

Nietzschean Allegory: The Perversion of Apollonian and Dionysian Beauty in *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*

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Abstract. In his 1872 book *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche argues that beauty emerges from the combination of the 'Apollonian', which derives from the Greek god of wisdom, and the 'Dionysian', a force personified by the Greek god of chaos and religious ecstasy. This article explores an allegorical interpretation of Nietzsche's dichotomy in two 2007 Westerns and literary adaptations, *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*. Drawing on political readings of these films and on the history of Apollonian and Dionysian allegory, I postulate that these animi frame the ideological conflicts of post-9/11 America, supplanting the exultation of Nietzsche's original ideal of beauty with dysphoria. The article first considers Douglas Kellner's analysis, which champions both pictures for their allegorical and philosophical properties. It then delineates Nietzsche's understanding of the Apollonian and Dionysian. It subsequently applies these phenomena to *No Country for Old Men* and its representation of an America plagued by sectarian violence and denuded of authority. I follow the evocation of this declinist subtext with an analysis of *There Will be Blood*, where I argue that the Apollonian and Dionysian serve to satirize the Bush administration's state of imperial overstretch and fracturing electoral coalition.

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In his 2010 book *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*, the sociologist and cultural historian Douglas Kellner argues that two 2007 Westerns provided 'allegories of the contemporary era'.¹ The power of these allegories, which Kellner sees as allusive to the anxieties of post-9/11 America, became accentuated by storylines that contained bathetic and nihilistic representations of iconic philosophical precepts. Kellner postulates that the Coen Brothers' adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men* conveyed an 'anti-Bush-Cheney allegory where the law and patriarchy

¹ Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), p. 15.

are impotent to deal with terror', a polemic realized by its 'grim vision of an existentialism without the heroism of authentic action, self-creativity, or self-coming advanced by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and others'.² A comparable allegory is evident to Kellner in *There Will be Blood*, Paul Thomas Anderson's loose adaptation of Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel *Oil!*. Referencing Nietzsche's seminal 1901 work *The Will to Power*, Kellner argues that the rise of oil baron Daniel Plainview forms 'a scathing denunciation of a hypermasculine American will-to-power', allegorizing 'George W. Bush and Dick Cheney's invasion of Iraq'.³

This article builds on Kellner's analysis by considering how the early scenes of both pictures use Nietzsche's dichotomy of Apollonian and Dionysian beauty to frame their political subtexts. Why apply this framework, especially when philosophers with a methodological affinity with cinema, such as Deleuze, offer valuable approaches? Equally, why should I focalize this interaction, which derives from Nietzsche's 1872 work *The Birth of Tragedy*, and not the philosopher's other, better-known concepts? This can, in part, be explained through the comparable cultural polarities of the late Bush era and the Germany of 1872. Writing soon after the Prussian victory at Alsace-Lorraine in 1871, Nietzsche prescribes the inevitability of the Dionysian, a state of chaos, irrationality, and suffering that would counteract the Apollonian rationalism of the nineteenth century. In 2007 America, the Bush administration, beset by an ongoing battle with religious terrorism abroad and an escalating subprime mortgage crisis at home, struggled to maintain America's reputation as a stable and arguably, Apollonian hegemon.

This is the contextual rationale for detecting this dichotomy in *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*. A major difference from Nietzsche's 1872 writing is that instead of personifying renewal, both films reframe Apollonian and Dionysian notions of beauty to allegorize a contemporary dysphoria. *No Country for Old Men* is set in the West Texas of 1980 while *There Will be Blood* begins in 1898 California. Apollonian figures such as Sheriff Ed Tom Bell and Daniel Plainview encounter forms of Dionysian chaos that analogize a post-9/11 conflict between American capitalist dominance and forces suggesting its decline. I posit that their renditions of Nietzschean philosophy convey the loss of America's hegemonic authority, attesting to the relevance of *The Birth of Tragedy* for cinematic allegory. Before I explicate this process, I must first explain Nietzsche's ideal of a healthy interplay between the Apollonian and Dionysian animi.

