

Marxist Obsessions

Many American film reviewers must labor under the spell of Marxist sentimentality. It's as though they have never recovered from their undergraduate viewing of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), Sergei Eisenstein's clever but facile Soviet-propaganda film. Not surprisingly, whenever left-wing politics show up on screen, they grow hopelessly nostalgic. How else to explain their near-unanimous canonization of director Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*; a botched adaptation of Upton Sinclair's 1927 socialist novel *Oil!*? Reading their notices, I began to wonder if the film had left the poor scribblers ideologically befogged. Most seem to have surrendered their judgment and unashamedly cribbed the language in the studio's press kit—"epic" being most frequently invoked, followed by comparisons with *Citizen Kane* and *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*.

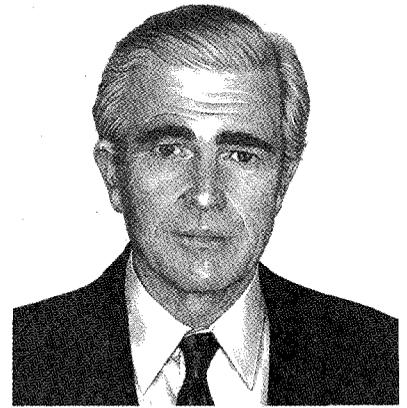
But this film is not an epic. It has neither the historical scope nor the social depth to qualify for even the loosest sense of the word. And, unlike Orson Welles' and John Huston's peerless films—which, lest anyone think I'm allowing my politics to cloud my aesthetic judgment, are also thoroughly left-wing projects—Anderson's film is an incoherent, unfinished psychodrama with occasional flashes of brilliance. The press notes tell us that it is "loosely" based on Sinclair's novel. This is p.r.-speak. The film has almost nothing to do with its source. Instead of Sinclair's expansive depiction of California high-stakes wheeling and dealing in the first decades of the 20th century, Anderson pits two American madmen against each other—one, a pitiless capitalist; the other, a religious huckster. Their battle is meant to represent the murderous consequences of the greed unleashed by America's addictions to secular and sacred entrepreneurship. Critics have accepted the film's large-

ly undramatized thesis that capitalism and religion have been equally ruinous of what might have been a more brotherly ethos in our land. Perhaps Anderson had in mind the political culture that flourished so beneficently in the formerly Marxist states of the last century. Well, certainly, capitalism and religion have inflicted their share of crimes on the masses, but their inflections pale when compared with the oppressive and murderous policies systematically enforced by Marxist governments.

I suppose Miramax has dubbed the film an epic because it invokes not only Sinclair but the Bible. Or is it Anderson's epic-size ambition they have in mind? The title comes from Exodus 7:19, in which the LORD commands Moses to stretch forth his rod over the waters of Egypt, "that there may be blood throughout the land." This is the first of the Ten Plagues designed to goad Pharaoh into freeing the Jews. The relevance of this allusion is a bit obscure, but I suppose Anderson means that America is the new Egypt, afflicted figuratively and literally with the plague of a blood-letting capitalism.

Given the cautionary reference, you'd think Anderson would have examined the workings of the detested economic system in some detail, but, curiously, he doesn't. Instead, he focuses on the oilman and the preacher, often to the exclusion of the novel's fuller portrayal of their surrounding community and its economy. In fact, he has rewritten the novel so that the resulting narrative barely reflects the original. His primary characters are monsters driven by their sociopathic obsessions to succeed at all costs. This was not Sinclair's purpose at all.

As a committed socialist, Sinclair was less interested in individual neurosis and criminality than in the American economic system, which his novels and essays portray as inherently



There Will Be Blood

*Produced and distributed
by Miramax Films
Directed and written
by Paul Thomas Anderson*

unjust. His wealthy characters are generally not evil. They just cannot see beyond their bourgeois assumptions. As such, they are not fully responsible for the iniquities they blindly visit on the less privileged. In the opening pages of *Oil!*, his protagonist, J. Arnold Ross (whom Anderson has archly rechristened Plainview), drives along an early concrete highway. The highway is so narrow that approaching cars can barely pass and have no choice but to trust each other's skill to negotiate the few inches of clearance provided them. Ross has taken his son Bunny along for the drive, and the boy thrills at each of these near misses as much as he would if he were on an amusement-park ride. The episode constitutes Sinclair's clever metaphor for unfettered capitalist competition. It does not seem to occur to Ross and the other drivers that some authority—a socialist government, for instance—should intervene to protect them from their potential recklessness. Instead of demanding that the road be widened, Ross contents himself with calling inconsiderate drivers "road hogs." This is Sinclair's version of the free market, a childish competition in which participants are left to run the risk of devastating collision at every turn.

