

Fossil Frontiers

American Petroleum History on Film

Georgiana Banita

No one can deny the dramatic potential of oil exploration on the big screen. Not only is oil a fraught concept that resonates with American foundational myths; its earthy and visual grandeur also vividly incarnates the larger-than-life aesthetics of cinema, as well as the epic ambitions of the historical genre in particular. For oil prospectors, the stakes are always high. As petroleum consultant Ruth Sheldon Knowles writes in her magisterial history of American wildcatting, oil is not only “the greatest single source of wealth in America for individual fortunes,” but also “the greatest source of business failure” (Knowles 1959: 302). The further back we look into the annals of oil drilling, lease negotiation, and geological science, the more likely we are to encounter extravagant narratives of unremitting labor, sudden bonanzas, and bloodcurdling downfalls. Historical films about the risky oil business have been produced with some regularity since the 1930s, yet despite the eventful development of the oil industry from the spectacular first gushers in Pennsylvania and Texas to the 1973 OPEC oil embargo and the overtly politicized contexts of petroleum today, the abiding obsession of the historical oil film remains the very early oil boom. Consequently, these films interfere with the conventions of the western and with the frontier theories put forward by Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt at the end of the nineteenth century, theories that have been interwoven with American historical film since the early 1920s. Within the broader scope of this cinematic genre the oil film can only be a punctuation mark, yet its contribution is essential.

As I aim to show here, the historical oil film helps elucidate the profound social and cultural transformations triggered by the rapid evolution of oil exploration into a propulsive economic force during the first decades of the twentieth century. Historian Jules Tygiel describes this period as dominated by “booster optimism and rampant speculation,” which brought together a colorful “cast of oilmen, stock promoters, Hollywood stars, cinema moguls, banking executives, Prohibition-era

gangsters, and evangelists” (Tygiel 1994: 8). The oil boom operated on a terrifying scale in this revivalist environment, leading both to a temporal compression in the accumulation of capital and to a geographical expansion. As Richard Slotkin has noted, the oil frontier opened “the prospect of immediate and impressive economic benefit for a relatively low capital outlay” while fast-tracking “the expectation of profit that the agrarian frontiers of 1795–1830 would require a generation or more to achieve” (Slotkin 1998: 18). Across the Southwest, some lucky cattlemen and ranchers surprisingly found oil on their farms, while others abandoned their barren land to look for oil elsewhere, drilling tens of thousands of wells every year, more than 90 percent of which came in dry. The energy, excess, and exponential growth experienced during this decade, coupled with the constant threat of financial bankruptcy, have spurred the film medium to employ the resources of the big screen to capture one of the most spectacularly transformative and disorienting moments in American history.

The oil film has been systematically occluded in scholarly discussions of the historical film genre, many fascinating productions drawing virtually no critical interest. Several well-known epics that culminate with the discovery of oil have raised questions of race and gender in the context of western expansion and the forging of American character, yet critics have paid little attention to the subtle links between a homesteading culture envisioned as female and the myth of oil-hunting masculinity. The films I will focus on here – *Cimarron* (1931), *Tulsa* (1949), *Giant* (1956), *Oklahoma Crude* (1973), and *There Will Be Blood* (2008) – meticulously reconstitute the world that preceded the oil boom so as to gauge the impact of mass drilling on the largely agricultural environment from which it emerged. Specifically, these films outline the disparity between the age of cotton (1830–1850) or the ranching era (1870–1885) and the oil culture that supplanted them. In the first part of my analysis I will provide a much needed overview of these films’ thematic concerns and formal strategies. In the second section I turn to a more recent historical oil film: Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*, which prefers indirectness and a fragmentary structure to the epic sweep of previous oil sagas, appropriating for its own purposes both the historical and the aesthetic antecedents of the petroleum plot.

It is indeed impossible to judge *There Will Be Blood* solely by the standards of written history, because in almost every scene Anderson foregrounds the history of the film medium itself, to show that history on film is very much lodged into the history of film. Cinema history is inseparable from a chronicle of the American oil industry, partly due to the simultaneous surge of oil wealth and Hollywood show biz in 1920s Los Angeles, and partly as a result of the deeply cinematic nature of the dream-seeking wildcat experience, which chimes both with the standard Hollywood plot in the early days of the movie industry and with the journey of the rural ingénue adrift in the “big city,” looking for stardom. The histrionic costume drama of the evangelical revival – with the meteoric rise and tragic collapse of its prominent figures – operates in Anderson’s film and in countless fictions of the

1920s (including Upton Sinclair's *Oil!*, on which the film is based) as an intermediary between the early oil fever and the cinematic imaginary.¹ To some extent every historical oil film incorporates or references previous works of the same genre (and my discussion of these works will highlight such intertextual linkages), yet Anderson goes a step further – to retrace, in the story of an ambitious oilman, some important stages in the cinematic history of American ambition and independence. As Jean Baudrillard has argued, “cinema plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths” as a result of its fascination both with “itself as a lost object” and with “the real as a lost referent” (Baudrillard 1994: 47). The historical oil film is thus not only concerned with its material referent but also haunted by the myths, tropes, and visual language of the historical genre itself.

Surprisingly for a film that is so conscious of and indebted to historical context and the visual economy of oil, *There Will Be Blood* has elicited interpretations that flatly deny its historiographic relevance. Peter Hitchcock for instance has claimed that Anderson “studiously eschews” historical detail, arguing that it would produce “a kind of documentary heft” and would detract from the film’s complex characterization and morality plot (Hitchcock 2010: 95). Hitchcock reads the political history of oil from the 2003 embroilment in Iraq backwards toward the 1920s, skipping over numerous cultural manifestations of the oil economy in fiction and film, which ultimately blinds him to Anderson’s canny homogenization of historical sources and classic cinematic tropes into an archetypal narrative of the American experience. The film’s “Production notes” accentuate this idea by aligning *There Will Be Blood* with “a pantheon of American motion pictures that explore the powerful confluence of ambition, wealth, family and the magnetic lure of the West” (*There Will Be Blood*, n.d.). Anderson invokes previous oil films as well as classic film treatments of American frontier mythology in ways that allow him to re-conceptualize the history of oil self-reflectively, as a commodity and as an abstract myth engrained in the fabric of the American imaginary. Anderson’s use of historical sources (especially the biographies of a California oil tycoon and a Pentecostal preacher), of the first 150 pages of Upton Sinclair’s muck-raking novel *Oil!* (1927), and of a series of American film classics recall the revisionist literary concept of “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 1988: 5), used to denote intensely self-reflective postmodern narratives that blur the generic borders between historiography and fiction. Yet Anderson’s methods in highlighting the textuality of history differ from novelistic practices not only by interrogating the film’s own mimetic engagement with the past (in this case, with oil history), but also by incorporating past exemplars of the historical oil film genre as secondary documentary material. This complex intertextual network relies to a great extent on the rich cross-referentiality and historicizing potential of the visual image. As Robert Rosenstone has pointed out, “the very nature of the visual media forces us to reconceptualize and broaden what we mean by the word, history” (1995: 6). I want to examine the ways in which *There Will Be Blood* interacts with the fossilized traces of the past through several strategies of “historical distantiation” – a phrase I use

to denote the process in which formal and aesthetic features of the film challenge mainstream conventions through disjointed narrative, inscrutable and unsympathetic characters, non-naturalistic acting, abrupt editing, and other violations of established cinematic rules. The overall effect of these strategies is to subvert notions of cultural continuity in favor of a formally and historically disruptive model of how the oil industry became interwoven with social change. Moreover, rather than provide a one-track account of Hollywood's interest in the history of oil exploration, I want to use these historical narratives to tease out significant issues about the relationship between oil aesthetics and cinematic historiography, as well as to place the subject of petroleum in the broader framework of the early twentieth century – an oft-romanticized, formative period of American economic history.

