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The Face of Janus

Iconoclasm in PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON'S

There Will Be Blood

In memory of dr. James Hurley
(1956-2014)

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Ladies and gentlemen…

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Ladies and gentlemen...
Introduction

"[T]he look and speech of an American Western are generally recognizable in any culture that has been exposed to its conventions," Rita Parks tells us in her monography *The Western Hero in Film and Television*.[1] More simply put: you know a Western when you see one.

And indeed, anyone who watches a film like George Stevens' 1953 classic SHANE will probably be able to guess its genre within the first minute: a lone horseman rides into the frame, with in the background the famous Rocky Mountains. The image has become such an iconic cliché that one does not even need to have seen a Western in order to understand it as one.

The same goes for THERE WILL BE BLOOD (TWBB), Paul Thomas Anderson's epic 2007 drama about a ruthless oilman in early twentieth century California, loosely based on Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel *Oil!*. It has men riding horses; Stetson-hats; ranches; open plains, interrupted by train tracks: the iconography points almost directly to the Western. And as it turns out, one can find allusions to the Western not only in the film's formal qualities, but within the narrative structure of its plot as well.[i]

Why is this interesting? The reader needs to be aware of the fact that the Western hero is one of the most potent and enduring symbols of the United States.[2] The lone, individualistic macho on his horse became not only an example for many Americans, it came to exemplify different projected ideals.[3] The cowboy quickly became a stock character of American national culture. What to think then of Daniel Plainview, TWBB's protagonist? Brilliantly portrayed by English actor Daniel Day-Lewis, Plainview is as lonely and individualistic as the archetype from SHANE, HIGH NOON (1952) and THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE (1962). And it is true that the cowboy has always walked a thin line between good and bad, but even 'outlaws' like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid are sympathetic and

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[i] I will focus primarily on the classic variation of Western as categorized by Will Wright. There are of course many different types within the genre, like the 'Spaghetti Western', the 'anti-Western', the 'Revisionist Western' and the types Wright distincts: the 'Vengeance Variation', 'Transition Theme' and the 'Professional Plot'. Because of the remarkable resemblance TWBB has with the 'Classical Plot' – which will be clarified later on in this introduction – and since the article would otherwise threaten to become too convoluted, I will not elaborate on the other categories.

easily admirable. Nevertheless, "[y]ou're unlikely to find an uglier character in recent years than Plainview," writes *Empire* on Day-Lewis' character.[4] The greedy, selfish misanthrope is scarcely praiseworthy and for this reason it is interesting to find out what the resemblances are between this protagonist and the ones from classical Westerns.

Frantz Fanton called national culture a passionate research, "directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others."[5] As a form of cultural expression, the Western might once had this end, but watching TWBB it seems unlikely that Anderson wants to offer his viewers the portrayal of "some very beautiful and splendid era" and to step *beyond* self-contempt.

Stuart Hall calls cinema "not […] a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but […] that form of representation which is able to constitute us as a new kind of subject, and thereby enable us to discover who we are."[6] If we decide to see the Western as a cultural expression, Hall's definition might open some more doors: what is Anderson saying to or about his people and his country when he turns one of their most enduring icons into a monster like Plainview? I shall look at what Anderson has done exactly with the Western hero in his characterization of the protagonist in TWBB and ask what the effect of it is. I hypothesize that my research will, among other things, illustrate the flexibility of the Western genre and that it will be an addition to the scientific field of Western cinema, in which the modern Western as of now has still been undertheorized and overshadowed by its classic counterpart.

One of the main texts that will be a starting point in my analysis of this character within the context of the American classic Western film is Marc Vernet's article "Het filmpersonage", which appeared in the magazine *Versus* in 1989. In order to come to a meaningful conclusion about a character, claims Vernet, it is crucial to consider it in relation to other characters. "Een personage definieert zich dus niet per se, voor zichzelf, niet alleen vanwege de heterogeniteit van zijn kenmerken […], maar ook omdat het zich plaatst in verhouding tot de netwerken die opgebouwd zijn uit de elementen van de andere personages. Een personage beschrijven betekent dus de netwerken beschrijven waarin de elementen circuleren en betekent dus ook alle personages beschrijven."[7] For this reason I will consider Plainview as an *actor* next to characters like H.W. and Eli Sunday. But since, in the end, I want to research the character as an archetypical Western "hero", I also need to consider him in relation to the protagonist in a classic Western. This is where I arrive at

Philippe Hamon. In his work "De semiologische status van het personage" (Versus, 1989) he makes the distinction between three different ways of looking at characters. Because of the attention I wish to pay to the function of archetyping in the case material, I am mostly interested in Plainview as a 'referential sign': the reference to a steady factor – in this case the cowboy – which has been given meaning by culture.[8] "[H]et personage zal dus bepaald worden door een *netwerk van relaties* op grond van overeenkomst, tegenstelling, hiërarchie en rangschikking (zijn distributie), die het personage op het niveau van de signifiant en de signifié aangaat, achtereenvolgens en/of gelijktijdig, met de andere personages en elementen van het werk en binnen eenzelfde context (de andere personages in dezelfde roman, hetzelfde werk) of in een aanverwante context *(in absentia:* de andere personages van hetzelfde genre)."[9] For the comparison, I have chosen for SHANE, because it is widely considered to be classic example of the American Western film,[10] and because it shares several similarities with TWBB, among which the iconic sequence of a stranger riding into a small village in America's West: the start of many great Westerns.

Of course, TWBB is not like all Westerns, and neither is SHANE. Unlike in THE SEARCHERS (1956) and NEVADA SMITH (1966)there is no theme of vengeance ; there are no Native Americans like there are in STAGECOACH (1939) or THE BIG TRAIL (1930) and both films lack the archetypical sheriff such as Gary Cooper in HIGH NOON and Errol Flynn in DODGE CITY (1939). Parks therefore looks for a definition of *a* Western, not *the* Western. "The implication is that there is no touchstone, model, or prototype that embodies the essence of "Westernness." There are individual Westerns that illustrate specific aspects of the total image; there are some that seem particularly rich in every aspect."[11] We will embrace this liberal definition, since it offers us more leeway in defining TWBB as a Western.

She names the "*visual and verbal elements*", which are "both a means of telling the story, of communicating mood as well as plot."[12] Moreover, they "illuminate the conventions of the Western genre", "both tell the story or develop some narrative aspect of the action" and "illustrate certain aspects of the characters or situations which are more forcefully depicted through symbolic speech or image."[13]

According to Parks, "[*s*]*tory form* is specified in the definition in order to clarify the relationship of a specific plot or action to the larger concept of the Western as myth." She states that the Western depicts certain symbolic elements of either American life, like "the self-made man, the Edenic dream, the clever Yankee, the energy, independence and freedom of movement," or of American versions of universal tales: "the death and

resurrection of the hero-god, the journey, the quest, the demon trickster, the duel to the death between good and evil."[14]

Parks then names the "*stock characters of situations*", which can be "embellished, twisted, reversed, convoluted, and sometimes parodied in order to produce variations upon the theme."[15] Also, a Western "takes place in a *frontier setting*[ii] of chronological time, geographical place, or psychological point of view."[16] It has "[*p*]*articular types of characters*", like the hero, the townspeople and the savages, who are then finally "*consensually associated with those situations and that setting* characterized as "frontier.""[17] Parks rightly says that "the concept of cultural consensus is basic to the definition of the Western. […] The iconography and the language, the mythic dimension and the stock situations, the characters and setting are all recognizable if they are consistent in their relationship with each other within the requirements of the genre."[18] Once again, simply put: you know a Western when you see one.