The Birth of Tragedy emerged from Nietzsche's perception of contemporaneous Germany. In this text, he sees Germany's cultural life as stultified by a sole reliance on the 'Apollonian', a phrase derived from the Greek god Apollo. The Apollonian promotes an ostensibly noble ambition towards a 'higher truth' and

² Ibid., p. 17.

³ Ibid.

‘the beautiful appearance of the inner world of the imagination’.⁴ This was based in a rationalism that stressed the self-perfection of the individual, a process of ‘individuation’ driven by ‘moderation’ and ‘self-knowledge’.⁵ Nietzsche cites this in Socrates, who drew on ‘an expression of contempt and superiority’ and a ‘divine naïveté and certainty’.⁶

The Dionysian’s beauty contrastingly invokes emotional extremes and a brute realism in human affairs. Stemming from the Greek god Dionysus, the Dionysian provokes ‘fear and horror’, as well as ‘asceticism, spirituality, and duty’.⁷ These saturnine qualities sit alongside chaotic and ecstatic characteristics. The Apollonian dwells in ‘plastic energies’, meaning the individual and visual arts of sculpture and painting, whilst the Dionysian encompasses collective expressions, such as the ‘Bacchic choruses of the Greeks’, and later the ‘St. John’s and St. Vitus’s dancers’.⁸ These ceremonies emphasize an irrational ‘intoxication’ and differ markedly from the ‘dream’ of Apollonian sensibility.⁹

Nietzsche apotheosizes arts in which the Apollonian comes to terms with the Dionysian dark side. This included the plays of Athenian dramatist Aeschylus, who depicts protagonists forced to reconcile the ‘inflexible flaw of individuation’ with a ‘monstrous transgression of nature’.¹⁰ The hubristic actions of Oedipus and Prometheus signal ‘a collision of different worlds’, because the Apollonian protagonists suffer for their ‘step outside the spell of individuation’.¹¹ To Paul Geyer, these characterizations became ‘employed to present the Dionysian reality and its redemptive potential’.¹²

Literary and sociological analysis identifies subversion of this philosophical rapprochement. To Wit Pietrzak, Yeats’s *Sailing to Byzantium* — a poem that *No Country for Old Men* references thematically — boldly represents Nietzsche’s dichotomy: the death of its elderly narrator unites the ‘raging Dionysian energy with the Apollonian order’.¹³ Louis Gulino applies this frictional interplay to the 9/11 attacks. Analyzing Richard Drew’s ‘Falling Man’ photograph, he argues that ‘Apollonian pretenses’ and a hegemonic ambition towards ‘American industry, security, and military might’ collapsed next to the ‘Dionysian content of the 9/11 photo record’ and ‘the uniquely tragic nature of the ugliness on display’, which undercuts ‘Apollonian authority’.¹⁴

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹² Paul Guyer, ‘The German Sublime After Kant’, in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. by Timothy M. Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 102–18 (p. 116).

¹³ Wit Pietrzak, *Myth, Language and Tradition: A Study of Yeats, Stevens, and Eliot in the Context of Heidegger’s Search for Being* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. 124.

¹⁴ Louis Gulino, ‘Tracing Apollo’s Descent: Nietzsche’s Aesthetic Ontology and the Myth

No Country for Old Men echoes Pietrzak's and Gulino's readings. Set in the year of Reagan's first election victory in 1980, the film's opening exposes this conservative *annus mirabilis*, and its implications of America's hegemonic renewal, as mere Apollonian illusion. Its title references the first line of *Sailing to Byzantium*.¹⁵ Like the ageing artist who begins Yeats's poem by bemoaning a land with 'sensual music' and 'unageing intellect', the introduction of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell displays the Apollonian aspiration for wisdom.¹⁶ As a montage portrays a languid West Texas dawn, Bell recounts the benevolent rule of his forefathers, who were also lawmen; he notes how 'some of the old time sheriffs never even wore a gun' and that 'you can't help but compare yourself against the old timers'.¹⁷

