early Western infused ideologies, and instead implies a knowing subversion of the conditions that helped secure these as dominant ideologies.

It is therefore no coincidence that the opening shots of *There Will Be Blood* take place in 1897. The year 1895 is marked in film history as the beginning of popular film exhibitions with the Lumière brothers' screenings in 1895.³¹ The close proximity of these two dates seems intentional, as though reflecting again upon the nature of its vehicle (i.e. film spectatorship) as part of the greater ideological mechanism at work within the process of Americanisation, to borrow Abel's term. In fact, the Western as a unique and definitive narrative of early American film, is intrinsically linked to the transition of cinema as pure spectacle into a politically-hued medium.

"First of all, early Westerns played a significant role in securing the new industry's transition from a 'cinema of attractions' to a cinema dominated by fictional films. They offered, I would argue, an exemplary model of negotiation between what Tom Gunning has called 'the desire to tell the story' and 'the desire to display', between narrative engagement and spectacle attraction. That is, Westerns told a certain kind of story within the context of displaying particular, picturesque American landscapes."³²

³¹ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2003) 18-19.

³² Abel, 78.

This new kind of narrative marks the transition from image to icon, from mirror representation to ideologically embedded reflections, and it is this very transition which the Postmodern Western genre and films such as *There Will Be Blood* utilize in order to subvert the political mechanics that are traditionally rooted within the Western genre.

Chapter 2

In the 1990's, American film critics remarked upon what appeared to be an emerging wave of "new Western history" depicted in popular films such as Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992). The central conflicts of these "new Westerns" focused on dispelling the myth of vast, open spaces that were free for the taking as well as reminding audiences of the many multicultural histories of the indigenous peoples who populated these early lands. More socially and politically conscious of its foundations, this 90's revivalism "essentially popularized history of the American west" in its treatment of the Indian image as well as respect for the history itself.³³ A decade after *Dances with Wolves* won Best Picture at the 1991 Academy Awards, Costner returned with another Western nostalgia film, *Open Spaces* (2003), which "makes no apologies for the genre or for releasing an unrepentant Western at a time when two rising generations of Americans are deep into very un-Western genre mindsets."³⁴ This dramatic change in audience reception indicates an important ideological shift within younger generations of American society who, as Joseph Natoli notes, find no personal significance in the values of the Old West or its heroes.³⁵ The postmodern generation didn't grow up with the same mythology of nation-building and masculine order as their grandparents, but instead witnessed a nation in violent conflict with the world at large and also committing volatile violence within. Anyone who lives in the aftermath of the Iraq War, 9/11, the Columbine shootings, or any other national emergency that has occurred in the last ten years may not be likely to believe in the power of one man to protect his or her small town from harm. In the midst of growing public anxieties, Andrew Dominik's *The*

³³ Rick Worland and Edward Countryman, "The New Western American Historiography and the Emergence of the New American Westerns," *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western* (London: British Film Institute, 1998) 187.

³⁴ Joseph Natoli, *This is a Picture and Not the World: Movies and a Post-9/11 America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007) 93.

³⁵ Natoli, 93.

Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford (2007) ruminates on the disintegration of Western hero archetypes in context of the genre and history that created them.

Just as films from the 1980's contained meta-myth narratives that centralized around the relationship between fathers and sons,³⁶ *The Assassination of Jesse James* examines familial ties as similar to folk constructions. There is a repetitive motif of brotherhood that is depicted in two pairs: the James brothers, Jesse and Frank, and the Ford brothers, Bob and Charlie. Through these two relationships, the previously assumed centrality of family that is essential to the narratives of 1980's American films is destroyed. In this narrative, both pairs of brothers grow distant from one another and undermine the supposedly intrinsic bond of family lineage. A scene that almost foreshadows this separation between brothers appears early in the film, after the James brothers and their clan of local ruffians have a rather unsuccessful train robbery. As the rest of the gang is cautiously hiding in abandoned farm buildings, Jesse finds his older brother in the solitude of an empty barn. The framing for this scene is also reminiscent of the iconic John Ford door frames as similarly evoked in *There Will Be Blood*. In this film, however, Jesse approaches from the outside door but never crosses into the barn, and in turn, his image is "framed" in this sense as the exterior frame. In contrast, Frank's slouching figure is "framed" on the opposite side of the film scene by two wooden pillars within the barn. In this way, the audience can examine both men in frames that are isolated from one another. It is notable that Jesse never crosses into the boundary and out of his outside frame, as though their two spaces do not coexist.³⁷ Instead of emphasizing the intimate and transcendental bond of the family, this scene instead depicts an innate separateness of brothers.

³⁶ Jeffords, 1994.