“Up from the Prairie, Overnight”: *Cimarron*

“Oil makes me tired,” Edna Ferber remarked before she began research for her western novel *Cimarron* (1929) – a historical revision of the pioneer myth and one of the first novels to recount the beginnings of the oil industry in Oklahoma. Ferber's perceptive weaving of petroleum history into the frontier narrative bespeaks her ambition as a “Scope-Seeker,” to use the phrase coined by a hostile caricaturist (Kenaga 2003: 191) – one capable of recalibrating the relationship between written and popular history. Whereas petro-upstarts failed to pique Ferber's interest during her research stint in the state, she was certainly fascinated with the “rich oil Indian” who gave a “new and fantastic angle to the thing” in ways that resonated with her own racial consciousness as a Jewish American female writer, sensitive to minority persecution and injustice. However, because “the frontier days, and the territory rush for land, and the oil, and all that” couldn't be done – she feared – “with any freshness” (Smyth 2010: 116), Ferber ultimately wrote a novel that focuses only partially on the oil-rich Osage Indians and white oil operators of Oklahoma. Released by the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Corporation (RKO) in 1931, *Cimarron* documents the frontier experience and its role in boosting the country's economic power, from the opening of the Indian Strip upon the Oklahoma territory in 1889 to the 1920s oil boom. Among the last of the epic westerns, *Cimarron* appears to extol the domestic virtues of nineteenth-century womanhood in the figure of Sabra Cravat (Irene Dunne), a practical, dictatorial woman whom Ferber describes as the true impetus behind the frontier expansion, thus challenging the historical marginalization of the female pioneer. Yet in the film's third act the discovery of oil on Osage land, the corruption surrounding mineral rights and leases, and the death of Sabra's husband, Yancey (Richard Dix), as a transient pauper working the oil wells effectively recast the balance between the homemaker and her intrepid husband.

In keeping with Ferber's understanding of her novel as “a malevolent picture of what is known as American womanhood and American sentimentality”

(Ferber 1939: 339), the film remains ambiguous about the historical importance of Sabra's achievements, especially after its panorama widens from a domestic view of family and gender relations to an intimation of how the oil industry fueled Oklahoma's economic revival. Half-Cherokee Yancey and his wife Sabra testify to the marriage of politics and economy: he dies working the oil wells while she becomes a congresswoman, their relationship suggesting a sophisticated gender dynamic amidst the fledgling petro-world at the turn of the century, without succumbing to the trite veneration of the female pioneer that permeated western discourse at the time. Unexpectedly, both Ferber's novel and the film close by adjusting the existing historical monument to the "pioneer woman of the West," to represent "the heroic figure of Yancey Cravat stepping forward with that light graceful stride," accompanied by "the weary, blanketed figure of an Indian" (Ferber 1939: 306) – instead of a female with child, as was the case in Ponca City. We should bear in mind that, by the time this monument was commissioned, Oklahoma had already changed from a wild frontier settlement into an oil-rich state, and the organizer of the 1925 philanthropic competition for the design of the monument was none other than Edward C. Marland, oil tycoon and governor of Oklahoma. It certainly seems more fitting that Yancey, whose irresponsibility and transient leanings correlate with the imaginary of the oil industry, should satisfy the oilman's nostalgic vision of the receding frontier. Ferber thus contextualizes the frontier heritage by highlighting not the Prairie Madonna's gender emancipation – largely fabricated for public consumption by oil-rich Maecenas – but the rising cultural power of mineral riches.

Cimarron in fact provides, contentiously, the first portrayal – and an authoritative one – of oil as a counter-female commodity. Although envisioned as a progressive entrepreneur, Sabra only partially recognizes the progress taking off around her. She wields domestic power for a long time, but the oil boom ultimately limits her authority. Her own daughter, Donna, is embarrassed by their exclusion from the oil bonanza and throws herself spitefully into a marriage with the town's wealthiest and much older oil millionaire. Even Sabra's friend, Mrs. Tracy Wyatt, a former Illinois school teacher, quickly abandons the interests she shared with Sabra (the local women's club and fashionable wallpaper prints) in favor of state-of-the-art cars. Everyone seems to escape Sabra's dominion by taking refuge in the promising, as yet unregimented oil business. Her son Cim goes away to work as a geologist on the Osage Reservation and marries a chief's daughter, while Yancey dies heroically on the nearby Bowlegs oil field, in Sabra's arms, after protecting his fellow workers from a dynamite explosion. Far from signaling a decline, Yancey's death puts to rest any suspicion that, unlike his wife, he only paid lip service to pioneer rhetoric (Kenaga 2003: 179; Smyth 2010: 121). "Yancey has never worked with his hands, revealing the fraud behind his frontier rhetoric," Jennifer Smyth observes, accurately describing him as something of a frontier dandy, yet disregarding the final steps of his trajectory in the oil fields. Both he and Sabra seek to gain a foothold of empowerment in the new frontier state, and Yancey ultimately secures his place in this new mythical space through physical sacrifice

beyond the realm of anything his publisher wife ever engaged in. He is, of course, only half-redeemed, because, even though he finds in oil-prospecting the kind of risky, macho, “cimarron” (that is, “wild, unruly”) culture that is a direct sequel to the gun-toting routine of the wild West, he is roughing it on the lands of his own ancestors, exploiting them. Having conquered frontiers in the American West, but also in Alaska, Cuba, and on the western front as a soldier in Flanders, Yancey cannot resist “the West of infinite distances” (Van Doren 1930) into which the new oil wells are tapping. Their repetitive hunger and apparent inexhaustibility (*pace* M. King Hubbert) feed the sprawling instinct of his nature.

Although oilmen on screen tend to be an introspective breed, as we shall see, critics have been guarded about the psychological depth of Yancey’s character: “Yancey has no interior,” Smyth writes, “he is merely an empty frontier myth, with plenty of style” (2010: 125). To dismiss Yancey as a cardboard frontier poster boy is, however, to overlook his synecdochic relationship with the history of Oklahoma’s expansion. On a number of levels, his westward journey unfolds in tandem with the history of Oklahoma, as it becomes evident from several parallel details. Yancey’s Sunday service in the gambling tent foreshadows his later wildcatting phase, while the town of Osage mushrooms into a seething metropolis – “up from the prairie, overnight,” which is also how Sabra describes the towering oil wells around which she guides visitors from Washington. The spasmodic gusher aesthetics is already implicit in the film’s opening sequence, without correspondence in Ferber’s novel, of the frenzied stampede for homestead claims in the 1889 Oklahoma Land Run, which ended within an hour (see Figure 15.1).