Bell's longing recalls the Apollonian's retreat to 'powerful misleading delusions and pleasurable illusions'.¹⁸ His alienation from the Dionysian occurs in the latter part of his monologue, which distorts Nietzsche's dichotomy and plagues the beautiful Texan landscape with philosophic ambiguity. He recalls a 'boy I sent to the electric chair at Huntsville Hill', for killing a 'fourteen year old girl'.¹⁹ This is a killing framed by contradiction — Bell remembers how the murderer informed him 'there wasn't any passion to the killing', an admission that belied the newspaper reportage, which 'said it was a crime of passion'.²⁰ He also recollects the murderer's confession that 'he'd been planning to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember', and 'if they turned him out he'd do it again'.²¹

The murderer's perfunctory rationalisation for his crime denudes the Dionysian's 'monstrous transgression' of its passionate, chaotic dimension. This alteration is complemented by Bell's reaction, which deviates from Nietzsche's combinatory understanding of Apollonian and Dionysian drama. Bell meekly comments, 'I don't know what to make of that', robbed of the traditional catharsis experienced by Apollonian protagonists touched by Dionysian reality.²² According to Nietzsche, those protagonists became aware that 'action can change nothing in the eternal essence of things', and realized 'it is laughable

of Safe Spectatorship in Post-9/11 America', *Gnovis: A Journal of Communication, Culture & Technology*, 9.2 (2011), <<http://www.gnovisjournal.org/2011/08/08/tracing-apollo%E2%80%99s-descent-nietzsche%E2%80%99s-aesthetic-ontology-and-the-myth-of-safe-spectatorship-in-post-911-america/>> [accessed 30 June 2017].

¹⁵ The first line of Yeats's poem states 'that is no country for old men': W.B. Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', in *Selected Poems and Four Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. by M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Scribner, 1996), pp. 102–03 (p. 102).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Yeats's references to 'unageing intellect' and 'sensual music' occur towards the end of the first stanza.

¹⁷ *No Country for Old Men*, dir. by Joel and Ethan Coen (Miramax, 2007).

¹⁸ Nietzsche, p. 29.

¹⁹ *No Country for Old Men*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

or shameful that they are expected to repair a world which is out of joint'.²³ In contrast, Bell's experiences are suffused with a tone of terrified ambivalence. He admits 'you had to be willing to die to even do this job', but fears putting 'his soul at hazard' and conceding 'I'll be part of this world'.²⁴

What allegorical meaning is created by this disjunctive relationship between the Apollonian and Dionysian's unique characteristics of beauty? In McCarthy's novel, Bell's Apollonian detachment appears symptomatic of the conservative backlash that resulted in Reagan's election. In a memorable tirade against the liberal reforms of the 1960s, he recounts telling a woman who wants 'her granddaughter to be able to have an abortion' that 'not only will she be able to have an abortion, she'll be able to put you to sleep'.²⁵ This hatred of changing social mores is supplemented by his nostalgia for a bygone racism: earlier in the novel, Bell recalls 'nigger Hoskins over in Bastrop County', who 'knowed everybody's phone number in the whole county by heart'.²⁶

Bell's longing for what Saxton and Cole called a 'mythical era when strong, white men, enforced a clear, unquestioned morality' recalls another, controversial understanding of the Apollonian.²⁷ The social critic Camille Paglia emphasizes the Apollonian's debt to the 'male orientation of classical Athens', which became 'great not despite but because of its misogyny'.²⁸ It resembled Western colonial power, 'enlarging human power against the tyranny of nature'.²⁹ This potency was most expressed in 'capitalism', with its 'extrapolations of hard, impermeable Western personality'.³⁰

Although the film deprives Bell of this patriarchal authoritarianism, its portrayal of hitman Anton Chigurh is ideologically charged, blending images of Apollonian capitalism with a spirit of Dionysian destruction. The end of Bell's monologue evidences this incongruity. A long shot shows Chigurh being arrested by a pair of Texan police officers. His clothing — a denim jacket and jeans — imitates the West's rugged individualism. Yet his other fashion choices, such as a perverse mop top haircut, are wilder. To *Sight and Sound's* Ben Walters and J.M. Tyree, this discordance creates 'an interrogation of American manhood', serving to 'lampoon the frontier ethos of the Reaganite cowboy man'.³¹

²³ Nietzsche, p. 46.

²⁴ *No Country for Old Men*.

²⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 196.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁷ Benjamin Saxton and Thomas R. Cole, 'No Country for Old Men: a search for masculinity in later life', *International Journal of Aging and Later Life*, 7.2 (2012), 97–116 (p. 101).

²⁸ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 99.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

³¹ Ben Walters and J.M. Tyree, 'Cash and Carrion: Film of the Month: *No Country for Old Men*', *Sight and Sound*, (2008), <<http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/4192>> [accessed 30 June 2017].

The unknown origin of Chigurh amplifies this sense of subversion. Although in McCarthy's novel, Chigurh's background is that of a Vietnam veteran, the film adaptation renders his background and nationality ambiguous, creating the specter of an outsider arriving to profane the *mise en scène* of Apollonian America. This subtext is underlined by two murders which place the Apollonian and Dionysian phenomena in stark symbiosis. Chigurh's first murder subscribes to the Dionysian's emphasis on chaos and ecstasy; soon after arriving at a police station holding cell, he murders a Texan police officer in an improvised fashion, using his still unshackled handcuffs to strangle him to death. A close-up dwells on Chigurh's maniacal face, which stares menacingly at the camera as he deprives the officer of life. Following this murder comes a more desultory homicide. After exiting the police station, Chigurh kills a lone driver by firing a cattle gun directly into his forehead. The formal precision of the instrument, and its connotations of capitalistic efficiency, contrasts the improvised quality of Chigurh's previous murder. A nihilistic perversion of Apollonian art, its evil derives from its detached utilitarianism rather than its uninhibited passion.

Enda McAffrey interprets this philosophical mercurialness. He sees it portended in Bell's anecdote about the child murderer, which underlined the 'false distinction between crimes of passion and gratuitous murder', and created a landscape where 'gratuitous actions appear paradoxically to invoke some underlying 'passion'.³² I interpret Chigurh's invocation of Nietzsche's dichotomy as similarly paradoxical. I also view it as possessing an allegorical salience, symbolizing a post-9/11 world where the embodiments of America's capitalistic hegemony are pervaded by terroristic violence.

A dysphoric, and allegoric, understanding of Nietzsche's dichotomy also underpins the experiences of *No Country for Old Men*'s third key character, welder and Vietnam veteran Llewellyn Moss. Like Bell, Moss initially appears an adherent to the cult of Apollonian individuation. He is first shown peering through the scope of a hunting rifle, preparing to shoot a deer in an attempt to recapture the Apollonian hierarchy of traditional frontier life. A path to the top of this hierarchy becomes tangible to Moss when he discovers the site of a drug deal gone awry. A tracking shot, which delineates his search for drug money across a site filled with murdered Mexican drug dealers, again juxtaposes the Apollonian American with images of Dionysian chaos. Jim Welsh ideologized this scene, also applying it to the landscape of post-9/11 America by arguing that the bloodied Mexican bodies and broader subtext of internecine violence 'fit the murderous wastelands of Iraq and Afghanistan', indicating an 'allegory concerning the murderous anxieties consequent upon terrorism and Neocon America'.³³

³² Enda McAffrey, 'Crimes of Passion, Freedom, and a Clash of Sartrean Moralities in *No Country for Old Men*', in *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Sartrean Perspective*, ed. by Jean Pierre Boule and Enda McAffrey (New York City: Berghahn Books, 2011), pp. 125–43 (p. 128).

³³ Jim Welsh, 'Borderline Evil', in *From Novel to Film: No Country for Old Men*, ed. by Lynnea

I find Welsh's allegorical reading compelling, but it becomes more intriguing in combination with *No Country for Old Men's* philosophical dimensions. The moments that undercut the relationship between the Apollonian protagonist and Dionysian reality add to the representation of post-9/11 vulnerability. Soon after Moss steals the drug money, he returns to help a dying Mexican, an act of irrational compassion not unlike the step outside the spell of individuation that doomed Aeschylus's protagonists. The causative relationship between two criminals, who spot Moss, and the subsequent hiring of Chigurh to kill him, hints that this act is more dangerous than Moss's initial robbery. Yet it is later made clear that Moss, who discovers a tracking device hidden within the drug money, would have been pursued by Chigurh irrespective of his humanitarian action. The storyline of the protagonist martyred by Dionysian reality is thus negated, supplanted for a narrative in which the modern Apollonian illusion of capitalistic self-improvement, embodied in Moss's theft, is punished for its indulgence.