³⁷ See Figure 2.3, Appendix B

In the other brotherly duo, the Ford brothers, this same undermining of family sameness occurs in the final scenes of the film as Robert and Charlie perceive the murder of Jesse differently. Although the killing is perpetrated together as each brother aims his gun at Jesse's back, and although both are historically recalled as the "murderers of Jesse James," the way in which this event manifests itself upon Bob's and Charlie's consciousness varies in each brother, and thus ultimately destroys any notion of sameness between them. For example, the clarity of the crime they had committed was only apparent to Charlie after the murder as Zee James, Jesse's widow, shrieks at them, "What have you done, Bob? Was this you?" Charlie never denies the crime but runs in panic from the living room, while Bob mutters in a semi-conscious state, "I swear it wasn't..." Yet, the first place they run after the murder is the post office where Bob will proudly scribble a note to the authorities: "I have killed Jesse James," and signs it, Bob Ford. While Charlie's guilt and recognition of the crime is immediate and instantly regretted, Bob is convoluted in his recognition and wavers between proud and confused. Unlike a film of the 1980's where the mutual enemy is destroyed via the coming together of family blood, (like the murder of the evil Emperor by the reunited Darth Vader and his son Luke in the *Star Wars* trilogy,) this family bond is actually destroyed by the exterior world. As Charlie and Bob begin their acting careers by re-enacting the murder of Jesse for the theater, Charlie's disintegration of himself into his character, Jesse James, marks him as more akin to the murderer victim than to his own family. In eerie resemblance of Jesse himself, Charlie's acting becomes closer and closer to the man in real life every performance, until he is finally driven mad and shoots himself. The narrator notes that in the end, "Charlie Ford became all that his countrymen wanted an assassin of Jesse James to be." Like Jesse James, Charlie is not a man of flesh and bone, but a name in a myth. Bob, however, denies his own relationship to Jesse's folk status by remaining in the public sphere, and subsequently attracts a lot of negative attention for this arrogance. The implied

connection between family members is undercut as another type of social construction in this way, because Charlie's character is more intimately connected to Jesse James than his own brother. Part of the hero mythology is built around binaries created through Othering, yet the very process of Othering is subject to some very different rules than previously supposed in Western constructions that emphasize American values of home, family, and the security within.

The manipulation of the hero myth within *The Assassination of Jesse James* reaches its height when Jesse accusingly questions Bob, "Can't figure it out: you want to be like me, or you want to *be* me?" Therein lies the impossible contradiction of the postmodern hero: believing in the myth is nearly impossible at an intimate distance. In order to maintain this relationship of mythic higher authority, Bob's role for a majority of the film is often compared to a biographer, as the narrator notes that Bob often "secretaried [Jesse's] dialogue... as if he wanted to compose a biography of the outlaw." By situating himself in this removed, observational relation to Jesse James, Bob can continue to perceive him as his dime store novels depict him. This relationship maintains Jesse as this stoic figure who cannot be understood as a mortal man. But as the myth begins to fail and Bob's expectations of Jesse's immortal state are not upheld, Bob begins to perceive Jesse in the frame of his legend as well as measure him by the morals of the greater cultural perspective. A great scene that mirrors this change in perspective arrives when Bob gazes at Jesse's pale, scarred body in the bathtub from behind the bathroom door.³⁸ Up until this scene, Bob only watched Jesse from a distance, such as when he watches him and his son through the mottled glass of the kitchen door. And in context of the previous sequence where Bob curiously follows Jesse through town and notes his actions like a field scientist, Bob's peering through the door is therefore as an act of

³⁸ See Figure 4.1, Appendix D

invasion of Jesse's private space. For the first time, the Jesse James folklore begins to fade enough for Bob to place himself above Jesse and act boldly enough to test the borderline between myth and man. Even Bob is surprised at this leveling of power, by declaring, "Why I don't believe I've ever seen you without your guns before." And as Jesse becomes disturbed by Bob's audacity and notes a new lack of reverence in his tone, he asks Bob to leave. However, the very stylization of cinematography that has been so far only applied to Jesse on screen, the fog vignette, is then applied to Bob as he rides home. Therefore, through this association, Bob has now assumed the role of hero as permitted by the repetition of cinematic technique, and the narrative focus has shifted onto him.

The Construction of History and Myth

Films such as this reflect the kind of malleable histories proposed by revisionist and postmodern historical fiction. Michel Foucault discusses the contesting truths of historical versus constructed histories as an important part of standard narrative that comprises social histories:

There's a real fight going on. Over what? Over what we can roughly describe as popular memory. It's an actual fact that people – I'm talking about those who are barred from writing, from producing their books themselves, from drawing up their own historical accounts—that these people nevertheless do have a way of recording history, or remembering it, of keeping it fresh and using it. This popular history was, to a certain extent, even more alive, more clearly formulated in the 19th century, where, for instance, there was a whole tradition of struggles which were transmitted orally, or in writing songs, etc.³⁹

Jesse James, as a product of his time period, is relayed as a working class hero through relics of popular fiction. Popular fiction deifies him while historical knowledge calls him a petty villain.