Figure 15.1 The frenetic Oklahoma Land Run anticipates the sudden upsurge of the oil industry. *Cimarron* (1931). RKO Radio Pictures. Director: Wesley Ruggles. Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Yancey's impatient understanding of time, which prevents him from spending more than five years in the same place, carries its own resonance of individualist drive and rapid development beyond the film's ending, despite the protagonist's death. By framing the oil rush as a final step in the triumphant settlement of the West and by interrupting the story of oil at an inchoate stage, where none of its blights has transpired, *Cimarron* ultimately idealizes the calcified pioneer stereotypes it set out to denounce. Ferber's disdain of oil wealth and of the underlying exploitation of Native Americans surfaces in many parts of the film and her critique might have succeeded, had the film not concluded by paying homage to Oklahoma's giant oil enterprises and by mythologizing the oil field as the place where the empire-builders heroically come to rest.² Later films will begin to suggest oil's potential to undermine the pastoral stability of the agricultural economy and the territorial rights of the Indian nations, warning against the impact of overdrilling and overproduction on American Virgin Land, whose protection is deemed a moral responsibility.

The Derrick that Broke the Plains: *Tulsa*

Among several mid-century oil films,³ Stuart Heisler's *Tulsa* (1949) is the only one that can be classed unequivocally as an oil western, partly because it explores a common western trope – in the words of Peter C. Rollins, “the pervasive ambivalence about progress that has been an integral part of American culture” (2006: 84) ever since Pare Lorentz's 1936 Dust Bowl documentary *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. Yet despite its familiar theme, *Tulsa* stands out as the first historical film to accurately portray the transition from farming to oil extraction in Oklahoma, while setting the tone for later films that will sketch the transnational vectors enmeshed with the local concerns of the American oil industry.

Tulsa opens with a somewhat naïve paean to oil, delivered in voice-over by Chill Wills, an icon of the western genre, who succinctly delineates the film's chronological and spatial coordinates: while the Indians were farming Oklahoma land, “the oil was underneath the ground,” slumbering like a trapped genie that “had to come out” and become “a mighty valuable commodity, sought for and fought for all over the globe, in Arabia, Persia, Algiers, Venezuela, and Mexico.” This global mapping of the oil industry culminates with the assertion that “the oil capital of the world is Tulsa,” a claim that the film explores by going back some 30 years to “ruminate,” as Wills puts it, on the brutal conversion of ranching culture into oil and refinery land.

The film spends little effort illustrating how the transition to oil differs from other industrial invasions of America's Virgin Land, and thus it compares negatively with *Cimarron*, where the land rush and the oil gamble are effectively juxtaposed. Nor does *Tulsa* deploy specifically cinematic means to stage this transition, with the exception of a montage sequence that anticipates the aesthetics of distantiation and disconnection, so eloquently at work in Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*. *Tulsa*

revolves around the story of a ranch girl, Cherokee Lansing (Susan Hayward), whose father is killed by debris flung into the air by an erupting gusher. Responsible for this misfortune are Tanner Oil and its eponymous owner Bruce Tanner, whose maliciousness provokes Cherokee to invest in drilling. Tanner soon becomes her arch nemesis, as well as one of several admirers vying with each other to seduce the frisky oil baroness. Guided by ideas of industrial progress and by his own gubernatorial ambitions, Tanner coaxes Cherokee into a merger (probably based on the actual merger of Skelly Oil and Getty Oil Company) that cements her transformation from a playful, bucolic ranch girl into an unscrupulous businesswoman who collects oil-stained dresses for every well she has brought in. The conservationist ideals of her business partner Brad Brady (Robert Preston), a well-traveled, Princeton-educated geologist, fall on deaf ears, as do the entreaties of her childhood friend Jim Redbird (Pedro Amendáriz), an Indian rancher who clings to his pure-bred Herefords and who refuses, even against a court injunction, to allow more oil wells on his property.

Like other Indians in possession of oil-rich allotments, Jim is declared mentally defective – a common practice at the time (Debo 1972: 305), placed under guardianship, and thus effectively dispossessed. The frantic montage sequence that dramatizes his crisis justifies *Tulsa's* Academy Award nomination for editing. In a disordered overlay that castigates the encroachment of industrial development on country life, the sequence blends images of Jim's troubled drive through sky-high oil derricks almost completely colonizing his property. The derricks close in on him like the steel bars of a prison, their pistons pressing down with their monstrous mechanics and hallucinatory hydraulics. At this juncture the film indeed drills down "to the fundamental, bedrock level of the American mind" (Rollins 2006: 93) to uncover a schizophrenic fidelity to both nature and industrial progress, epitomized here in the skillfully composed image of the slain cattle scattered around the oil-poisoned crick. Jim's agonizing refusal to relinquish his trade and traditions completely will safeguard the significance of this film as an important exploration of the domestic tensions that were largely disguised by the global expansion of the drilling industry in the 1920s. After *Tulsa*, "oil capital" will create increasingly bloody frictions between individual entrepreneurs determined to remain self-made (ranchers and wildcatters alike) and large capitalist enterprises looking to gain control over the new resources.

The Giant of Desire

George Stevens's 1956 adaptation of *Giant*, Edna Ferber's "scope-seeking" reappraisal of an American usable past and its traditions, codifies the narrative into the most ambitious epic saga in the history of the oil genre. Stevens shared Ferber's attraction to an aesthetics of large ideas, bolstered by the invention of CinemaScope and by a postwar economic upswing that unleashed the jubilant

consumption of petro-fueled commodities, initiating what Stevens's biographer Marilyn Ann Moss calls "the euphoria of size" (Moss 2004: 203). "*Giant* is so big," Moss writes, "there is no *end* to desire" (226) – a desire that materializes in profit and excess. Oil as a commodity and as a way of life aptly epitomizes – and in turn energizes – this giddy atmosphere. Yet what sets *Giant* apart from *Cimarron* or *Tulsa* is its investment not only in largeness (of landscapes, dreams, and egos), but also in a kind of largesse embodied in Elizabeth Taylor's matriarchal role as the very opposite of Sabra Cravat's bigoted nativism, a role that Stevens upgrades from an ensemble character in Ferber's novel to central intelligence in the film. In an opening sequence that evokes the young Cherokee Lansing chasing calves around her father's ranch in a pre-lapsarian landscape of farming bliss, we meet the marriageable Texan Jordan "Bick" Benedict (Rock Hudson) as he arrives in Maryland to consider the purchase of War Winds, a rebellious horse whose owner, Leslie Lynnton, charms young Bick without delay. The two return to Bick's ranch, Reata, as husband and wife, to the chagrin of Bick's possessive sister Luz (Mercedes McCambridge) and of James Dean's Jett Rink – an obnoxious, habitually drunk cowhand who not so secretly pines for Leslie.

The film takes its time before it strikes oil; it takes longer in fact than Ferber's novel, which begins with a scene already set against the backdrop of Jett's oil empire. We learn that Reata – "almost a different country," as Bick puts it – was built to show the "cotton crowd" that the cattlemen had taken over: a rather short-lived satisfaction, as Jett will soon build his own hotel and airport to outdo the cattle crowd. We pay little attention to Jett before his well comes in, but it is impossible to overlook the disconnection between him and the land that the Benedicts worship so assiduously: Jett seems to live in cars, where he lounges in iconic poses and speaks passionately about who is or isn't boss of Reata (the power dynamic oscillates between Bick and Luz) until Leslie arrives and dispels his doubts. On the small patch of land he inherits from Luz, Jett wants to build his own Little Reata, but his constant drinking and belligerent temper derail his plans – until the day when oil unexpectedly seeps out of Leslie's muddy footprint. It happens when she comes to visit, and luck falls into Jett's lap with little effort on his part. From this day on, he will be nothing more than an opportunist for the Benedicts, "a no good wildcatting so-and-so." Their resolve, if not their resentment, weakens in time and, after years of Jett's "punching" (an image that the film illustrates with more of the violent hydraulics so masterfully edited in *Tulsa*), Bick opens Reata for oil drilling and the cattle soon have to wind their way around the wells (see Figure 15.2).