A comparable relationship between philosophic contradiction and political allegory is visible in the beautiful Western landscapes of *There Will be Blood*.³⁴ The opening montage of Paul Thomas Anderson's film is set in 1898 California and depicts the efforts of aspiring oilman Daniel Plainview. Anderson's use of diegetic and non-diegetic elements signals an interplay between Apollonian and Dionysian dispositions. From his first appearance in a barren mining pit, Plainview indicates a façade of Apollonian detachment. His lone dig for oil is imbued with grey, desaturated cinematography, a palette which reinforces Plainview's emotional distance. The exaggerated rugged individualism of his oil dig further recalls Paglia's categorizations and her stressing of the Apollonian's place in the history of western patriarchal capitalism. As Plainview digs, a shrill score by Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood suffuses him with the Dionysian's melancholic dimension. Such synchronicity between the Apollonian protagonist and music was viewed by Nietzsche to be the apotheosis of sublime art: music subjected Apollonian rationalism to the 'mythical', creating an 'individual example of universality and truth staring into the infinite'.³⁵

Despite this formal and tonal congruity, Plainview's determination perhaps more resembles the titular prophet of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* than the catharsis-afflicted protagonists of Aeschylus's plays. Like Zarathustra's decade-long isolation in the mountains, Plainview's attempt to retrieve oil from the underground location appears a Sisyphean attempt to 'bring light to the underworld'.³⁶

The allegorical implications of this grandiosity become clear when Anderson flashes forward to Plainview's business in 1911, a plot section which subjects

Chapman King, Rich Wallach and Jim Welsh (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), pp. 73–86 (p. 77).

³⁴ *There Will be Blood*, dir. by Paul Thomas Anderson (Paramount Vantage, 2007).

³⁵ Nietzsche, p. 94.

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 39.

both the Apollonian and Dionysian to internal contradiction. This is portended in Plainview and adopted son HW's partnership with Eli Sunday, an evangelist who pervades the civic life of a Californian small town known as Little Boston. Although this friendship is based on the affinity between church and oil industry depicted in *Oil!*, Plainview and Sunday's pact is pertinent for American political life in the 2000s, where George W. Bush had achieved overwhelming evangelical support during the Iraq War and his 2004 presidential campaign.³⁷ To Kellner, it was the greed of neo-imperialism which dominated Plainview's relationship with Sunday, conveying a 'saga of oil wealth and its bloody consequences', 'about the Bush family and its vicious quest for money and power'.³⁸ Moreover, he saw this allegory as layered with Nietzschean precepts, providing a 'scathing denunciation of a hypermasculine American will-to-power and the destructive effects of greed and predatory capitalism'.³⁹

Kellner's invocation of *The Will to Power*, written twenty-nine years after *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1901, illuminates how *There Will be Blood's* allegory is framed with Nietzsche's later alterations to the Apollonian and Dionysian synthesis. The philosopher Walter Kaufmann noted how this infamous work contained 'relatively few references to the Apollonian' and instead revolves around contrasts between the beauty of 'the Dionysian' and 'the Christian'.⁴⁰ The meekness of Eli, who colludes in Plainview's industrialization of Little Boston whilst resenting his influence, recalls Nietzsche's characterization of Christianity's adherents as 'pessimists, nihilists', and 'romantics of pity'.⁴¹ He reflects Nietzsche's belief that Christians should prioritize Dionysus's 'affirmation of life' more than the 'holy existence'.⁴² The varying meaning of this 'affirmation of life' alludes to the tension between the Bush administration's pro-business and evangelical constituencies, differing from *No Country for Old Men's* analogizing of the Dionysian with borderless violence.