In the end, popular history wins out in technocratic society where film and television become the

³⁹ Michel Foucault, "Film and Popular Memory," *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961-1984)*. Sylvère Lotringer, ed. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989) 123.

most widely available form of accessing cultural histories: “...I believe this is one way of reprogramming popular memory, which existed but had no way of expressing itself. So people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been.”⁴⁰ Dominik’s film is therefore a more radical representation of social memory because, as Foucault notes, “The historical knowledge the working class has of itself is continually shrinking... but although it gets less, it doesn’t vanish.”⁴¹ When these pieces of evidence of Jesse James as a human pierce through the narrative, Bob’s discovery is the same discovery of the film audience that perceives the projection apparatus: the myth on screen is only as real as flickering lights and shadows.

The Assassination of Jesse James examines the process of myth building with imagery that recalls its folklore roots while simultaneously questioning the authenticity of that imagery. Stylistically, the film exploits its genre’s roots and the imagistic mechanisms upon which Westerns traditionally rely. The entire film is infused with golden-hued fields, foggy vignettes, and nostalgic symbols of the Old West through the masterful cinematography of Roger Deakins. The opening sequence of the film introduces various facts of Jesse James’s legend in a solemn voice-over combined with Jesse’s pensive face that cross dissolves into dreamlike landscape shots.⁴² This transition between shots of Jesse and the land cross dissolve to further mystify the audience of his powerful myth status, as though Jesse were a greater godlike being of equal power to the land itself. This magical exaggeration of Jesse’s character is noted as the narrator describes James’s granulated eyelids that make him blink more frequently and interprets the fact through a nostalgic lens remarking, it was “as if he found creation slightly more than he could accept.” This hyperbole of James as an icon of the West continues as the narrator reflects, “Rooms seemed hotter when he was in them; rain fell stronger; clocks slowed; sounds were

⁴⁰ Foucault, 123.

⁴¹ Foucault, 123.

⁴² See Figs. 4.2, 4.3, Appendix D

amplified.” The natural world becomes supernatural in James’s legacy and these poetic memories are matched with shots of dusky fields and time-lapse skies that flicker upon James’s stern face. James’s legend is then described in a romantic reminiscence of natural landscapes and the untamed frontier.

Jesse James is not unique in this iconography, as many previous Westerns and Western artists have explored the relationship of the transcendental and the landscape⁴³. Understanding the meaning of this nostalgic reenactment is critical for understanding the popularity of the Western because, as Paul Connerton notes “[ritual reenactment] is a quality of cardinal importance in the shaping of communal memory.”⁴⁴ The act of filming a Western is in itself a ritual reenactment that helps shape the communal memory of the American West as history/mythology. In the 1970’s, George E. Fenin and William K. Everson described the impact of Western myth on American life as something that is tangible for modern audiences because,

The frontier is, in fact, the only mythological tissue available to the young nation. Gods and demigods, passions and ideals, the fatality of events, the sadness and glory of death, the struggle of good and evil – all these themes of the Western myth constitute an ideal ground for a liason and re-elaboration of the Olympian world, a refreshing symbiotic relationship of Hellenic thought and Yankee dynamism.⁴⁵

The success of the Western, therefore, is the triumph of dualism and Western thought antiquity; and the reenactment of these themes secures the myth. However, in *The Assassination of Jesse James*, James is forever cast in the lens of this nostalgic re-enactment through stylistic allusion to traditional cinematic depictions of legendary cowboys, and the “mythological tissue” of his world is deconstructed as pure fantasy. Whether ghostly visible behind the rising steam of a slowing locomotive or squinting pensively at the edge of a blazing field, this stylized imagery

⁴³ Barbara Novac, *Nature and culture : American landscape and painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 61.

⁴⁵ Richard M. Maynard, *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality* (Rochelle Park: Hayden Book Co., 1974) 56.

undermines its very reality because postmodern audiences no longer require simple binaries to construct a narrative. Therefore, the Western hero myth is deconstructed into its formulaic representations: masculine figures connote power through symbols such as fog, shadows, and open spaces; while the weaker characters, such as the women and “cowards” are confined to door frames and windows. Thus, the few women in *The Assassination of Jesse James* are often depicted gazing placidly out of windows, such as the young General Hite’s wife who is seduced by Dick Liddel, another member of the original train robbing gang. In addition, most of Bob Ford’s curious watch of Jesse takes place through a screen and via this symbolism he is cast as a “coward” like the title of the film supposes. This heavy-handed symbolic imagery is then immediately read by the audience as the clichéd style of the Western. When the audience becomes aware of these devices, as in the case of *Jesse James*, the mechanism of film style is exposed and thus the art direction reveals this formula as reenacted myth.