The spectacular final act, a celebration of Jett and his oil empire that rounds up all the oil-rich Texans, also brings Bick and his former cowhand face to face; "You're all through," Bick mutters, and Paul Thomas Anderson may have had these words in mind when he gave Daniel Plainview the closing line "I'm finished." But Jett has one more thing to say in his drunken monologue. He elucidates his boundless ambition through a sexual metaphor that recasts his quest for oil in



Figure 15.2 The cattle crowd on Reata reluctantly caves in to Jett Rink's upstart enterprise Jetexas. *Giant* (1956). Giant Productions. Director: George Stevens

terms at once sentimental (he sought the love of a woman) and aggressive (he forced his way into the oil business because he couldn't press for Leslie's love). Leslie, he mumbles, is "the woman a man wants, the woman a man's gotta have," in other words she remains an elusive bounty in much the same way in which the riches of Texas were beyond his reach for so long. Jett's intense desire for Leslie – a rare instance of a female figure being conflated with oil, if not exactly possessing it herself – accounts for his subversive charm and for the film's unsettling fascination with this marginal yet irresistible character, with whom we do not exactly sympathize, but whom we nevertheless watch closely, expecting him to yield the clues that the Benedicts' conformity and domesticity clearly withhold. Leslie responds to the enigmatic Jett with both reserve and veiled interest; indeed their relationship may be seen as more broadly symptomatic of that between the pioneer woman and the petroleum frontier, providing a useful conceptualization of how oil ultimately unsettles the domestic territory into which the eastern bride attempts to remould the wilderness.

Even though they might, through their female protagonists, suggest a link between petroleum and femininity as allied figures of subversion and civilization, *Cimarron*, *Tulsa*, and *Giant* in fact stage a conflict between the women's flawlessly shipshape world, on the one hand, and the cacophony of the oil industry with its maniacal ambition and moral Machiavellianism, on the other. Sabra's "careful husbandry," as Donna Campbell has pointed out, "is dwarfed and rendered irrelevant by the unexpected and unearned wealth of the oil fields" (Campbell 2003: 40). At the close of *Cimarron* it is not Sabra's statue that is unveiled but Yancey's, who finds his death among the oil wells, amidst a burgeoning industry that reflects his unsteady passions. The burning oil wells of *Tulsa* need to be dynamited before the contrite Cherokee can find marital bliss with her conservationist lover.

And Leslie, a paragon of matronly histrionics and sentimentalism, never entirely understands Jett Rink's obsession with her beauty, later sublimated in a quest for oil that despoils the land in lieu of the woman. Leslie in particular "works ceaselessly to remake Texas into an empire more socially just than the oppressively class- and race-bound country to which she came as a bride" (37); but what both she and Ferber overlook is that Texas has more to deal with than the arrival of uppity eastern women and will give in to historical pressures greater than Leslie's efforts. The oil industry's growing pains coincide with much of *Giant*'s post-World War I setting, and even though Jett fails in the end by conventional moral standards, his corrupt fiefdom clearly takes the place of Reata as home to the new Texan oligarchy. Stevens advisedly changes the name of Jett's hotel from Conquistador (in Ferber's novel) to Emperador, in order to suggest that the expanding oil empire has already settled into permanency. While James Dean's oil-blackened face obviously highlights his social hybridity as peer to the Mexicans whom he resents (Smyth 2010: 210), Stevens projects oil as something separable from the racial issues that had colored representations of the state, and Jett as the kind of liminal character – racially ambiguous, vaguely menacing, an appendage to the Benedicts with no roots or history of his own – who can personify the shifting face of the new industry (see Figure 15.3).

Jett's lucky strike in fact provides the transitional point that Stevens planned to use as an intermission so as to reflect the dawning oil age on a formal level. In the second half of the film a new sense of mobility emerges with the expansion of Jett's oil enterprise, Jetexas (he and Texas are practically one entity at this point), whose labeled tanker trucks convey crude oil to nearby refineries and petrol stations. Even the Benedicts purchase an airplane and are no longer seen



Figure 15.3 Jett's social hybridity facilitates his role as automobile-crazed transitional figure channeling the shift from ranching culture to oil wealth. *Giant* (1956). Giant Productions. Director: George Stevens

riding horses, despite Bick's archaic attempts to teach his son to ride on his fourth birthday.

In conversations with his son and his son-in-law, both of whom have other plans than taking over Reata, Bick debates whether the country needs cattle, doctors, or soldiers to sustain the war effort. Jett suggests that the nation most urgently needs petroleum; but neither Bick nor the film in general seem to take his statement seriously or at face value (see Figure 15.4). Indeed, representations of the oil industry, both in the novel and in the film, drew the attention of more oil magnates than critics. The *Saturday Review* enlisted a woefully unqualified book reviewer to malign Ferber's novel, partly in order to placate – so Ferber thought – the Texas oil man E. DeGolyer, chairman of the magazine's board of directors, whose feathers may have been ruffled by the book's unflattering portrayal of Jett Rink (Smyth 2010: 199). Even before production began, the Warner Bros. legal department had been anxious about Jett Rink's resemblance to Texas oil millionaire Glenn



Figure 15.4 The elderly Benedicts wistfully ponder the futility of their ranching ambitions. *Giant* (1956). Giant Productions. Director: George Stevens. Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

McCarthy, who started out “working as a ‘pump monkey’ in a filling station for \$15 a week” (McWilliams 1948: 429) and whose well-publicized antics included riding a horse into the lavish hotel he built in Houston (Knowles 1959: 323). Warner also feared a libel suit from the Kleberg family, owners and operators of the gargantuan King Ranch from which Ferber might have drawn some inspiration in describing Reata. Yet Dean’s death in a car accident prior to post-production deflected attention from these potential litigations and encouraged the producers to focus the publicity campaign on Dean and his doomed character, propelling Jett onto a mythical trajectory carried by the actor’s posthumous celebrity. Ironically, Ferber responded to Dean’s death in terms that could be applied to the rising mythology of oil itself: “Poor Jimmy Dean,” she wrote in a letter, “He has grown into a kind of dreadful cult” (quoted in Smyth 2010: 224).