Reading TWBB's and SHANE's respective summaries, it seems easy to draw an unambiguous parallel between the two main characters: both Shane and Plainview must be the undisputed heroes of the film. This is all the more true when we read it along the lines of Will Wright's definition of the classical Western's functions in his indispensible book *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. He lists them as follows:

1. The hero enters society.
2. The hero is unknown to society (*optional*).
3. The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability.
4. The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given a special status.
5. The society does not completely accept the hero.
6. There is a conflict of interest between the villains and the society.
7. The villains are stronger than the society; the society is weak.
8. There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and a villain (*optional*).
9. The villains threaten the society.
10. The hero avoids involvement in the conflict (*optional*).
11. The villains endanger a friend of the hero (*optional*).
12. The hero fights the villains.

[ii] Whether this frontier is situated in the East or the West seems to be irrelevant to her. This might be contested, but since TWBB is uncontroversially set in West Coast California, I chose to pay no heed to it in this essay.

13. The hero defeats the villains.
14. The society is safe.
15. The society accepts the hero.
16. The hero loses or gives up his special status.[19]

In SHANE, these functions can be recognized as follows: Shane rides his horse into a small town (1) to which he is unknown (2). There, he is discovered to be an excellent gunfighter (3), causing him to be greatly respected by the townsmen, and even admired by the son of a local farmer called Starrett (4), but only after he is severely distrusted by them (5) for riding ahead of the Ryker family, a villainous gang of ranchers who attempt to take all of the town's land by force (6). Shane discovers that the villagers are clearly no match for the gang (7), who start to intimidate and even murder folk (9), but he leaves the conflict for Starrett to solve (10) until he learns that the man is about to walk into a deadly trap (11). He then steps up as the person to fight the Rykers and confronts them in a saloon (12), where he manages to shoot and kill the leader in a gunfight (13), after which the surviving members leave town (14). Even though Shane is greatly admired after his actions (15) he decides to leave because his work is done here (16).

Let us summarize TWBB in the same manner, interpreting the 'villain' Plainview needs to fight as 'growing poverty': Plainview rides his T-Ford into a small town called Little Boston (1) to which he is unknown (2). There, he is discovered to be an excellent businessman and oil tycoon (3), causing him to be greatly respected by the townsmen (4), with the exception of the young priest Eli, who doubts his honorable intentions (5) to save the town from decline and poverty (6). Plainview notices that the townspeople themselves are not capable of bringing wealth to society (7) and steps forward as the man who will turn Little Boston into a flourishing enterprise (12). He manages to buy up all the land and successfully starts drilling for oil (13), bringing jobs and capital to the town (14). Even though Plainview is ultimately accepted as a member of the community (15) he decides to leave Little Boston in order to live in solitude (16).

I now have a reason to read TWBB as a classical Western in the first place, which opens the door to our research. Remarkably enough, the film does not really feature a human or antromorphic villain in the above summary/interpretation. This early in my thesis, it might seem problematic to base the entire research on 'poverty' being TWBB's 'villain'. That Plainview is helping a town in trouble is obvious, but this trouble does not necessarily come in the shape of one or more bad guys, as is the case in SHANE. This makes the following

analysis complex, and therefore all the more interesting since according to Vernet, a character is defined by the way he relates to other characters. More specifically, and corresponding with Wright: a hero is defined by the villain he faces. And since, naturally, poverty is not a character, it can never be interpreted as an *actual* villain. Then why bother? Because, perhaps, TWBB was never intended to simply be (like) a classic Western.[iii]

Throughout the film, it is occasionally suggested that Anderson was very much aware of the type of genre he was dealing with, and TWBB continues to both embrace and distance itself from it;in formal elements but also within its narrative structure. This mostly applies toits representation of its Western hero: Daniel Plainview, butnd also to its positioning of the villain. I will go into greater detail on the subject later on.

I willinitially focus on differences and similarities between Plainview and Shane, paying attention to their actions, decisions and motives. I will view Plainview as a continuation of the cultural phenomenon we know als 'the cowboy', and look at what both Day-Lewis and Anderson did with it. There are several titles that I will use in this research, most of them focus specifically on the Western as a genre. The first of them, and possibly the most obvious choice, is of course Wright's *Sixguns and Society*. It links up nicely with Vernet, since Wright specifically focuses on the narrative structure in the Western, whereas Vernet uses cinematic semantics to analyze characters in cinema in general.

However, Wright does not give a clear definition of the Western.Parks, on the other hand, does. In *The Western Hero in Film and Television*, she calls the Western "a visual and verbal story from depicting a repertoire of situations in a frontier setting and involving the particular types of characters consensually associated with those situations and that setting."[20] Like Wright, Parks is mostly interested in the mythology behind the Western and its hero.[iv] I have chosen to use Parks as a source because of her extensive attention to "the

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[iii] TWBB makes of course many references to classic Western iconography (see figure 1a and 1b) and has that one interesting shot which shows us a train track in the middle of the frame, piercing trough the Western plains: a visual motive commonly associated with Westerns since Edwin S. Porter's THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY from 1903, the first film in the genre ever produced. But there, Anderson makes a small, postmodernist joke: the camera suddenly pans right and we see a small T-Ford driving next to the track. As it approaches, the camera slowly starts to ride backwards, following the car. Eventually the car drives next to the camera, with the camera riding next to it; the train track has lost its classic narrative function by adopting the cinematographic function of a dolly track, in order to shoot the technological innovation which replaced the locomotive as the number one engine in the world (figure 2).

[iv] I will refer especially often to her second chapter, "The Materials of Myth", wherein she dives into the great variety of different archetypes in which the Western hero presents himself. Not only as cowboy, but also as soldier, 'man with a gun' and the 'mountain man'. These latter two will return in the second chapter, since they correlate with the character of Plainview.

character," and I believe her work will greatly contribute to my research.The third title concerning the genre of the Western is another one from Wright: *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy & Social Theory*. The author argues that, as summarized in the blurb, "the cowboy myth reflects the criticism made of industrial capitalism by the seminal figures of classical sociology, Marx, Weber and Durkheim, each of whom criticized the class structure, bureaucracy and cynical individualism of the industrial market." Because of Plainview's identity as an industrial capitalist, I will refer to this book multiple times throughout this thesis.