Anderson's dour film admits no such scene. In his dealings, Plain-

view (Daniel Day-Lewis) deliberately encroaches on others, ferociously determined to refuse them any more quarter than he absolutely must. His idea is to crowd others off the road if he can. And why not? "There are times," he explains, "when I look at people and I see nothing worth liking. I want to earn enough money that I can get away from everyone." Armed with such cynicism, he is not surprised when a young man named Paul Sunday (Paul Dano) offers to sell him information about the oil underneath the Sunday family farm without informing his father. Ignoring the implicit betrayal of the offer, Plainview tries to bargain the price down, as any good capitalist would. Later, he offers Paul's father, Abel, \$3,700 for his house. But Abel's other son, Eli (also Paul Dano), points out that there's oil on the property and demands another \$10,000. Eli is a faith healer and wants the money to build a church for his congregation. Plainview is visibly put out by Eli's demand, and you can hardly blame him. It's not just the expense. Since Dano plays both Eli and Paul, the brothers are indistinguishable. This leaves Plainview—and the audience—to wonder if the two characters are twins or the same scheming young man playing him for a fool. Anderson doesn't let on until he throws us a sort of ambiguous bone at the film's alternately hilarious and gruesome conclusion.

Anderson offers us another puzzle. We are led to believe that Plainview is cheating the Sundays, but the offer of \$3,700 for their small, deteriorating farmhouse would have been a princely sum in 1911, when far more substantial houses were going for half this amount. And, as Plainview points out to Eli, there's no guarantee that he will find a workable oil reservoir, and searching for it will cost him greatly in equipment and time. Yet Day-Lewis's performance suggests Plainview is robbing the Sundays. He must be. He's a capitalist, after all.

Soon, Plainview goes about buying up the other farms in the area. This process is sketched in with a few scenes—some of them, vividly com-

pellent; others, vague and unconvincing. Then, a Standard Oil agent offers Plainview a million dollars for his oilfield. In a fit of wholly unexpected lunacy, he threatens to come to the man's home at night and cut his throat, should he persist in trying to drive him out of business. Anderson then jumps from 1911 to 1927, leaving out the story of Plainview's ascent to megalomaniacal billionaire. We are to infer that his efforts drove him mad, but we do not see how or why. Instead, Anderson shows us Plainview sleeping in one of the lanes of his mansion's indoor bowling alley, surrounded by empty wine bottles. That's capitalist decadence for you, and, apparently, it's all we need to know.

It is here that Plainview has his final showdown with Eli, who in some unexplained way has made his own fortune and is now in danger of losing it. Sinclair based Eli on Aimee Semple McPherson, the commercially successful evangelist of the 1920's who made her fortune by transforming preaching into show business. A forward thinker, she anticipated today's televangelists by taking profitably to the radio airwaves. Sinclair went to town with this material. Oddly, Anderson has ignored it, choosing to focus on Plainview and Eli as natural antagonists. Why should they hate each other? In their mutual contempt for the little guy, they would seem to be natural allies. Anderson does not explain.

Although Anderson's film is an inchoate mess, it does have one continuing focus: betrayal between brothers. This he signals by naming Eli's timid father Abel, the original fraternal victim. Then, we have the mystery of Paul and Eli echoed by the fractious relationship between Plainview and his long-lost brother. Finally, Eli tries to snooker the oil magnate by appealing to their shared spiritual brotherhood. It's a corollary of Marxist theory that capitalist competition fosters

literal and figurative fratricide by encouraging exploitation and even murder of one's fellow man. But Anderson doesn't earn his theme; he merely asserts it. Indeed, capitalism has sometimes promoted vicious business practices, but to portray this convincingly, a filmmaker should illustrate with instances. Certainly, the directors Anderson invokes—Welles and Huston—did.

Despite its failings, *Blood* is worth seeing, if only for Day-Lewis. He has created a spectacular caricature of the possessed capitalist. Sounding like John Huston giving one of his smarmy performances, he has the voice of a born manipulator, breathy and rumbling with oddly placed drawls and pauses. At one point, he tells his brother he sees "the worst in people. . . . To have you here gives me a second breath. I can't keep doing this on my own with these . . . people." The "these" that precedes "people" is hissed, and the improbably long pause that follows makes "people" seem as if he had been searching for some more appropriate term of obloquy to apply to the cretinous bipeds with whom he must deal. I don't know whether Anderson meant it as such, but it's a marvelously comic moment. Day-Lewis's performance may be a stunt, but it's a fascinating one. It reminded me not only of Huston's vocal mannerisms but of Humphrey Bogart playing the mad gold prospector Fred C. Dobbs in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Huston's adaptation of B. Traven's Marxist novel. Like Bogart's Dobbs, Plainview descends into greed-induced paranoia, and, as he does, he takes to muttering his suspicions to himself, limping about his oilfield like a coiled, gimlet-eyed demon, shuttered up in his perverse hatred for others.