In further parallel of this ritual reenactment motif, in the final scenes after Ford shoots James, the film depicts a literal reenactment of the crime itself through Bob Ford playing an actor on stage who is reenacting the fateful day that he shot Jesse James. The narrator decries, “By his own approximation, Bob assassinated Jesse James over 800 times. He suspected no one in history had ever or so often or so publicly recapitulated an act of betrayal.” In this way, the film is alluding to its story’s own constructed mythological roots akin to those of the play: people watch the performance and reconstruct the situations as fact. Those “facts” then become more powerful than other depictions as they are disseminated throughout mainstream culture, and eventually the fabrication becomes truth-like. Therefore, Dominik’s film reflects upon the reenactment ritual of cinematic experience as both critical to the genre of Westerns as well as indicative of a necessary national process, because as John Beardsley remarks in his essay “Gardens of History, Sites of Time:” “Implicit in all these images, whether celebratory or

elegiac, is the sense that how American culture defined itself relative to landscape was of central importance to national identity.”⁴⁶ This self definition process was furthered in conjunction with the development of cinematic history and the subsequent mythology of metaphoric spaces that it presents. It is a process that is constantly referenced throughout the film in the various forms of cultural myth-making that appear: Bob’s “nickel books” that depict the James brothers’ crimes in colorful allegory, the ritual act of photographing the deceased body of Jesse James and the pop culture sensation that those photographs attain as commodities, and finally in the ritual reenactment of the shooting itself. The mythology within *Jesse James* is self-reflexive and aware of its own device: cultural reenactment.

The imagery utilized within expository sequences of Jesse’s early years, (i.e. the scenes that describe Jesse’s family, his blinking disorder, his missing fingertip, etc.) reveal an undercurrent of film reflexivity. In an apparent allusion to the device of the cinema as well as the ideology of Plato’s cave, it is no surprise that Jesse James’s folklore is described in ominous voice-over and matched with images of shifting shadows and light beams on a hardwood floor.⁴⁷ A poetically perfect image for cinema, the passage of time and human perception, the image is repeated throughout the film to remind us of the illusion. This visual cue reminds the audience of the filmic frame in which we view Jesse James as well as all of the characters of Dominik’s film. By his final scene, Jesse James says, “That picture’s awful dusty,” in reference to a photograph on his wall, but the phrase seems to foreshadow his end as a “dusty” myth in which Bob no longer believes. The uncomfortable stage-like deliberation of Jesse to fix this picture is matched with the view of Bob in the reflection of the picture frame, and as though Jesse had already resigned himself to his myth’s demise, he watches unblinkingly as Bob draws his gun. The frame

⁴⁶ John Beardsley, “Gardens of History, Sites of Time,” *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century*. Mildred Friedman, ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994) 43.

⁴⁷ See Fig. 4.4, Appendix D

of Jesse watching Bob is a frame within the frame of the film, and Jesse's ability to see the hidden action of the scene is like the audience's own omnipotent perspective on these characters. The multiple perspectives that are derived in this staging are reflective of the layering of different points of view that create a film narrative. Therefore, Dominik's film is a reflexive condensation of varied collections of memories and different perspectives, in other words, precisely what is required in the translation of fact on to the screen image.

Ironically, modern audiences know that the myth is only half fabricated due to the historical information that shapes the story of real-life Jesse James. As an authentic historical figure, Jesse James is described in two-dimensional representations such as photographs and portraits, as well as through news articles and books. The line between constructed reality versus historically verifiable reality is misconstrued due to the amount of time that has passed and this allows numerous auxiliary facts to be lost and legends to spring up in their place. This creates a conflicting perception, one that must be somehow reconciled with what audiences see on screen. "The gap between an interpretation of reality and reality itself is what [Jacques] Derrida calls in French '*différance*'—a made-up word indicating not only the *différance* between the two, but also a *deferral* of meaning that allows for new meaning to be grafted on the old one."⁴⁸ In terms of Dominik's Western, Derrida's *différance* bestows new dimensions upon the narrative imagery beyond simple formula. In perfect symbiosis, "myth" is equally as valuable as "the real" by these definitions, because each is relationally linked to the other. The character of Jesse James in Dominik's film is therefore not the simple, two-dimensional parody of Western hero but an active agent in history, a la Christian Metz's imaginary signifier, where the object on screen is separate from the object it represents in the real (physical) world. Awareness of this distinction between real and representation is a particularly postmodern discovery, and contrasts severely

⁴⁸ Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 1977) 23.