Principal Location: The Oil Well

Partly as a consequence of oil millionaires’ growing investment in Hollywood, by the mid-century wildcatting entered the vocabulary of motion pictures, both thematically and as a catchphrase for irresponsible film ventures. As California journalist and historian Carey McWilliams remarked, “[o]il and motion pictures are not quite as antithetical as might be imagined.” In Hollywood, which has its fair share of “‘wildcat’ productions [. . .] the ‘producer’ is likely either to strike it rich or to come up with a ‘dry hole’” (McWilliams 1948: 429) – and it is with this latter phrase that *TIME* magazine dismissed Stanley Kramer’s 1973 effort *Oklahoma Crude* (Schickel 1973). Oil has certainly inspired some dubious productions over the years, but Kramer’s film wasn’t a dry hole. Released in the year of the oil embargo that precipitated a worldwide crisis and a reappraisal of conspicuous consumption in the United States, *Oklahoma Crude* stages oil disputes on an unpretentious, much smaller scale than the polytonal *Giant*. Based on a novel and screenplay by Marc Norman, the film centers on Lena (Faye Dunaway), a young wildcatter in Oklahoma in 1913 who decides to bring in her oil well without the help of her estranged father (John Mills) or his hired hand Mase (George C. Scott), while she keeps at bay the aggressive oil trust that tries to overrun her claim by sending in a cigar-chewing goon, impersonated with cartoonish verve by Jack Palance. It is quite challenging to determine what distinguishes a gusher from a dry well in cinematic terms, yet *TIME*’s assessment seems rather uncharitable, neglecting as it does the ways in which Kramer blends several key tropes of the oil aesthetics with a concomitant critique of genre stereotypes.

Like Cherokee Lansing, Lena stakes her life and energies on the oil business in the face of overwhelming odds and corporate maneuvers to appropriate her tract. She pursues her wildcatting dreams like a female Yancey, drilling through the frontier and the glass ceiling at the same time, while Mase attempts to anchor her down into a romantic settlement that she accepts out of weakness and a lack

of better options: her oil well comes in spectacularly, only to go dry again within minutes, and the woman and her oil are separated once again. Here the problem lies with the ossified mystique of petroleum as a symbol of triumphant expansionism and adventure, which Hollywood typically associates with the macho western. Although Lena is doubtlessly the most complex character of this film, reviewers have taken her multidimensional personality for granted and acclaimed instead the transformative trajectory of the Scott character, even though the greater love story, subtly sustained by the phallic mechanics of the drilling rig, is clearly that between Lena and her derrick.

Lena spurns Mase's advances not because she doesn't enjoy his company but because her sexual persona exceeds conventional gender boundaries. Mase retreats in disgust after Lena's confession that she abhors both men and women, preferring the idea of a "third sex" endowed with both kinds of reproductive organs, so that she can "screw herself" without having to open the hard shell in which she has so painstakingly enveloped herself. Her obsessive, hands-on rapport with the drilling bit appears to confirm her sexual self-sufficiency. In many ways, Lena anticipates Plainview's relationship with the land, a relationship that Anderson does not explicitly envisage in sexual terms, although the mere fact that *There Will Be Blood* operates so successfully on a libidinal level strongly suggests that we may be overlooking an important dynamic of desire. Famous wildcatter Mike Benedum hinted at this dynamic when he described oil drilling as the triumph "over a stubborn and unyielding Nature, forcing her to give up some of her treasure" (Knowles 1959: 151). Plainview's whisper "there she is" down the mineshaft, his evasive answers to questions about his non-existent wife, and his callous abandonment of his adopted son reveal the extent to which his sexual drive has been sublimated into his drilling operations. Busily engaged in the sensual, selfish business of pampering her well, Lena uncannily duplicates Plainview in everything but gender. Her foulmouthed accusations alienate both her father and Mase. She takes the fight to the oil fat cats and doesn't shy away from indiscriminate killings to reclaim her well. In a sentimental moment she promises Mase a large percentage of the oil profit, yet she cuts it down to two as soon as the well comes in. Even when she romances Mase or mourns the death of her father, we recognize that she only temporarily deigns to climb down the oil hill on which she perches like an Oil Madonna of the Prairie.

With the exception of a single scene shot in the nearby town, where Lena fruitlessly tries to enlist the help of a lawyer, and of another scene in which Palance whisks both Lena and Mase away, to blackmail and beat them to a pulp, the entire film gravitates around the derrick as a home, a family unit, a love nest, a war zone, a furnace, and finally a black swamp of crude dreams. This is the first intimate, psychological oil film that looks at the photogenic landscapes of the legendary West entirely through the grid of the oil derrick. No other film before *Oklahoma Crude* endeavored to restrict its setting to the oil well itself.⁴ In this sense, and bearing in mind Lena's rapidly depleted well, we might describe *Oklahoma Crude* as a "teaser" (in other words, a low-producing gusher) rather than as a "dry hole."

The film's significance is thus twofold. As a treatment of gender roles on the fossil frontier, *Oklahoma Crude* sheds new light on the previously inconceivable notion of a female wildcatter. Psychologically, the film stresses the individualist ethics of early oil exploration, sharpening the quest for oil to the point of psychosis and stripping down the emotional environment of the drilling rig – reducing it from the family ethos of earlier sagas to the all-consuming obsession of a lonely and violent American Adam.

Creation Myths of American Cinema: *There Will Be Blood*

Shot close to Marfa, Texas – the location of George Stevens's *Giant* – *There Will Be Blood* may be seen as the first self-reflective historical petro-film in its focus on the individual rather than on the family and society-oriented processes that formed the subject of Ferber's historical romances. While James Dean chafed, of course, under the marginal position of his character in the broadly trans-generational design of *Giant*, Anderson accords the oil parvenu a larger-than-life role, completely at the expense of familial ties and historical progression. There is so little in this film of what we commonly associate with film historicity that the only way to read *There Will Be Blood* as a historical film is, against the grain, as an image of oil hysteria rather than oil history. While Ferber straddles the boundaries between high and low culture, Anderson aims to move beyond social realism and to establish petroleum as a potentially great myth of cinema, along with other commodity fetishes – such as gold in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) or water in *Chinatown* (1974). Described as a “creation myth for American capitalism” (McGill 2008: 82), *There Will Be Blood* obviously recalls other stories recounting the insidious consequences and tragic postscript of greed – *Citizen Kane*, of course, but also *Scarface* or *Eureka*, both released in 1983 – although Anderson allows both the narrative and the actors' performances to deviate grotesquely from the path trodden by these classics.

Anderson meaningfully projects petroleum as not simply a stage in the history of industrialization, but as the trigger for “changes of operatic sweep” in the “insular world” of southern California (*There Will Be Blood*, n.d.). In the 1920s, the Californian oil craze quickly led to “growing stocks, overflowing tanks, and declining prices, frantic efforts to stimulate more low and unimportant uses [. . .] dozens of new wells, and more oil, more oil” (Ise 1926: 109). Rough-and-tumble independent prospectors must have experienced some degree of cognitive dissonance when this sudden industrial shock exposed them to social life and fervent competition. As Anderson observes in an attempt to justify Plainview's asocial behavior:

A lot of the first oil men started out as gold miners and silver prospectors, and when they made the transition to oil, they were required to be salesmen and speak a lot more than they probably wanted to. I think their natural instinct was to work quietly alone, and I imagine being thrust into situations where they had to sell themselves was endlessly frustrating. (Pizzello 2008: 36)

Through several strategies of historical distantiation, the film shows how Plainview brings “progress and riches to a land that has never known them, at a cost that will blacken his very soul” (*There Will Be Blood*, n.d.). The first among these strategies involves the use of historiographic pointers in the style of *Cimarron*, which opens with the succinct historical caption: “In 1889, President Harrison opened the vast Indian Oklahoma lands for white settlement. 2,000,000 acres free for the taking.” Screenwriter Howard Estabrook punctuates the visual narrative with more such historical superimpositions and intertitles, which had been indispensable in the silent era and which many historical films retained, “thereby self-consciously allying their narratives with the more traditional and respectable forms of written history” (Smyth 2006: 36). “OIL-” stands out among newspaper headlines and other written documents as *Cimarron*’s most dramatic intertitle – the metaphysical header for a new era. Along with superimposed dates, Anderson uses other written media, such as Plainview’s signature or his hand-drawn sketch of a cable tool rig (an improvement over the tripod derrick he starts out with), in order to visualize the industry’s mechanical development and to show that this is not a broad social history of the Southwest but an individual story. Further illustrating the fictional narrative are images that seem modeled on historical portraits.⁵ The classically structured shot of Plainview and H. W. before a crowd of potential customers lingers on the screen during Plainview’s unctuous speech like a haunting, gloomy family portrait (see Figure 15.5). These documentary details form a historical narrative “so enveloping and insular it would feel at once unlike today’s world yet unmoored in time” (*There Will Be Blood*, n.d.).