Due to his relatively short career, only a few monographies have been written on Anderson and his work. Of those few titles in existence, there is only one featuring a chapter on TWBB: Jason Sperb's *Blood and Blossoms: Postmodern Media Culture and the Films of Paul Thomas Anderson*. The book gives an honest, in-depth analysis of Anderson's œuvre and provides a high amount of background information on TWBB's narrative, characters and production. I will therefore refer to Sperb on several occasions.

My method of research will be a structuralist character analysis: I will interpret formal elements from the case studies to draw conclusions about the correspondence between Plainview and Shane.

The starting point for this methodology is Wright's categorization of Western elements into several binary oppositions. This binary division will form the basis of my thesis structure: every paragraph will focus on one of the oppositions Wright proposes – these being hero/society; good/bad; strong/weak and wilderness/civilization. In each paragraph, both TWBB and SHANE will be considered in the light of the relevant binary and subsequently compared with each other.

I have chosen this particular construction because I believe it will give my thesis a logical and clearly organized structure.

In the conclusion I will summarize the parallels between a classic Western, like SHANE, and TWBB, and offer an explanation as to what Anderson meant to say with his iconoclastic take on the Western hero.

figure 1a

figure 1b

figure 2

I habe a competition in me

A definition of opposites

According to Wright, observing the characters' actions, choices and motives, can help us to recognize the classical plot. Their conceptual meaning becomes clear on exposing what Wright calls the 'oppositional structure' of the Western: how are the different characters different? What are their "recurring or defining points of conflict and opposition?"[21]

This part will focus on these oppositions, of which – in the classical Western and according to Wright – there are four: hero/society; good/bad; strong/weak and wilderness/civilization.

The difference between the hero and society is mostly made explicit because the hero is a wanderer without any home, family, friends and/or past. The society on the other hand is portrayed as a community filled with familes.[22] 'Good versus bad' puts both hero and town in opposition to the villain, and is chiefly manifested in the struggle between the social village and the selfish, greedy villain. Looking closer at this opposition we arrive at a second coding in which we notice the hero's kind nature and the unfriendly personality of the villains.[23] The third opposition, between strong and weak, contrasts both the hero and the villain with the society. While the pro - and antagonist are both assertive and powerful, the village is almost always doubtful and slack.[24] Wilderness/civilization is the final opposition and quite a metaphorical one: roaming as free as a bird on the wing, the hero symbolizes the wilderness, while the village (including the villain) stands for civilization, as in "having a concern with the money, tools, and products of American culture."[25]

Get out of here, devil

hero versus society

The main question one needs to ask with this opposition is: who is in- and who is outside society? As can be read in the introduction to this chapter, the more superficial answer is: the hero and village respectively. But it becomes harder when we try to identify the hero; exactly what I will be doing in this thesis. This main question is therefore also the starting point of my research.

Then, what seperates the hero from the rest of society? In SHANE, the required elements are clearly present: he has no past, and only hints at what might have been his life years ago. He even lacks a surname. The audience, like the other characters, are given vague clues like "It's been a long time since I've seen a Jersey cow," and "I'm bound one place or another, someplace I've never been." The villagers have families, jobs and a home. Starrett makes the situation explicit when he firmly states: "We've got our roots down here."

In TWBB we can find a similar opposition: Daniel Plainview drives into the village of Little Boston, a close community filled with big families. The first people Plainview encounters are the Sundays, a family of farmers consisting of father Abel and his wife, sons Eli and the absent Paul, and the two daughters, one of them named Mary. Their roots lie on their ranch, on which they grow potatoes and raise goats. Plainview is presented as their direct opposite. Although less vague than Shane's, his past still remains mysterious. We know that he grew up in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin and dug for silver during the '90s. His youth, ancestry, education, precise age and pretty much everything else remain ambiguous.

There is a remarkable scene in SHANE where the title character changes his buckskin outfit for jeans and a shirt. He takes a job as Starret's assistant and moves into his house. It becomes clear that he plans on becoming part of society. We often detect Shane staring at Starrett's wife Marian, and he looks after their son Joey as if it were his own child. He seems to be trying to compensate his lack of civilian life with the presence of a family, a wife, child, house and having a job.

Plainview appears to be making a similar attempt: he imitates bourgeois life by presenting himself as a father and by eulogizing familylife.[v] Plainview, like Shane, tries to assimilate in society. His reasons, though, are understood as being mostly pragmatic, as

[v] "I encourage my men to bring their families as well," he tells the citizens. "Of course it makes for an ever as much rewarding life for them."

opposed Shane's more romantic motives. As a family business, with a cute son as a partner at his side, he manages to win the hearts of many clients.

It is an interesting fact, then, that Plainview has no real family: his so-called offspring, H.W., is secretly adopted after the death of the boy's father, Plainview's colleague, and when halfway into the film a stranger introduces himself to be Plainview's half-brother Henry, after which he is made the latter's new partner, the man turns out to be a fraud. It seems that Plainview's family life exists only as family business, and can only exist based on lies – if not Plainview's then someone else's.

That family is important for Plainview is obvious. Nevertheless, the question remains whether this importance stems only from economical reasons or also from any sentimental ones. Perhaps we will get some clearance with the arrival of Henry: "Having you here gives me a second breath," Plainview tells his supposed brother. He entrusts him with his past, fully convinced of having found a congenial mind. That the past nevertheless remains and stays behind, is made evident when Plainview reminisces about a house he used to live near. In his childhood he wanted to eat in it, clean it and have his children run around in it, so he says; nowadays, he expects that only the sight of it would make him sick.

Somewhere in time a turning point must have taken place, where Plainview broke not only with his bourgeois life, but with his roots altogether. When he decides to accept part of that past in the form of Henry, he learns that his real brother has actually died. Like Shane, Plainview remains a man without a past, whether he likes it or not. "[T]he minimal requirement for the hero is that he belongs to the West and has no association with the East, with education and culture."[26] Whatever remains there, back in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, it is out of Plainview's reach. He belongs to the West only.

With the arrival of Henry, H.W. moves more and more to the background. This definitely has something to do with his obtained deafness, which makes him useless as a business partner, but probably also with the fact that Plainview thinks he now has a *genuine* kinsman to pose as partner in his family business.

Whether that is true or not, it is obvious that he grants Henry a unique position. Sitting in front of a campfire, Plainview leans over to him and entrusts him: "I can't keep doing this on my own. With these people." He grins to the man next to him: they are family, therefore like-minded and together they stand against the rest of the world, against the other "people". It is a relationship we could never detect between Plainview and H.W., since the latter's practical position always overshadowed his position as a son. To Plainview, H.W. was never an equal.