with they way traditional Western art traditions operate. Martin Friedman analyzes traditional Western landscape depictions as betraying a simplistic ideology that was common in early frontier history, noting, “In traditional Western paintings of the landscape, whether the Italianate prospects of Claude Lorrain, Codot’s soft-edged pastorals, or Monet’s chromatic dissolutions of nature’s façade, the artist-observer who surveyed the terrain through the rectangular picture plane was the invisible, controlling, but distanced presence.”⁴⁹ This traditional view of Western imagery is rooted in binary opposites, as installation artist Lewis deSoto explains that “characteristically, Western conceptual structure is built on a series of discrete polarities: good/evil, heaven/earth, order/chaos, there are thousands. The ‘landscape’ comes out of an inherent belief that the self exists as separate from some *other*.”⁵⁰ Derrida’s *difference* corrects this assumed separation of screen depiction and self by looking at the relation between multiple realities. Another American landscape artist, sculptor Martin Puryear, defines landscape as “a phenomenon that successive historical cultures have chosen to interpret according to their own world views.”⁵¹ Therefore, although the fantastic imagery of *The Assassination of Jesse James* attempts to depict the character as flat, the interplay of social myth and historical reality betray this particular façade.

The depiction of landscape in the film draws comparison to Terrence Malick, a friend and collaborator of Dominik.⁵² Like Malick, who has a “penchant for viewing archetypal or mythic material through the lens of fractured modernist narratives and techniques,”⁵³ Dominik’s narrative is aware of its whimsical landscape devices. In referencing photogenic mythology this way, Dominik’s Western goes beyond traditional Hollywood syntax to remind the audience that

⁴⁹ Friedman, 26.

⁵⁰ Friedman, 17.

⁵¹ Friedman, 22.

⁵² According to an online interview in *Time Out London Online* (www.timeout.com).

⁵³ James Morrison and Thomas Schur, *The Films of Terrence Malick* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003) *xiii*.

films are partially constructed fiction, despite their factual historical roots. “So thoroughly have cinema and other moving-image technologies shaped our experience of the American landscape that the image of the landscape often seems more real than the thing itself,”⁵⁴ according to Lucinda Furlong. She furthers this argument by noting that landscape is shaped by socio-cultural factors as well as “the cultural forms employed to represent it,”⁵⁵ such as the cinema. Indeed, the relationship between film and landscape is highly philosophical:

[Film] landscape has its own geography, one that situates the spectator in a cinematic place where space and time are compressed and expanded and where societal ideals, mores, values, and roles may be sustained or subverted... The cinematic landscape is not, consequently, a neutral place of entertainment or an objective documentation or mirror of the ‘real,’ but an ideologically charged cultural creation whereby meanings of place and society are made, legitimized, contested, and obscured.⁵⁶

The “ideologically charged cultural creation” within Dominik’s narrative is explicitly expressed in the devices of imagery, but also revealed in the film’s structure.

The circular narrative structure utilized in the film’s finale poses a central paradox of binary constructions within this genre. Shifting paradigms of hero versus villain problematize the simplicity of traditional binary opposites utilized in the Western and consequently reveal how those binaries are constructed. The first two hours of the narrative propose Robert Ford, the victimized and innocent character, as the hero archetype. In contrast, Jesse James, simply because of his murderous history and violent personality, may be described as the villain. The Western binary structure is constructed within this duo. However, as Ford completes his hero task by destroying the villain and shooting James the conclusion is not attained with this act (as normal Western narrative dictates). Instead, the film continues for another half hour following

⁵⁴ Lucinda Furlong, “Landscape as Cinema: Projecting America,” *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century*. Mildred Friedman, ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994) 52.

⁵⁵ Furlong, 52.

⁵⁶ Stuart C. Aitkin and Leo E. Zonn, eds., *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1994) 47.

the tribulations of Ford's newfound celebrity status as "The Man Who Shot Jesse James," and Ford's supposed righteous act is undermined. Finally, in self-reference of its structure, yet another assassin character is introduced: "The Man Who Shot the Man Who Shot Jesse James,"⁵⁷ Edward O'Kelly. O'Kelly's surprise appearance in the film complicates the simplicity by which binaries operate in Westerns. His character forces a paradigmatic shift in character roles, becoming the new hero character by killing the "Coward Robert Ford." With the death of the "hero," the Postmodern narrative completes its cycle.

By depicting the events *after* the normal conclusion of a Western, and by repeating its structure to reveal the formula, *The Assassination of Jesse James* provides the missing link between social memory and reconstructed histories that Westerns traditionally disguise. In Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember*, he describes this process:

We identify a particular action by recalling at least two types of context for that action. We situate the agents' behavior with reference to its place in their life history; and we situate that behavior also with reference to its place in the history of social settings to which they belong. The narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity.⁵⁸

Identity, according to Connerton, is necessarily linked to the narratives of others. This is a perfect description of the plot of Dominik's film, where Ford defines his character through the prism of Jesse James. And although James attempts to act as an ambivalent, untouchable folk figure, his fate is necessarily and intrinsically tied with Ford's. When Ford finally kills James, and Ford is subsequently shot by O'Kelly, the murder motif repeats in order to show the inherently linked causation between past, present, and future selves of postmodern identity.

