

There Will Be Blood, 2007
I drink your milkshake!

There doesn't seem to be a genre Paul Thomas Anderson doesn't excel in – be it an up and coming porn star (“Boogie Nights”, 1997), Tom Cruise spouting expletives in the episodic drama “Magnolia” (1999) or actually getting a great performance out of Adam Sandler in “Punch-Drunk Love“ (2002). Whatever he touches, he manages to turn any genre on its head and, in the end, come out with a movie that, while harking back on milestones before it, always manages to stand on its own and be something new.

The same goes for “There Will Be Blood”. It's a wonderful character study as well as a scathing indictment on two of America's legacies – capitalism and religion. The setting, a late western that ultimately debunks anyone's mythic preconceptions of what a western – the most American of all film genres – is. But to limit it to a 2 ½ hrs rant about capitalism and fanatic religion (and the fakeness, evil and selfish motives behind each) would be too simple.

It is, foremost, a character study. A study that focuses on two people – Daniel Plainview/Daniel Day Lewis (who clearly sees the evil in his fellow men, yet is not blind to his own evil) and of Eli Sunday/Paul Dano, the religious fanatic. It's all in a name. The film contrasts the ruthless way of the oil magnet with the equally ruthless ways of the evangelical preacher, both trying to get ahead by exploiting their fellow men. Both equally aware of who and what they are, culminating in one of the most memorable scenes of two antagonists meeting each other who, in the end, are essentially the same and painfully aware of just that. The ultimate triumph of one is anything but, as it leaves him as a mere shell of a man. And actually, the true culmination of the movie is moments before that scene, when Daniel pushes away his son by revealing he isn't his true son and thus has nothing of himself in him. But whether that's true, and whether that's the most cruel or most selfless act of Daniel Plainview in the whole movie is up to the viewer to decide, just as Anderson never descends to an obviously preachy tone and operates on a more subtle level.



Give me the blood, Lord!

What isn't subtle is the view on capitalism by focusing on the very beginning of it and what it does to a man. The same goes for religion or at least the fanatical type of religion portrayed here. And with the focus on oil, one cannot help but see the movie through the lens of today. There is enough to support this as a critique on recent US actions – abroad as well as within the US itself. But the true strength of the movie lies in its unmasking of more universal concerns and character traits that have seemingly grown like cancer, leading to where we are today.

All of which is brilliantly set in a western tradition – opening shot of the American landscape and a seeming celebration of the individual as opposed to the community. But where Plainview is exploiting the common people for his business interests in a more obvious way, Sunday is doing just the same through more insidious means. And it's the ultimate confrontation of these two characters, without any bullshitting on either's part for once, that makes the drama come full circle.

All of this is aided through the beautiful direction – the contrast between the wide, desolate landscape and the more than uncomfortable close-up shots of pure evil as well as the striking imagery of light vs dark, aided through a minimalist soundtrack and inevitably nihilistic conclusion. The first twenty or so minutes, played out without any dialogue, music and in the suffocating confines of a mine shaft, work as a kind of summary of the whole movie and as a symbolic portrayal of the lengths to which people are willing to go to in order to reach their goal. Daniel Day Lewis more than deserves his Academy Award, but I cannot fail to wonder why Paul Dano's performance, equally mesmerizing, went completely unnoticed.