A scene suggesting otherwise is a tender one in which Plainview willingly lets H.W. cut his hair. The positions of dominance and subordinance are reversed, and even outweighed by the suggestion of affinity between the two (see figure 3). Interestingly, this scene was cut from the final version. Anderson appears to have tried to conceal any suggestion of tenderness between the two characters, an approach which reaches its climax in the penultimate scene in which an older and newlywed H.W. informs his father that he and his wife will move to New Mexico to start his own oil company. He motivates his decision by saying: "I'd rather keep you as my father than my partner." But since he always has been more of a business partner than a son for Plainview, not much is left when he distances himself from the first role. A son he never was, states Plainview, and now that he ceases to be a partner as well, all that he remains to him is a part of the rest of the world the misanthrope stands against. "You're killing my image of you as a son [read: "business partner"]." he says. It would be quite an unambiguous character defining sequence, were it not for the little scene following it: sitting among his workers, Plainview playfully teases H.W. (see figure 4), showing us a rare example of fatherly love in TWBB. Is it a flashback? Or a false memory? Some fantasy? Fact is, that it complicates the above scene with Plainview saying: "You're someone else's. […] I took you for no other reason than that I needed a sweet face to buy land." Like in most Anderson films, character development is complex: never explicit, always implied. To give a satisfying conclusion on the matter seems almost impossible; Plainview's actions, choices and motives constantly contradict one another.

What *can* be concluded in the first half of this paragraph is that Plainview is and remains the man without a past. The son he claims to have is not really his – he permanently distances himself from him in the final act – and the man who claims to be his brother is an impostor. His attempts to become a part of a community only exemplify his opposition with society;ot only because of said lies, but also because of his forceful and dominant personality, stressed by the cinematography and narrative, which makes it impossible for him to mix with a crowd.

In plenty of occasions we see Plainview surrounded by groups of people, but he always puts himself in a contrasting position, like in his speeches.[vi] Or he stays outside of the group, as an observant, like he does during Eli's first sermon or in the brothel with Henry.

Opposite or outside, but always above. His role is magisterial, and therefore oppositional: Plainview considers himself, as stated above, as standing against 'others'. To

[vi] Note for example the first speech we hear, during the scene opening the second act of the film, in which we only see Plainview in close up, keeping the rest of the attendees out of frame.

put visual force to this, Plainview almost never bothers to take off his hat in the company of others. It is only when he positions himself as submissive that he is accepted as an equal. After his baptism, during which he voluntarily lets himself be bullied and humiliated by Eli, he gets surrounded by the other church members, who approach him with “Welcome to the flock, brother Daniel.” They hug him, kiss him and shake his hand. For the first time in the film, we see him as *part* of a crowd (see figure 5).

The moment ignites a reversal: in the subsequent scene we see how Plainview has his son H.W. come back from boarding school and adresses him for the first time with *son*, and surprisingly refers to Little Boston as *home*: “Welcome home, son.” Like Shane, who stays in the background at the Christian funeral of Torrey, Plainview is the only one who explicitly distanced himself from religion and therefore from the society. With his new membership of the local church Plainview not only becomes a more or less official member of the community, but also accepts this part offered to him.[vii]

Plainview’s need to be included in a social group, to eventually escape it,[viii] comes forward in David Potter’s definition of a dual “relationship between man alone, and man in society – man constantly straining against the compulsion imposed by the group, and man continuously driven by need for identity with the group.”[27]

After his conversion and the subsequent ‘rescue’ of Little Boston – the baptism enables Plainview to install a crucial pipeline, which will have the poor town flourish – Plainview is finally accepted by the community. Also in SHANE the hero wins the respect of the community by saving the members from disaster. After the job is done, Shane gets on his horse and rides away, into the mountains and back to the loneliness of the wild.

In TWBB Plainview undergoes a similar treatment. In the infamous final scene we see that he, after the success in Little Boston, retreated from society into his own, lonely wilderness: a giant mansion in which he destroys furniture with a shotgun and beats family-in-law to death with bowling pins while screaming: “I told you I would eat you up!”[ix] I will return to the wilderness in a later paragraph.

[vii] Sitting with his son in the restaurant, hugging and kissing him in an exaggerated fashion, Plainview’s hat lies prominently on the table: a stark contrast with the bold attitude in front of the Standard Oil representers (see figures 6a and 6b).

[viii] “I want to earn enough money so that I can get away from everyone,” Plainview tells Henry.

[ix] Plainview’s posture makes him look almost like the vicous, prehistoric ape-men in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (see figures 7a and 7b), as suggested by filmmaker Nelson Carvajal in his highly interesting video essay 2001: THE DAWN OF BLOOD.

figure 3

figure 4

figure 5

figure 6a

figure 6b

figure 7a

figure 7b

We have a sinner
good versus bad

"A gun is as good or bad as the man using it," Shane tells Marian when she expresses her dislike of the instrument. With that line, he illustrates Rita Parks' theory that it is the precise usage of the character's 'exceptional ability' that makes the difference between a hero and a villain. "As adapted to fiction, the character type can be – and consistently has been – both hero and villain, savior and menace, god and devil."[28]

In SHANE we can see the character of Shane on the one side, and gunslinger Wilson on the other. Both are extremely proficient in their handling of firearms, but both use it for opposing goals: Shane to protect the village, Wilson to subject it.

Plainview's exceptional ability is his extensive knowledge of business. He is a self-made man, and he knows how to make big money. As it befits a Western, the town (Little Boston) appeals to the hero's (Plainview's) exceptional ability (knowledge of business) to save it from trouble (poverty). That this knowledge can be used in a more villainous way as well, which would support Parks' theory, is illustrated during the conversation Plainview has with Abel and Eli Sunday concerning their land, cunningly attempting to decieve and exploit them and their family.[x] What has become of Little Boston in the end is unknown. All we know is that Plainview made the villagers promises which could identify and position him as the hero of the film: "This community of yours will not only survive, but flourish." That the people accept him as their saviour reminds of the historical tradition of Western frontiermen of appointing a 'lawman'.[xi]

The line between good and bad is a thin one, according to Parks, who then writes about what she calls the "man with a gun." "This was the person the cowboy frequently became before the story was ended – the outlaw, the gunfighter, or the lawman."[29] This "badman" can, despite of the crimes he commits (like murder and/or robbery), be remembered as a sympathetic folk hero, like Billy the Kid or Jesse James. Parks cites Mody Boatright, who states that the outlaw must satisfy to a couple of demands if he wishes to be seen as a national hero. First of all, he must be part of the Anglo-American majority and originate from

[x] "We'll give them quail prices."