⁵⁷ This title would be bestowed upon Edward O'Kelly as his claim to fame in Colorado history books, and today a biographical novel exists by a similar name: *The Man Who Murdered Jesse James' Murderer: Ed O'Kelly*, by Judith Ries (St. Louis: Patches Publications, 1994).

⁵⁸ Connerton, 21.

According to Western genre critic Philip French, “Death [in Westerns] is confronted directly as a fact of existence, possibly the ultimate fact, not to be taken lightly nor to be viewed without perspective.”⁵⁹ French then goes on to note that the consequence of this perspective is “a deep contempt for those who fail to respect the ritual [of death and burial].”⁶⁰ Similarly, as Peter A. French notes in *Cowboy Metaphysics: Ethics and Death in Westerns*, “The conception of death that is adopted, and even glorified, in Westerns, structures and delimits the ethics endorsed in the genre.”⁶¹ In contrast with other Westerns whose heroes are killed in the finale, such as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), this film does not provide an example of genre revisionism, but rather a study of the why the Western formula exists in the first place. As a Postmodern Western, *The Assassination of Jesse James* subverts the traditional death motif in Westerns by de-valuing its ability to provide filmic closure and instead places Death as an informing aspect of film structure. Instead of arguing for realism in Western historical depictions, it attempts to demonstrate the necessary and dialectical relationship between mythology and history.

Crisis of Representation and Reality

Foucault, in his famous discussion of film and popular memory, ponders the complexity of politically charged historical recreation films such as Malle’s *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) by claiming, “The problem’s not the hero, but the struggle. Can you make a film about a struggle without going through the traditional process of creating heroes? It is a new form of an old problem.”⁶² This is the problem of dialectics that plagues modern mythological constructions. Beneath the narrative structure of Dominik’s *The Assassination of Jesse James*, which is

⁵⁹ French, 74.

⁶⁰ French, 74.

⁶¹ Peter A. French, *Cowboy Metaphysics: Ethics and Death in Westerns* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997) 49.

⁶² Foucault, 125.

topically a film about heroes and villains, there is another discussion that emerges: the struggle of society to maintain the binary distinction that has governed them. How can there be any narrative without conflict between two binaries? Western thought requires Othering, but as a postmodern conception of history proposes, this is not always possible due to the infinite influences that shape our cultural histories. This compression of history into linear binary dimensions has a political dimension, as Foucault reminds us, “Since memory is actually a very important factor in struggle (really, in fact, struggles develop in a kind of conscious moving forward of history,) if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles.”⁶³

The ultimate question posed by Postmodern Westerns such as *The Assassination of Jesse James* addresses the necessity of historio-mythological Westerns in terms of the underlying social anxieties such Westerns express. The question is: Why doesn’t the American film-going audience want the cowboy hero to succeed anymore? With the subversion of the hero ideal and the fall of the “cult of cowboy” from earlier days of Westerns, the Postmodern Western might be viewed as a separate genre in and of itself. According to the simple terms of Western narrative archetypes, Jesse James is the villain. He callously murders many people and is thus socially construed as the outlaw character. Therefore, when Robert Ford kills him, by the terms of the binary-dictated genre, we are supposed to view Ford as the hero. However, the repetitive device of the ‘senseless murder’ by Edward O’Kelly suggests the inability of the Western to choose a consistent hero. In systematically denying the traditional narrative structure, this film denies the hero and creates a specific crisis of Western, white masculinity.

One possible anxiety in this crisis of masculinity might relate to the current political atmosphere, as Sidney Blumenthal’s article in September’s *Guardian Newspaper* remarked, “In

⁶³ Foucault, 124.

Western iconography, the lineage runs from Hawkeye to Buffalo Bill, from the Lone Ranger to George W. Bush.”⁶⁴ Notably, George W. Bush’s speeches following the September 2001 attacks employed this fictional film language, as when he commented on “smoking [the terrorists] out...” “dead or alive.”⁶⁵ Mark Hertsgaard reflects on the President’s diction as deliberate “cowboy talk, [and] the Wild West sheriff warning.”⁶⁶ Thus, the current crisis in masculine power figures seems to indicate a greater systemic anxiety in post-9/11 society that is rooted in the *failures* of Western hero ideology. In our contemporary context, this also points to the failures of Western figures of power and authority. The unstable economy and tense state of global affairs often absorb into the public consciousness, and in *The Assassination of Jesse James*, even manifests in how we remember our myths. In *Hard Bodies* (1994), Susan Jeffords suggests that the politically embedded film discourse of the Reagan era which consisted of masculine legacy films, such as the *Back to the Future* series and *Rambo* films, and actually reinforced this type of masculinity as a dominant ideology. In the *Assassination of Jesse James* and *There Will Be Blood*, it seems likely that the very political, economic, and social conditions that were exploited by the Reagan era’s masculine restoration project are in fact rejected by postmodern ideals in these Postmodern Westerns.