Figure 15.5 Historical detail is supplied through carefully constructed shots of classical photographic composition. *There Will Be Blood* (2007). Paramount Vantage. Director: Paul Thomas Anderson. Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Anderson also dramatizes the episodic nature of petroleum history through historical gaps and time-lags, in addition to that most obvious temporal lapse – the 80 years that elapsed between the publication of Sinclair’s novel and the release of the film. The narrative skips forward, from the 1890s to the 1920s and from the great outdoors to a city mansion with historically accurate ambient details (e.g., vintage cable drilling equipment), strengthening the effect of these formal fractures. Composer Jonny Greenwood, for example, researched American church music of the time and set himself “constraints such as only using instruments from the period” (Bell 2008: 34). In the densely textured piece that runs over the opening scene, he uses ondes Martenot, a “magical,” “not jarringly modern” instrument, invented in the late 1920s, that “builds a mounting sense of terror of the forces at work below the surface” (*There Will Be Blood*, n.d.) and ties in with “things becoming gradually mechanised” (Bell 2008: 34). This mechanization is reinforced by the soundtrack’s fascination with the hypnotic rhythm of the oil rig tools – a sound pioneered in *Oklahoma Crude* and further strengthened here through its juxtaposition with silence. Silent on the inside and silent once it settles on the ground, oil becomes explosive in its moment of transition, and it is this mysterious mutation that the film seeks to capture through Plainview’s equally enigmatic persona, compounded by a larger sense of mystery at the heart of the film’s spare plot.

Hannah McGill has noted that “the narrative has an anxious, stuttering rhythm: chunks of time are skipped, vital plot information darts by unexamined or is withheld,” creating an ambiguity and wariness that the viewer internalizes: “All the characters’ inner lives are so glancingly sketched that any subterfuge seems possible. We begin, like Plainview, to regard them all with mistrust” (McGill 2008: 82). Like the equally guarded Lena before him, Plainview remains bluntly resistant to human contact, seeking instead to tap not only into oil but also into an endless reservoir of solitude. His misanthropy is predicated on a competitive spirit, instilled in him by the rivalry among oil prospectors. If they didn’t find oil, others did; and if they did find it but failed to make sufficient profit to drill another well, others would, draining the oil underneath their property. When storage tanks were dismantled, oily skeletons at their bottom revealed the bloody outcomes of these rivalries. Daniel Day-Lewis’s archaic mannerisms underline Plainview’s repression and guardedness – which are partially modeled on Count Dracula’s, as suggested by Anderson himself, who refers to his picture as a “horror film” (Pizzello 2008: 36). As if to support this classification, he includes a scene in which the holy-roller fundamentalist Eli Sunday (Paul Dano) performs a spectacular exorcism on the oilman – who is fittingly “given to death-like sleeps on wooden floors (like a vampire in a coffin)” (Newman 2008: 157) when he isn’t haunting his own house or pacing up and down his tracts on long, spidery feet that buckle under the weight of his rotten core (see Figure 15.6).

This type of subliminal horror permeates the film starting with the discovery of oil, which brings with it, as one reviewer aptly noted, “an ominous, unsettling,



Figure 15.6 Plainview's bond with the earth continues even after the oilman has been transplanted into a rich mansion where he never feels entirely at ease. *There Will Be Blood* (2007). Paramount Vantage. Director: Paul Thomas Anderson

before-*Godzilla*-arrives feel, which carries into the rest of the picture as every breaking of ground loses a demonic force" (Newman 2008: 156). Operating on the same spectrum, the title translates oil into blood through a metaphor that reaches its apotheosis in the final scene, as Eli's blood oozes over the floor, in a vivid and unsightly reminder of Plainview's lifelong obsession. The blood/oil analogy encapsulating the violence endemic to oil drilling operations in fact predates Anderson's film and can be traced back as far as 1910, when an unlucky prospector finally bringing in a well triumphantly proclaimed over the roar of his gusher: "My God, we've cut an artery down there" (Knowles 1959: 48).

In a gesture that perfectly encapsulates Anderson's allegorical use of historiographic citation, Plainview materializes as a composite of several historical figures, referencing the California oil tycoon Edward Doheny in particular, who was indicted by the US government in 1924 on multiple charges of bribery and conspiracy. As much a "stalwart frontiersman" as Plainview, Doheny "preferred outdoor life to indoor comforts" (Davis 1998: 7) and, like Anderson's protagonist, he was born in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, prospected for silver before transitioning to oil, and remained uninterested in domestic affairs despite being married twice and having children from both of his consecutive wives. The film's opening may have been inspired by Doheny's unverified story of falling down a mineshaft in New Mexico in the 1880s and breaking both legs (although Anderson places the scene in 1898), while Plainview's first strike evokes Doheny's first oil well in Los Angeles, where "rivulets of the viscous substance" provoked the "shocked silence" (26) of the crew – the same silence that defines the film's opening gambit. Anyone who has seen photographs of Doheny, however, will notice the physical discrepancies between him and Lewis's Plainview. During a series of spectacular trials in the 1920s Doheny was described as "extremely inoffensive [. . .] too gently

inclined and too humorously inclined to be commanding” (Davis 1998: 161); yet the veneer of grandfatherly kindness was misleading. The *New York Times* saw in him an “empire builder,” one of the most “aggressive men in oil production,” who liked “nothing better than a fight – fist or financial” (166). Plainview’s impulsive, megalomaniacal nature indeed resonates with the attention-grabbing personality of this oil magnate, who could burst into apoplectic rages if his will was not satisfied. Like Plainview, Doheny was “blunt, impatient, and demanding” (40), but above all he was “greatly envious” (17) – a sentiment forged over a long period of poverty, gloom, and frustration as the big oil strike eluded him. As Davis notes, “writers have presented Doheny in historical accounts and in fiction as the archetypal evil Yankee and a man of unconscionable greed” (xiv). Yet, beyond this caricatured evil, Doheny and Plainview share a gentler character strain, born of personal grief. Doheny’s son, Ned – groomed, like H. W., to inherit his father’s oil empire – was murdered in the Greystone mansion, where Eli is slaughtered at the end of the film. Plainview loses his son as well, albeit in a less violent manner, when H. W. chooses to forgo his inheritance and strike out on his own in Mexico.