[xi] Parks, on page 47-48, notes that since the law officers from the East were mostly oblivious of the situation in the West (laws were often simply copied from England, even though they were irrelevant and inapplicable in the vast and diverse American West) and days away from said village, citizens chose their own man to help them, appealing to his 'exceptional abilities', resulting in historical facts overlapping the fictious narrative we know from the Western.

a poor but respectable family. Furthermore he must have had an unpleasant childhood because of poverty, injustice or something similar. Also, his first crime must be commited as a result of extreme provocation from the other party. Fourth, his first years as a “badman” must be spent by acting against the enemies of the people: Yankees, companies, railroads, the wealthy, etc. During his career he is obliged to perform acts of kindness and generosity, preferably while commiting his crimes. Finally, he must die a martyr’s death by means of atonement, or live on in anonymity when someone else dies in his place.[30]

Plainview does not answer to any of these criteria, with the sole exeption of the fifth (performing acts of kindness and generosity), although we already wondered how much of this can truly be seen as altruistic. His mysterious background might be consistent with the identity of Wright’s lone hero, but it also makes his image as Parks’ ‘badman’ problematic, since we have no ‘extenuating circumstances’ which mitigate the gravity of his crimes and makes him appear sympathetic. Moreover, Plainview is pre-eminently the kind of person which Boatright and Park’s outlaw would act against: wealthy, the owner of a company, and even a ‘Yank’. And last but not least, Plainview does not die a martyr. On the contrary: he survives the end of the film while bludgeoning a defenseless man to death.

Comparing TWBB once again with SHANE makes us wonder how much Plainview really resembles the title character, and not the film’s main villain Ryker, a greedy cattle farmer who buys up the villager’s land. Ryker is identifiable as a villain, because he does “what urban industry encourages”, namely: he seeks to be an owner and live off the work of others. “The myth only sees owners as decent if they also work their own property and help everyone else become an owner/worker,” Wright states in his book *The Wild West*.[31] Ryker on the other hand is a capitalist: someone who thinks of his property as capital, which is subsequently used for investment so that the capitalist can live off the profit it generates. Because profit requires other people to work the property, capitalists benefit from the existence of class-differences.[32] The cowboy opposes this directly, because he strives for equality and individual freedom. According to Wright, the Western hero is an individualist hero in the tradition of Locke and Jefferson: only in a classless society can the free market can flourish, and a decent and civil West exist.[33] “On the western frontier, according to the myth, any effort to monopolize property defines an individual as a villain.”[34] It is the cowboy who acts against these villains: he arrives in town and only takes the dominant role to get rid of the class differences by killing or chasing out the villains, thereby ending the monopoly. After that, he drops this dominant role and leaves the town in equality and civility (in accordance with the passive government as propagated in liberalist ideology). This makes

him different from most traditional heroes – who, like the villainous capitalists, fight for privilege – like Lancelot or Achilles.[35] The cowboy "represents individualist values and those values were first put into practice, and most completely put into practice, in American market institutions."[36] He does not search for dominance, but strives for absolute freedom. Ryker on the other hand, *does* strive for dominance, as does Plainview. Wright refers to the possibility of "a villain who previously 'cleaned up the town'. But this previous hero then became a villain by keeping his dominant control and staying to oppress the citizens."[37] Yet, Plainview cannot be characterized as such, because after Little Boston is "drained dry", he leaves the town to itself, creating market freedom. Does this define him as a hero? Not necessarily, but neither does it make him a unilateral villain. At least, it is hard to define him as one since he is still in possession of the traditional heroic characteristics mentioned above. Also, if I am to identify him as a villain, I first need to identify the hero of the film, since this analysis works mostly with opposites and I argued that characters define themselves mostly in relation to others.[38] And a hero other than Plainview is far from obvious, as I will also show in later paragraphs.

"The gunfighter myth is the battle between good and evil in its most elemental form," says Parks.[39] But Anderson breaks the usually black and white pattern of the Western with an almost vitriolic sense of irony. When Parks speaks of the Western hero, she gives an accurate description of Plainviews Janus-faced personality: "he was lovable and fearful, virtuous and wicked, gentle and wild."[40] Plainview shows kindness to H.W., but just as easily disposes of him when he is no longer useful to him; he buys Mary Sunday a pretty dress, but only after he tried to exploit her family. "Outlaws, gunfighters, lawmen – all historical representatives of these three categories of the man with a gun have been romanticized by the mythmakers on the same basis: that of making good guys out of questionable guys and heroic action out of violent deeds."[41] What TWBB does is ommiting this transformation, without dissolving the image of the hero immediately. In Plainview we still recognize a Western hero, but since he is so obviously 'flawed' due to also being a capitalist, meaning that he misses the qualities that make a "good-bad" cowboy out of a "bad-bad" cowboy, we start to look more closely at his function and the meaning of this departure from genre conventions. We start to get an idea of what Anderson wanted to tell us with TWBB and Daniel Plainview.

According to Wright, the opposition between good and bad is made explicit through"the social, progressive values of the members of society versus the selfish, money values of the villains. The decent citizens are committed to taming the land, raising families,

and bringing churches, schools, business, and law to the West, a commitment repeated in virtually every classical Western. The villains however, are committed to personal gain by any means and at any cost, usually at the cost of progress, decency, and law."[42] Plainview appears to own both sides: he brings, among other things, economical development, schools and employment to Little Boston. His motivations, though, are "commited to personal gain by any means and at any cost," and definitely at the cost of decency and law.

Then there is the second coding, "which differentiates those people who are kind and pleasant to others from those people who are not."[43] Here too, Plainview's moral ambiguity becomes evident: for one thing, he 'protects' Mary against her abusive father and buys her the dress. We can consider this to be one of the most valuable signs: Plainviews protection of the innocent.[xii] This reminds us of Shane's personality:heshows his kindheartedness by taking responsibility of little Joey. These actions also reflect the previous paragraph, in which we learned that the hero is driven by an intrinsic need to compensate for his lack of family. Does this make Plainview a good man?

Few would answer 'yes', because we also have the Plainview who lies, murders and manipulates. These extremes, which become more and more explicit in the second half of the film, overshadow his good character traits on all fronts, not in the least because of the selfish motivations which drive his good traits, and give doubt to every remaining sympathetic outing.

Plainview's lack of morality might be explained within the tradition of conservative individualism (the same as associated with the individualist cowboy), which asserted no need for it. According to the individualists, no hierarchically determined dominant moral order would be necessary, only rationality and equality. "Morality had long been associated with religion and class, the morality of feudal order."[44] The idea was that the rational self-regulating market could replace the Christian notion of God: "He was no longer active in the universe and humans could easily ignore Him."[45]

Initially, Plainview simply avoids Eli and his church, suggesting a more humble desire to simply not want "to challenge Christianity" and sidestep it.[xiii] Later, Plainview's denouncement of the church, Christianity, God and therefore morality, becomes more and more explicit. That Plainview is nothing like a good man or hero near the end of the film, in which he brutally murders a defenseless Eli, borders on the obvious. However, the question

[xii] Plainview uses these exact words to the little girl: "I will take care of you."