⁶⁴ Natoli, 81.

⁶⁵ Natoli, 81.

⁶⁶ Natoli, 81.

Conclusion

As Paul Sharrett suggests, “The contemporary collapse of Hollywood representational narrative and the myths it supports may seem a consolation in the sense that it suggests the slow coming apart of a political/social order that has defied progressive values and the advancement of democratic society.”⁶⁷ The failure of the paternal authority figure is manifested in the failure of the children, and structurally, American family values mirror this shift. The culture of American youth violence peaked in the last decade, bewildering and emasculating older generations. Another film from 2007 that ruminates on this loss of authority in the father is *No Country for Old Men* (directed by Ethan and Joel Coen), a work that portrays a totally useless and confounded sheriff at a loss to help, correct, or even comprehend the crimes of the new generation. In this film as well, white American masculinity is second-guessing its power in the face of an ideological crisis generated and supported by the Iraq war, the rise of school and church massacres, and economic instability. In contemporary life, the Western hero figure has failed to help us comprehend new forms of family and social evils. “The cinema of Postmodernity suggests a society no longer able to believe fully its received myths (the laws of the father, the essential goodness of capitalism, the state, religious authority, the family). Yet it is also unable to break with these myths in favor of a historical materialist view of history.”⁶⁸ Given this, Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* and Dominik’s *The Assassination of Jesse James* attempt to reclaim the Western genre for the bastardized children of Postmodernism. Myth and memory are utilized by each film to reflect on postmodern conceptions of history as fluid and dynamic. As film and literature critic Bruce Kawin reflected some 35 years ago during the first wave of postmodernism discussions,

⁶⁷ Sharrett, 330.

⁶⁸ Sharrett, 319.

The question is whether experience can be caught in time—whether any act of recording can approach the act of living. Words and frames occur singly, and accumulate into statements or movements. It is in their nature to divide experience and to present pieces of experience in sequence, trusting the act of apprehension to restore continuity. They make it necessary for us, and thus instruct us, to apprehend the present, a perfect continuum, as a series of instants. It is this act of division that distinguishes art from experience.⁶⁹

Postmodern discourse has always posed critical questions for how we interpret the world around us, and in the Postmodern Westerns examined in this thesis, we see this discussion trickling into the films themselves. While postmodern philosophy has often been described as a deconstructing and negative analytic approach to contemporary culture,⁷⁰ I believe that the harsh realities depicted on screen in *There Will Be Blood* and *The Assassination of Jesse James* are in fact beneficial to producing a progressive view of the “Old West” because they encourage social awareness in contemporary audiences, who perhaps through the aid of these films will have a better chance not falling victim to the same ideological pitfalls expressed in the films of their parents’ generation.

⁶⁹ Bruce Kavin, *Telling it Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972) 153.

⁷⁰ Beverly Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 3-4.

Bibliography

- Abel, Richard. "Our Country/Whose Country? The 'Americanisation' Project of Early Westerns." *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*. London: British Film Institute, 1998.
- Adams, Steven and Anna Gruetzner Robins, eds. *Gendering Landscape Art*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- Aitken, Stuart C. and Leo E. Zonn, eds. *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1994.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage, 1980.
- Beardsley, John. "Gardens of History, Sites of Time." *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century*. Mildred Friedman, ed. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994.
- Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film History: An Introduction, 2nd ed.* New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2003.
- Calder, Jenni. *There Must be A Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and in Reality*. New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1974.
- Campbell, Hugh, Michael Mayerfeld Bell, Margaret Finney, eds. *Country boys: masculinity and rural life*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Corkin, Stanley. *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004.
- Coyne, Michael. *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in Hollywood Western*. New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997.
- Davies, Philip John and Paul Wells, eds. *American Film and Politics from Reagan to Bush Jr.* New York: Manchester University Press, 2002.
- DiPiero, Thomas. *White men aren't*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Dyer, Richard. *White*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel. "Film and Popular Memory." *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961-1984)*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e), 1989.
- French, Peter A. *Cowboy Metaphysics: Ethics and Death in Westerns*. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.

- French, Philip. *Westerns*. New York: Viking Press, 1973.
- Friedman, Martin. "As Far as the Eye Can See." *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century*. Mildred Friedman, ed. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994.
- Furlong, Lucinda. "Landscape as Cinema: Projecting America." *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century*. Mildred Friedman, ed. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994.
- Hawkes, Terence. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Routledge, 1977.
- Hill, Mike. *After whiteness: unmaking an American majority*. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
- Hillier, Jim ed. *American independent cinema*. London: British Film Institute Publishing, 2001.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Family Frames." *Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.
- Johnston, Robert K. *Useless beauty: Ecclesiastes through the lens of contemporary film*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Kawin, Bruce. "The Mummy's Pool." *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*. Barry Keith Grant, ed. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984.
- Kawin, Bruce. *Telling it Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972.
- Kuhn, Annette. *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. London: Verso, 1995.
- Little, William G. *The Waste Fix: Seizures of the Sacred from Upton Sinclair to the Sopranos*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Lyden, John C. *Film as religion : myths, morals, and rituals*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- Maynard, Richard M. *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality*. Rochelle Park: Hayden Book Co., 1974.
- Mayshark, Jesse Fox. *Post-pop cinema : the search for meaning in new American film*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2007.