The film’s iconic historical quotation is, however, only obliquely related to Doheny, and it eloquently epitomizes Anderson’s alienating approach to the history of petroleum and to its Hobbesian dynamic. In the climactic Greystone scene, Plainview lapses into a hyperbolic parody of his misanthropic self when Eli, whose fortune took a hard hit after the stock market crash, attempts to sell him mineral rights to a property around which Plainview has been drilling for years. The oilman initially feigns interest, then calmly points out that he has already been able to tap into that basin through drainage – that is, by “drinking” Eli’s “milkshake” through his adjacent wells (see Figure 15.7).

Plainview’s “milkshake” lines were quoted verbatim from a transcript of the 1924 congressional hearings over the Teapot Dome scandal, in which Senator



Figure 15.7 The symbolic sucking of “milkshake” from Eli’s already drained tract underscores Plainview’s vampiric qualities. *There Will Be Blood* (2007). Paramount Vantage. Director: Paul Thomas Anderson

Albert Fall, who was ultimately convicted of accepting bribes for oil-drilling rights to public lands, explained oil drainage by reasoning: “Sir, if you have a milkshake and I have a milkshake and my straw reaches across the room, I’ll end up drinking your milkshake” (Foundas 2008). Historically, this entertaining argument accurately describes how oil extraction was regulated by the rule of capture, which decreed that “oil resources were available to all neighbors simultaneously,” so that if “one producer decided to abstain from production [. . .] that person’s neighbor might simply take all the oil” (Sabin 2005: 15–16). The resulting impetus toward overproduction contributed to the instability of both production and prices, which accumulated to take a massive toll on individual psychology. As one local editor put it in 1865, people

neither talk, nor look, nor act as they did six months ago. Land, leases, contracts, refusals, deeds, agreements, interests, and all that sort of talk is all that they can comprehend. [. . .] the social circle is broken; the sanctuary is forsaken; and all our habits, and notions, and associations for half a century are turned topsy-turvy in the headlong rush for riches. (Yergin 1992: 33)

Anderson effectively captures the moral chaos and growing distance among individuals as the oil derricks huddle closer and closer together. In doing so he strays from the historical record of Doheny’s life, to create an almost entirely unsympathetic, intensely inward-looking character.

At the end of his spectacular rise from obscure silver prospector to canny politician, Doheny dined privately with Winston Churchill (Davis 1998: 104) and even came to regard himself as a global player in the oil industry, repeatedly encouraging President Wilson to seize control of the Mexican oil fields in order to secure America’s wartime petroleum supplies (117). Plainview’s ascent is much less intellectual or politically minded, Anderson focusing instead on his character’s interior conflicts. Even though Plainview’s mansion gives the impression of a lavish, tastefully furnished property, its dark interiors sketch not so much artistic taste as a sullen psychological landscape, because Plainview’s dollars do not leap as lightly out of his pockets. His ascetic lifestyle cannot be further removed from Doheny’s sybaritic life philosophy, or from his philanthropic enterprises. Even in Doheny’s Greystone mansion, Lewis portrays a man who is uneasy with his own wealth and doesn’t quite know how to enjoy it. He eats his meals from a plate that he holds over his knees, as if he were still a wildcatter living in a tent. Nor does Plainview conform to the image of Doheny as a businessman and defendant in multiple courts, a man who had become the dull executive of his frontier empire even while he continued to describe himself nostalgically as an “ordinary, old time, impulsive, irresponsible, improvident sort of a prospector” (Knowles 1959: 215). When H. W. expresses his nostalgia for the oil field, Plainview – now chained to a desk, with the routine task of signing documents – only pretends not to share it. The new economic era, in which business revolves around the aggregation of

capital rather than around the rugged individualism of the early oil boom, has obviously passed him by.

While it certainly makes sense that the role of petroleum in American industrialization during the opening decades of the twentieth century should come under increasing scrutiny at this time, the image of the evangelical preacher Eli stands out as a rather unusual addition to the oil canon. In creating Eli, both Sinclair's novel and Anderson's film draw on the life of Pentecostal preacher Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944) – one among several kinds of speculators and fast-buck artists who thrived in free-wheeling LA during the oil boom.⁶ Sinclair's Eli Watkins displays much of Sister Aimee's religious effervescence in visions, trances, and glossolalia, which draw large audiences to his healing services in the white tabernacle modeled on Aimee's Angelus Temple; and there he, like McPherson, applies his sense of drama to orchestrate religious tableaux and pageants. Eli's rhetoric closely follows Aimee's in its slightly stilted, archaic tone, characteristic of undereducated story-tellers intimately conversant with the Bible. Like Aimee, Eli preaches on the radio to expand his congregation; but, unlike the female preacher, Sinclair's grandstanding, spiritually impoverished Eli has little depth. Paul Dano's Eli, on the other hand, is an artful self-creator who seeks to justify his actions by appealing to the supposedly divine sanctions of a church of his own creation, much the same way as Plainview sees his drilling success as the emblem of a divine favor. Just as Eli is "washed in the blood" of Christ, Plainview is washed in oil and filled with awe, indeed almost delirious, at the realization that he can triumph over nature while Eli and his followers celebrate vanquishing the devil inside them. Both the oilman and the preacher chase dreams of wealth that belie the authenticity of their promises to channel religious rebirth (Eli) or to open up Californian oil badlands for civilization (Plainview promises schools and crops to gullible farmers). Plainview is, after all, no less of a false prophet than Eli – his oilman's speeches no less incantatory, commanding, and hypnotic than the preacher's. He succeeds, unlike the down-on-his-luck Eli, simply because his commodity, oil, is always in demand and less dependent on market fluctuations. Like Jesus Christ himself, oil is "the same yesterday, today and forever," as Aimee Semple McPherson would put it. Nor does oil present an entirely adventitious attraction for Eli. The secluded life in the oil colony sensitizes the workers to his message, thus encouraging him to imagine himself as patron to the treasures dug out by the derricks rising out of the barren land like churches. "There is [. . .] a slightly melodramatic quality about oil fields," Carey McWilliams writes, elaborating on the spiritual flair of the region:

The great shining storage tanks glisten in the sun; the forest of derricks assume fantastic shapes in mist and cloud, light and darkness; and the ceaseless thumping of the pumps makes for an atmosphere of doubt and misgiving. Oil drillers themselves are a notoriously superstitious breed of men. (McWilliams 2001: 40)

In the words of Yancey Cravat, the new oil empire emerges "like a miracle out of the Old Testament," and the film uses Eli as a kind of moral chorus to punctuate

the stages of Plainview's meteoric rise. In the flaming gusher on the Watkins farm Eli sees a warning against the powers about to be unleashed through drilling, powers that only his church can harness – although Plainview, of course, disagrees. Their quarrels over oil leases mimic the structure of conversion, each trying to persuade the other through head-butting missionary work (see Figure 15.8).