[xiii] This is suggested cinematographically in the church being built exactly opposite the derrick, as we learn from the principle of *point-of-view* (see figure 8), and in that the construction of the first is juxtapositioned to the destruction of the latter in subsequent scenes.

that remains is how he came to be like that. Are we seeing the same type of person when we compare the Plainview from the final act with the one from the first? Or did some sort of transformation occur?[xiv]

We can name two moments of departure in the film which point to the latter option, the first one being the first act, in which Plainview's obsession with the black gold is ignited. The second one takes place exactly an hour into TWBB, during probably the most memorable scene of the film: the deflagration of the oil derrick.

"Gas! Gas!" screams one of the workers. Right then the ground bursts open and an explosion of steam almost knocks H.W. from the roof he was watching on, destroying his hearing. Immediately after the eruption, Plainview gets up and runs to the derrick. Then the oil comes up, resulting in black rain falling down. Because of Plainview's character it is remarkable how little attention he gives to this phenomenon. Instead of the oil he focuses solely on H.W.. He takes him into his arms and turns his back to the derrick and its destructive discovery, running away with his son in his arms to take care for him (see figure 9). It is only after the fire explosion that Plainview's attention drifts away from the boy: "I have to deal with this now," he says. "You wait here for me, alright? I'll be back in a minute." Despite H.W.'s pleas to make him stay, he leaves. And he does not come back "in a minute". Not because of his attempt to extinguish the fire, but because of his obsession with the "whole ocean of oil" under his feet. "And no one can get at it, exept for me." Even when an assistant reminds him of his son lying in the mess hall, Plainview keeps staring at the burning treasure.

It is a fact that Anderson drew inspiration from Stanley Kubrick's classic horror film THE SHINING (1980), a film about a father who slowly goes mad and descends into murderous obsession.[46] It thus shows resemblance in storyline, but looking at several formal elements in TWBB one can find more similarities. I'll stick to the ones used in said scene. One of them is the excessive use of music in the above scene. Johnny Greenwood's soundtrack until then has been relatively mellow and melodious. But during most of the derrick fire sequence, starting at the moment where Plainview takes H.W. in his arms and stopping at the extinguishing of the fire, the music is nervous, dissonant and generallyunsettling. The composition, *Convergence*, taken from Greenwood's album *Bodysong*, deliberatly evokes

[xiv] It is suggested that the oil itself might be responsible for Plainview's corruption. The character is introduced as ambitious, but morally blank. He has little to no interaction with people so therefore no conclusion can be drawn about his ethics. It is then only by accident that he and his co-workers find oil and after inspecting the substance Plainview raises his black hand to the sky, showing the find. What follows is the only human sound we've heard in almost ten minutes of film: the baby, little H.W., suddenly starts crying, like an omen.

comparisons with Kubrick's use of composer Krzysztof Penderecki in THE SHINING. One only needs to hear Penderecki's *De Natura Sonoris Nr. 2* to understand the influence on Greenwood's input to TWBB. Anderson was convinced that his film was a horror film at heart, and therefore had tried to shoot it as one,[47] borrowing from Kubrick's classic wherever he could.[xv]

The turning point exemplifies what Wright calls the "individualist problem of morality": if no moral rules are required for the creation of a civil society, what then prevents people from lying, cheating, abusing and murdering each other?[48] Individualists like John Locke and Adam Smith assumed that rational individuals would naturally also be moral, and therefore no moral code would be necessary.[49] But Plainview shows us that such assumptions can not be guaranteed: he becomes both model and liability to Locke and Smith's ideas.

The first sign that backs up the interpretation of the turning point features in the very first scene that follows: Eli walks up to Plainview, asking him where the money is that Plainview promised him. As a reply, Plainview hits him in the face, and drags him in and through the mud. It is the first time we see Plainview use physical violence and the first time he provokes Eli in such a direct manner. It is from here that his hatred for the young man starts to grows exponentially and he becomes more and more deranged, threatening to cut a man's throat and actually committing murder. There will, indeed, be blood.

Before arriving there, Plainview rids himself of H.W., who has become useless as a partner after the accident resulted in his deafness. He puts him on a train and never says goodbye. It mirrors the scene in which Plainview and H.W. are sitting in a train for the first time (see figure 13a and 13b). In that scene Plainview tenderly accepts H.W. as a son. In the later scene, he abandons him, disposing himself of that one element that could generate any sympathy from both his clients and us viewers. The train cabin features as the motif for Plainview's two-faced personality and forces us to seek a turning point, which we can find in the fire scene halfway through the film.

[xv] Anderson and cinematographer Robert Elswit even end the discussed scene with the only zoom used in the entire film; a possible reference to Kubrick's extensive use of the technique in THE SHINING (see figure 10). Also, having Greenwood's music accompanying it, we see what has become known as the 'Kubrick stare', a "blank stare" into space, according to Sperb on page 205. In THE SHINING, the stare (in this film acted out by Jack Nicholson) marks the point in which the main character has defenitely crossed the line from good to bad (see figure 11a). In TWBB's fire scene we get a similar shot of Day-Lewis' face (see figure 11b). This might indicate a similar sort of obsession, or even possession. Not of ghosts and spirits like in THE SHINING, but of oil and money. In the shot, we might witness Plainview's definite transformation from 'hero' into 'villain'. Or maybe, as Anderson hints in a visual reference to another horror classic in the final scene (see figures 12a and 12b), 'monster' is a better term.

Another motif can be recognized in the murder of Henry: the 'funeral' of Plainview's victim mirrors the opening scene. The pickaxe is back, only now featuring as a tool to dispose of something, as opposed to something to expose something with (see figure 14a and 14b). Other than that, even the music is identical. Anderson seems to suggest that little is left of the earnest, hardworking Plainview from 1898.

The corruption of Plainview is exemplified once more on a cinematographic level. During Eli's first sermon we witness, the young preacher screams the words: "Get out of here, ghost!" He underscores his fixedness by proclaiming to chase the devil out, and to hit him, to kick and bite him, until it has left. Then suddenly, at the end of the speech, Anderson cuts to a close up of Plainview, looking around suspiciously at the applauding group of people: as if he recognizes the sermon as a threat made to his adress. The seed of competition has been laid. One of them will succumb to the other, and we already know which one that will be. "I told you I would eat you up!" Plainview is powerful, and again herein lies ambiguity: both hero and villain are the strong ones in the American Western.

figure 8

figure 9

figure 10

figure 11a

figure 11b

figure 12a

figure 12b

figure 13a

figure 13b

figure 14a

figure 14b

I am going to bury you underground
strong versus weak

Let us, for ambiguity's sake, put the opposition between good and bad aside for now. To research the contraposition strong versus weak is a simple way to deal with Plainview's moral complexity as it puts hero and villain side by side, both opposing the society.