- Miller, Gabriel. *Screening the novel : rediscovered American fiction in film*. New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1980.
- Morrison, James and Thomas Schur. *The Films of Terrence Malick*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003.
- Natoli, Joseph. *This is a Picture and Not the World: Movies and a Post-9/11 America*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Novac, Barbara. *Nature and culture : American landscape and painting, 1825-1875*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- O'Neill, John. "Law and gynesis: Freud v. Schreber." *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*. Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, eds. New York: Routledge Press, 1992. 238-249.
- Ringel, Fred J. ed. *America as Americans See It*. New York: The Literary Guild, 1932.
- Salisbury, Mark. "Andrew Dominik: Interview." *Time Out London (Online)*. 4 March 07. Available <http://www.timeout.com/film/features/show-feature/3798/andrew-dominik-interview.html>.
- Santoni, Ronald E. *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.
- Sharrett, Christopher. "End of Story: The Collapse of Myth in Postmodern Narrative Film." *The End of Cinema As We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*. Jon Lewis, ed. New York: New York University Press, 2001. 319-331.
- Sinclair, Upton. *American outpost; a book of reminiscences*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1932.
- Sinclair, Upton. *Oil!* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1927.
- Southgate, Beverly. *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Worland, Rick and Edward Countryman. "The New Western American Historiography and the Emergence of the New American Westerns." *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*. London: British Film Institute, 1998.

Appendix A



Fig. 1.1 Daniel and H.W. on the train



Fig 1.2 Daniel's mother, Mary Plainview



Fig. 1.3 Daniel's deceased brother, Henry

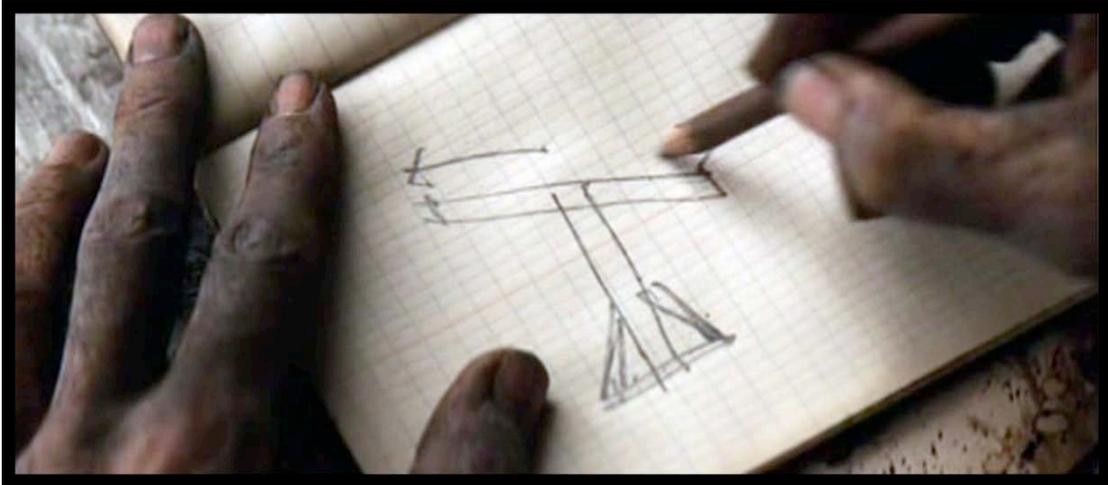


Fig. 1.4 Daniel's architectural sketch of the oil rig



Fig. 1.5 Daniel's hand in victory or Hallelujah?



Fig. 1.6 H.W.'s real father smearing oil on his forehead

Appendix B



Fig. 2.1 John Wayne's cowboy is silhouetted as Western icon in Ford's *The Searchers*



Fig. 2.2 Eli and Daniel, framed as doubles



Fig. 2.3 Jesse James and brother Frank in isolated doorframes

Appendix C



Fig. 3.1 Daniel Plainview illuminated in the flames of burning his oil rig



Fig. 3.2 Dobbs accuses Curtin of malicious intentions by the light of their campfire

Appendix D



Fig. 4.1 Bob Ford watching Jesse James bathe.



Fig. 4.2 Jesse James crossfaded into grand landscape shots



Fig. 4.3 Foggy vignette illustrating the mythic quality of cinematic vision



Fig. 4.4 Shadows as symbolism for cinema