This archetypal struggle brings Anderson's elliptical reworking of Doheny's and McPherson's biographies into the proximity of several American classics, particularly California-based stories of endless ambition, rancor, or pride. Anderson's



Figure 15.8 With the congregation gathered at its wooden stair, the derrick shows an uncanny resemblance with Eli's church, against which it competes in an archetypal struggle to capture the faith of the oil workers. *There Will Be Blood* (2007). Paramount Vantage. Director: Paul Thomas Anderson. Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

models appear to be of the rags-to-riches-to-rags variety, where the driven American survives unscathed, if morally chastened, in spite of his violent transgressions. For one thing, Daniel Day-Lewis's seasoned, avuncular voice recalls John Huston's Noah Cross in *Chinatown*, a film that obsesses as much as *There Will Be Blood* does over dubious land acquisitions. Polanski's equally bloody thriller revolves around water (the commodity on which the fate of parched Los Angeles depends) – as permanent, obvious, and intractable a problem as petroleum three decades earlier. Both films recast the early expansionist days of American capitalism as an elemental madness by pathologizing the image of America's founding fathers quite literally, through perverted father figures whose avarice and penitential power over others know no bounds: Noah Cross impregnates his own daughter, while Plainview callously uses his son to attract customers, then abandons him when a gas explosion takes away the boy's hearing. Both Plainview and Cross undertake an unassailably confident course of action that seems rooted in a full acceptance of evil: as Noah Cross remarks, "most people never have to face the fact that at the right time and the right place they're capable of anything." Both look beyond their immediate profit into a transcendent, bountiful dream-in-progress – "The future, Mr. Gittes! The future!" – commensurate with Yancey Cravat's vision of the fossil frontier as a gateway to progress and of himself as its privileged usher.

If John Huston's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which Anderson and his crew were watching while shooting *There Will Be Blood*, is another obvious reference, there are a few less explicit intertexts of which Anderson himself may have been only dimly conscious, such as Martin Scorsese's *Aviator* (2004) and Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924). The son of a Houston industrialist who made a fortune by selling innovative drilling bits, Howard Hughes possessed the kind of gift for spending oil money that Plainview patently lacks. And, although they are equally obsessed with the future, the two millionaires see it through different lenses: Plainview remains a team of one, while Hughes – like Hearst/Kane before him – embodies the self-made man who has broken with pioneer ideals. "The old pioneering spirit is disappearing," Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in 1910, citing the "oil king" as a prototype of the new "monarch of trusts" who exercises control over vast economic empires (Turner 1920: 317–318). The frontiers opened by the oil boom became profitable only after "their integration into an industrial economy" (Slotkin 1998: 18), providing the necessary infrastructure for mass transportation and marketing. Anderson, however, isolates Plainview by pitting him against companies such as Standard Oil, which dictates railroad policies and holds the monopoly over America's refining capacity and pipelines. As a small operator, Plainview certainly relies on large enterprises to buy the oil he produces, yet his image of himself as a spike in the wheel of big business preserves his frontier integrity and allows the film to acquit him in the end. It is above all Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* that echoes in the final confrontation between Plainview and Eli, slugging it out in the harshly lit bowling alley of Doheny's Greystone mansion.

Greed covers nearly the same time span as *There Will Be Blood* (1908 to 1923) and, like Anderson's film, it adapts a novel – in this case, Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) – in ways that greatly expand on the original. Yet, while von Stroheim's film develops into a study of masochistic desire for money, quite significantly we never see any cash in *There Will Be Blood*, even though precise sums are offered, withheld, or rejected. Plainview's obsession is with the simplicity of the desert/oil dichotomy, the desert that Howard Hughes came to long for because it was, as the eccentric recluse imagined it, "clean" (a purity that is coterminous with the oilman's yearning for solitude). The visionary final scene in the Death Valley, where McTeague kills his archenemy only to realize that they are chained together and he won't be able to escape the scorching heat – certainly a scene we could read retrospectively as a bleak premonition of the American century trailing off on a despondent note in oil-packed hostile deserts – parallels Anderson's open-ended confrontation between religion and capitalism, both of which are morally and intellectually "finished," though very much alive as an unbroken historical lineage between the 1930s and the present.

Thus, far from being a mere sidetrack to the central industrializing impulse in the opening decades of the twentieth century, petroleum history is represented in these films as integral to American capitalism and western expansion, but also as crucial to a critical interrogation of American frontier mythology. Whereas earlier historical scenarios such as *Cimarron*, *Tulsa*, or *Giant* are invested in the domestic and social impact of the burgeoning oil industry, recent interventions are strongly marked by a much more variegated reconstruction of the early oil boom, which derives in part from the deliberate juxtaposition of cinematic signifiers so as to show that the history of cinema and petroleum history converge in mutually illuminating ways. Doheny's Greystone mansion in Beverly Hills is not only the location for the climactic scenes of Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*, but also – interestingly – the former headquarters of the American Film Institute (from 1965 to 1982), where the film's cinematographer, Robert Elswit, was shooting video as a student.⁷ Film history and oil history again converge through this coincidence. Doheny had in fact attempted to bring them even closer by asking movie mogul Cecil B. DeMille to think over the possibility of shooting a film that would present Doheny's own perspective on the scandalous litigations in which he was embroiled (fearing controversy and public attack, DeMille declined). Anderson's portrayal of Doheny in Daniel Plainview absorbs the intervening history of the American oil industry – with echoes of an imperial peak and decline – and provides a dynamic dramatization of oil as a key economic event and cultural trauma. From 1931 to 2008, the historical oil film consequently evolves from the repression of oil narratives in relation to the dominant economies of race and gender in early frontier discourses, toward an aesthetic encoding of petroleum as necessarily embroiled both with the historiographic genre and with the nexus of ambition, opportunity, and violence at the heart of American cinema.

Notes

- 1 One chapter in David Fine's study *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (Fine 2000) is fittingly entitled "The twenties and beyond: Oil, movies, and salvation."
- 2 The filmmakers had received equipment from the Texas Oil Company, while thousands of filling stations advertised the film for RKO. The press book even claimed that *Cimarron* tells "the whole story of Texaco" – a plain exaggeration: the statement is supported by a single shot (Smyth 2010: 136).
- 3 These include *Boomtown* (1940), *Flowing Gold* (1940), *Wildcat* (1942), *Desperadoes of the West* (1950), *Spoilers of the Plains* (1951), *Dream Wife* (1953), *Thunder Bay* (1953), *Blowing Wild* (1953), *The Houston Story* (1956), and *The Wheeler Dealers* (1963).
- 4 Even though he includes appendages to the derrick such as the church, the mansion, or the negotiation table, in *There Will Be Blood* Paul Thomas Anderson explores the dramatic potential of the oil well in the tradition established by Kramer.
- 5 To provide historical context, the DVD extras of the collector's edition include *The Story of Petroleum*, a vintage featurette (1923–1927) created by the US Bureau of Mines in collaboration with the Sinclair Oil Company as a promotional film, in addition to a 15-minute slideshow of old prospecting photographs interspersed with images from the film. Many of the photographs originate in Kenny A. Franks and Paul F. Lambert, *Early California Oil: A Photographic History, 1865–1940* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1985).
- 6 Aimee McPherson in fact responded to the petroleum zeitgeist of Southern California. One of her earliest sermons arose from the Parable of the Ten Virgins, which she uses to illustrate that "some know the value of oil and some do not; some waste on earth the fuel required for Heaven" (Epstein 1993: 125). In the statement she made during a grand jury investigation into her kidnapping, Aimee stressed her disdain for earthly riches by noting "I have never put my money in oil wells," although in August 1934 she was entertained at the home of "Mr. Phillips, of the Phillips Petroleum Company" (390).
- 7 Greystone is not the only property belonging to an oil tycoon to feature prominently as a film location. Until 1957 Norma Desmond's Renaissance-style mansion, as seen in *Sunset Boulevard*, stood at 641 South Irving Boulevard and belonged to oil tycoon J. Paul Getty. At the time of filming the mansion had passed to Mrs J. Paul Getty in a divorce settlement, and she, in turn, rented the property out to Paramount.

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