I already referred to the passive appearance of the village in an earlier paragraph. It isportrayed as a collection of inhabitants without a voice, though even the idea that Little Boston exists out of individuals seems unlikely. Only occasionally we see a citizen who is of notable influence on the story development: Abel and Eli Sunday and William Bandy. Them aside, Plainview seems to be dealing with a homogenous mass, wearing the same dark clothes and having the same furrowed faces (see figure 15). "To make their weakness as convincing as possible, the social group rarely contains young, healthy men; typically, the settlers or citizens consist of women, children, and elderly, middle-aged, plump or comic men."[50]

They do not indulge in fury, ecstasy or any frenzied emotion: subdued and apathetic they stay in the background, accepting everything Plainview offers or demands.[xvi] This whole village's passive powerlessness has been symbolized in one character: Abel Sunday, Eli's father. His position as head of the family is based on a rather distorted power relationship with his son, whom he cannot seem to control. Eli calls his father by his first name, beats him and scolds him: that it is a Protestant preacher who abuses his father is remarkable for the reason that he *ought* to be the keeper of conservative, paternal family values. The fact that Eli does not even respect the only man, apart from God, who he is obliged to look up to ("Honour your father"), emphasizes Abel's lack of power. He only appears to have control over the women in his life, whom he commands and abuses. But to Eli he looks up, so it seems. After Plainview's catalytic proposal to buy Sunday's land it is Eli who manages to push up the price, and even though Plainview – after this heated discussion – turns back to Abel to ask him how he feels about it, the man's only response is: "Yes, what Eli says."

Not being able to stand up against the villain and/or accepting the hero to solve your problems: whichever the exact situation is, the inhabitants of Little Boston are guilty of at

[xvi] After finishing his introduction to the townspeople of Little Boston, Plainview asks whether there are any questions. Only Eli raises his hand: "Will the new road lead to the church?" "That will be the first thing that it leads to," Plainview replies. "Thank you, Eli. Anyone else?" It remains quite; the glassy looking faces just stare at him.

least one of them, mirroring the residents of the town in SHANE, who are guilty of both. Only the character of Starrett seems to be made of sterner stuff. Contrary to his fellow townsmen, he does not shy away at the thought of fighting Ryker and Wilson. But in the end, even he turns out to be powerless, when Shane knocks him down in order to fight the villains himself (thus probably saving Starrett's life).

Typically, the town is portrayed as a collection of inhabitants who all need help, according to Wright. In SHANE, they need the Ryker-family to be driven out; in TWBB they need rescue from an economic downfall. An important difference between the two films is that the Rykers in SHANE stand in direct oppositionto the village, while the poverty in TWBB is merely a sociological feature of Little Boston. The only thing standing in direct opposition to Little Boston is Plainview. Is he the hero? In that case the film lacks a villain. Or is Plainview the villain arriving in Little Boston? In that case the movie lacks a hero. Eli cannot fill the gap that appears, because he is too weak for either role. In the previous paragraph I suggested that Plainview is both, though not necessarely at the same time. He gets to Little Boston as a hero, in a similar way as Shane. Both men arrive at a family of farmers, are being received politely and offer their services during dinner (see figure 16a and 16b). But after the oil has risen to the surface, so have Plainview's nastier characteristics. It is now a villain who uses the town for his own enrichment, and who murders Eli. He is "a man in command of things, persons, and events, handling them skillfully".[51]

Like Starratt, Eli is not afraid to confront the village with their passive attitude after he recognizes the transformation of their appointed saviour. It is suggested that he makes this discovery together with us: Plainview's line "There's a whole ocean of oil under our feet and no one can get at it except for me" seems highly inappropriate to us when we know that his son is in need of him. Any doubts we might have had about his nature are now confirmed by this crucial scene (and will be even surpassed later on). Anderson suggests that Eli feels the same way: right after that line of dialogue the director cuts to a close-up of actor Paul Dano's face, staring melancholically at the fire (see figure 17). The look on his face suggests a weary notion of the power that holds Little in its grip. His subsequent confrontation with the village (similarly to Starrett's when he recognizes the nature of the Ryker family) is symbolized through one with his father, who, as I already established, stands for the entire inert village. Eli summarizes the situation as follows: "You let someone come in here and walk all over us. You let him in and do his work here." He continues: "You didn't do anything but sit down. You are lazy and you're stupid." Eli then proceeds to knock Abel to the ground,

abusing and humiliating him, as if his old father's weakness has not been made clear enough yet.

But however well Eli may control his father, even he turns out to be no match for Plainview. In the final scene, the opposition between strong and weak is given one last prominent role. Plainview, in a megalomaniac mood, throws Eli around, torpedoing him with bowlingballs and –pins, shouting the following line, as to underline his power over him, Little Boston and everyone else: "I'm the Third Revelation! I'm the one the Lord has chosen! I'm smarter than you! I'm older! I'm one of God's prophets! I told you I would eat you. I told you I would eat you up!"

figure 15

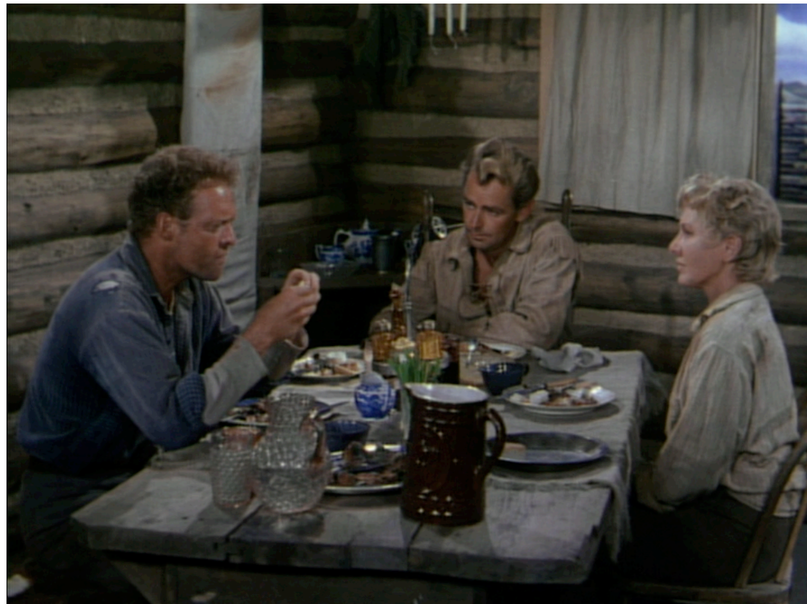

figure 16a

figure 16b

figure 17

I told you I would eat you up
wilderness versus civilization

A striking resemblance between SHANE and TWBB is, among other things, the opening shot: the image of a mountain ridge (see figures 18a and 18b). Maybe it is simply a coincidence, but nevertheless both films use the landscape for similar reasons: they make evident the role of wilderness. In SHANE, the static image is disrupted by the main character riding into the frame, towards the mountains. In TWBB, Anderson cuts from the equally static image to a shot of Plainview, hacking in his mine shaft. Both characters are being visually introduced as being *one* with nature. After the opening shot, Shane is positioned more often against the awesome imagery of nature. Moreover, he is dressed in buckskin, clothing that is most commonly assocoiated with the historical frontier men.