By making Plainview such a magnificent monster, Day-Lewis has also made *Blood* a film worth watching, despite its half-baked political intentions. ◊

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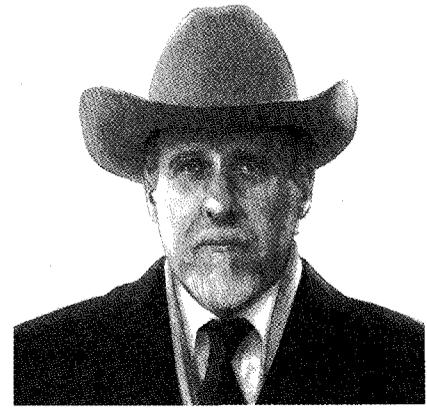
Cupid's Thunderbolt

In the weeks immediately following the encounter with the illegal immigrants in the *arroyo*, Jesús "Eddie" and Héctor were men possessed by a single idea, though not the same one. Jesús could think only of joining up with the recently formed Critter Company, based in El Paso but with a chapter in Deming, and fighting Islamists at the border. As for Héctor, his sole, overwhelming thought was to get home to Belen with his family, far away from the bewitching siren at the Pink House in Las Palomas.

Never in twenty-something years of married life had he been tempted by another woman—until now. Héctor tried to assure himself that his desire for Jacinta Ruiz was entirely normal, because it was completely natural. Adultery is as American as apple pie, and just as healthy; indeed, it is positively pro-American, as anyone who watches TV and reads *People* at the barbershop or on the checkout line at the supermarket knows. And yet, for some reason he couldn't fathom, he was unable to acknowledge that yielding to his male instincts by cheating on AveMaría was acceptable behavior. In what he clearly recognized to be a failure of imagination and nerve, Héctor blamed himself. Had he come to the United States as a child, perhaps he might be more completely acculturated to modern, progressive American ways. As it was, the notion of infidelity stuck in his craw like a beer-can pop-top in a magpie's gullet, except for when he sat drinking with Jesús "Eddie" in the Pink House bar, waiting for his friend to visit the toilet and leave him alone with Jacinta for three precious minutes—which was why, every time, he attempted to talk Jesús "Eddie" into driving to Deming instead. In these efforts, he regularly failed, and this failure Héctor also blamed on himself. Obviously, he wasn't being very persuasive, and he knew all too well the reason for that: When the

time came for "a couple" of drinks after dinner, Héctor wished to be nowhere in the world but in the mesmerizing presence of Jacinta Ruiz.

In vain, he worked at firing Jesús "Eddie's" enthusiasm for the Critter Company to still greater heat, as a distraction from the cheap beer and attractive company at the Pink House. (Jesús, though not as smitten with the girl as Héctor was, had ceased digging him in the ribs and offering lewd encouragement to extramarital pleasures. Having for now given up on *Contracepción* after living under the same roof with her for weeks without eliciting the slightest sign of interest, his behavior in the presence of Jacinta and Héctor had become distinctly rivalrous.) But at this formative stage in their organization, the Critters met only twice a week, once at the chapter leader's home in Deming on Sunday evening, and again the following Saturday morning for military training at the border next to Pancho Villa State Park. The Critter Company was a new militia group, intended to compete with the Minutemen whom it considered unsound on the immigration issue for their unwillingness to raid across the international line onto Mexican soil. Its name was borrowed from Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest's celebrated Confederate cavalry, which the founder, a German-born American named Wolfgang Mitternacht from the Air Force base at Alamogordo, had read about in Shelby Foote's three-volume history of the Civil War. As none of the Critters, including Mitternacht, could ride a horse, the men were obliged to train on foot, though dressed in appropriately critterish garb in which they resembled *Rendezvous* reenactors on the upper Green River. The Critter Company's relaxed schedule left Jesús "Eddie" plenty of time for beer drinking at the Pink House, affording Héctor little room for maneuver and leaving him with the consoling



thought that, anyhow, he never permitted himself the company of Jacinta Ruiz absent the presence of a chaparrone. In the end, after hearing Jesús enthuse about the pleasures of hiking around in the wintertime desert with a heavy pack on his back and a pistol on his hip, Héctor himself joined the Critter Company, more to divert his mind from Jacinta than from the conviction that anybody, short of the 150,000 troops in Iraq, could do anything to control illegal immigration across the southwestern border. (Not even President Bush believed that.)

Héctor had always counted as one of the many advantages of early repatriation his avoidance of military service in either country in which he held citizenship. Now, in his forties, with a slight paunch and not what could be called in shape, he'd been apprehensive of the discipline militia training entailed. His first morning in the field, attempting to stand straight under the weight of the Jansport daypack on the hardpan desert floor with an icy wind slashing through his buckskin suit and whipping the leather fringes along his legs and arms while Wolfgang Mitternacht strode up and down bawling orders from under his pulled-down coonskin cap, Héctor was already regretting having signed up with the Critter Company. And why was it necessary to learn to salute, to make an about-face, to sound off, to assume formation, to march in step? This wasn't the Charge of the Light Brigade, was it? The Minutemen's routine amounted to sitting out in lawn chairs under umbrellas, drinking beer and panning the scrub