In TWBB, the makers focused more on the historically correct rendition of the late 19th century prospector, men who tried their luck in the pristine American West (see figure 19). Bearded, clothed in ragged working clothes and a Stetson hat, on his back a rifle (which is the only object in this scene that will return at the end of the film), he appears like the personification of Parks' 'mountain man': a primitive adventurer; a shrewed hunter, woodsman, or, in this case, miner. The expression 'one with nature' is taken almost literally in this first scene, if we pay attention to the color scheme: Plainview is covered with dust and dirt, and with his pale colored clothing, hands and beard almost vanishes against the equally sandcolored earth surface (see figure 20).

Parks states that the mountain man developed out of the 'prototype' Western hero and moved further into the West, distancing himself more from civilization with every step he took. "He becomes […] more isolated and self-sufficient; he is a man of freedom – sometimes verging on anarchy. He is now the mountain man."[52]

Plainview is introduced to the audience as thus, living in isolation and not speaking a word, even when finally being among other people. Language, arguably the cornerstone of civilization, is omitted. Only after Plainview discards his role as 'mountain man' and dons the part of 'man with a gun' (the prospector as saviour of villages), we hear him speak.

"When the cowboy emerges from the wilderness – the State of Nature – the young, fledging community is also still in the State of Nature," says Wright.[53] According to him, the townspeople are trying to leave that state to build a rational society for themselves. But the villains, who benefit from a dominant position in the yet uncivilized town, can rely on their

strength and violence and the weakness of the citizens to prevent that from happening.[54] But the Western hero's connection to the wilderness makes him stronger than the citizens, and he possesses the "necessary strength, the necessary violence, to save the threatened community and build a civil society."[55] His connection to the wilderness gives him the tools to end the State of Nature and remove the villains from the town. "What he brings from Nature (the wilderness) is exactly what society needs. Part of what he brings is wilderness strenght and violence, but the villains are also strong and violent though not identified with the wilderness. What the wilderness gives the cowboy, then, as the true, enabling individualist, is strength tempered by morality, a wilderness sense of honor."[56] It is this sense of honor that makes the hero bring 'good' violence. Without it, his State of Nature does not transcend that of the immoral villains, who bring 'bad' violence. As I already described, this idea of individual morality is problematic, because it cannot be inherent tothe rational individualist according to conservative liberal thought. Plainview illustrates this issue by being a mountain man, a hero from the wilderness, nevertheless lacking a sense of honorable morality. The line between order and chaos in Nature is thin, and we see Plainview cross this line during the important 'fire scene'.

According to the Western's classical story-structure, the hero, after finishing his job, returns to the wilderness. As I stated in the first paragraph, we notice this tradition both in SHANE and in TWBB: Shane returns to the mountains he came from, and Plainview retreats into a giant mansion. The hunting rifle out of the opening scene returns, and we see how Plainview shoots at a stuffed bison's head, several hides and furniture stacked in the hallway (see figure 20). In fact, we get a glimpse of the mountain man from the beginning. Like Shane, Plainview concluded (insofar he had not already done that) that human society is not for him and that he would do best simply to return to the wilderness, in this case a manor where he can do as he pleases ("verging on anarchy", according to Parks.[57]), even primitively bludgeon people, seemingly without consequence as illustrated by his indifferent uttering: "I'm finished!"

A big difference between the two characters though, is that Plainview's role as man with the gun only serves to eventually rid himself of civilization,[xvii] while Shane took the part to be accepted in that civilization, which, as it unfortunately turned out, was not his destiny.Thus, the classical Western appears to be much more fatalistic than the more existential story structure of TWBB.

[xvii] "I want to earn enough money so that I can get away from everyone."

To conclude this part, I would like to quote Parks on her definition of the Western hero, which I think refers just as much to Plainview: “The Western hero, then, is generally a loner. He is, however, a man in command of things, persons, and events, handling them skillfully […]. He is a man of mysterious and frequently melancholy past; his future is tenuous and foreboding. He is almost always a man with one foot in the wilderness and the other in civilization, moving through life belonging to neither world.”[58]

figure 18a

figure 18b

figure 19

figure 20

figure 21

I'm finished!
Conclusion

Plainview, from beginning to end, follows the path of the lone hero in the classical Western. I discovered that the character adopts the status of villain as well, but without losing his identity as hero. Plainview instead seems to be playing with the hero-identity, corrupting it in the process. It is a perversion of Parks' statement about the historical mythmakers' goal: "that of making good guys out of questionable guys and heroic action out of violent deeds."[59] We recognize the hero in Plainview, but merely because these characteristics show up on the surface: a man from the wilderness, without roots of any kind, showing up one day at a little village in trouble, offering to help it out, afterwards returning back into the wilderness, leaving the town in freedom. His actions and superficial identity corresponds with those of the classic hero as identified by Wright and Parks. But his motives accord much more with their definition of one type of archetypal villain: the rich, greedy Eastern industrial who wants "to own all the land".[60] Comparing TWBB with the movie SHANE, I indeed noticed similarities between Plainview and Shane, but also between Plainview and Ryker.

What could this mean? In TWBB's black, cynical final act, it is the villain who is the last man standing. "[T]he contemporary American's inner landscape has been befogged by shades of grey. […] No longer do the bad guys receive their just deserts; on the contrary, more frequently they become the possessors of the earth while the heroes are outsiders – symbolic of anti- or nonheroism."[61] Parks explains here the disappearance of the Western within contemporary (she wrote in 1982) popular culture. She argues that, after the fall of Saigon, Americans were no longer sot sure of their strengths, of their role as the "ultimate victors in the battle against evil."[62]

She preceded this by saying that "[n]o longer is the cause clearly and unmistakably good or evil; no longer can the good guys be recognized by their color, gentle birth, cleanliness of speech and dress, and courtesy to women and children."[63] However, instead of writing the Western off as outdated, Anderson uses the genre and the problem Parks names to illustrate the complex nature of the hero within the American landscape. His character of Plainview is, as I have already said, the embodiment of Locke and Smith's paradoxal theories of indivualism and liberalism as exemplified by Wright: because morality is defined by hierarchy, it is undesirable; the individual can only flourish in a classless, amoral

society. But for the desired free market to actually come into being, all (rational) individuals must be inherently moral. It is this blind faith in the goodness of man that has urged liberalism to provide the individual with enormous financial power and responsibility. And it were the few months prior to TWBB's release that proved how this faith was an unsustainable illusion, when the stock markets collapsed due to the irresponsible (and arguably immoral) risk management of investors and bankers, and the world was thrown into the biggest economical crisis since the '30s.

The mythic individualists who fought for freedom, classlessness and free markets have turned into the very villains they used to fight. From hardworking, honest mountain man into greedy, immoral capitalist: Plainview is a fitting analogy to the schizofrenic image that the neo-liberalist nowadays holds. He is not as much Shane *or* Ryker, but their missing link.

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Notes

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