Plainview's visit to one of Sunday's church ceremonies conveys this distinct allegorical focus. Although Sunday initially seems to personify the herd-like Christianity detested by Nietzsche, his attempt to exorcise an elderly woman of her arthritis embraces the Dionysian spirit. Gesticulating wildly and screaming with exultation to the ailing woman and an enraptured church crowd, Sunday's evangelical populism recalls Nietzsche's praising of the Dionysian's 'morbid exaltation and madness', which was encapsulated in the 'joy of peasants' and

³⁷ A detailed account of this support, which amounted to '78 percent' of white evangelicals in 2004, is located in Martin Durham, 'Evangelicals and the Politics of Red America', in *Right On? Political Change and Continuity in George W. Bush's America*, ed. by Iwan Morgan and Philip Davies (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2006), pp. 204-18.

³⁸ Kellner, p. 15

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 540.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 542-43.

a 'self-justification of nature'.⁴³ A final tracking shot delineates this sensibility. Anderson's camera follows Eli performing an exorcism of the ghost causing the elderly woman's arthritis, ending his ceremony by miming the spirit being thrown out of the church.⁴⁴

Plainview's exploitation of the Dionysian's spirituality is vitiated by his oil empire's borrowing of the Dionysian's hedonism. Immediately after the religious ceremony, Sunday confronts Plainview and blames the death of an oil worker on a culture of drinking on the derricks. Their dispute recalls the arguments of Nietzsche biographer and translator R.J. Hollingdale, who, in an introduction to his 1984 translation of Nietzsche's 1891 work *Dithyrambs of Dionysus*, comments on Dionysus's identity as 'both the object of a religious cult', and 'an ideogram for the uncivilized energies for which the Dionysian rites were released'.⁴⁵ The appearance of this contradiction in *There Will be Blood*, and its underlining of a gulf between capitalist excess and religious asceticism, can be seen to deconstruct the Republican right's traditional coalition of free-marketeters and evangelicals. This dissonance also frames the film's allegory for the Iraq occupation, most alluded to in moments which stress the Apollonian character of Plainview's business, and analogize his industrialization of Little Boston with the descent of US imperialism on Iraq.

Such an affinity between the Apollonian and imperialism was briefly delineated in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche referred to Apollo as 'the builder of states', whose followers, in contrast to those who pursued the Dionysian's spirituality, championed a 'path of extreme secularization, whose greatest but also most terrifying expression is the Roman *Imperium*'.⁴⁶ Although Nietzsche later revised this emphasis on secularization by replacing the Apollonian with Christianity, the analogy here bears resemblance to Paglia's interpretation of a philosophy that was encapsulated by the hegemony of western civilization.

Plainview's influence on Little Boston initially seems to borrow these imperialistic dimensions of the Apollonian. *There Will be Blood* begins in 1898, a year defined by the rationalizations of American expansionism in Cuba and the Philippines. An imperialist subtext pervades an address Plainview gives to Little Boston's evangelicals, where he boasts that oil revenues can improve the town's primitive infrastructure. In its ironic treatment of his American audience as colonial subjects, Plainview's address recalls the civilizing impulses of Apollo; he promises the creation of 'schools' and 'water wells', for 'education' and 'cultivation'.⁴⁷ Juxtaposed with Plainview's Apollonian precepts is a hint of what Douglas Kellner called the 'shock and awe' of the Iraq occupation.⁴⁸ As

⁴³ Ibid., p. 541.

⁴⁴ *There Will be Blood*.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dithyrambs of Dionysus*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1984), p. 17.

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 111.

⁴⁷ *There Will be Blood*.

⁴⁸ Kellner, p. 16.

Plainview speaks, a tracking shot follows a group of oilmen descending on Little Boston at nightfall. Their walk carries the animus of a nighttime raid, creating a subtext of militarization contrary to the benevolent intentions of Plainview's paeans. Most resonant, however, is an allegory for the Iraq War's economic incentives. A long shot shows an encampment of oilmen staring exultingly at the town's signature oil derrick, contrasting the Apollonian emphasis of Plainview's speech with the fervour generated by oil wealth.

The allegorical perversions of Apollonian and Dionysian beauty in both films are exemplified in their endings. The conclusion of *No Country for Old Men* takes place after Bell fails to prevent the killing of Moss by a Mexican cartel. Bell is trapped between the two poles of Nietzsche's dichotomy; after a former colleague reminds him that the violence plaguing West Texas has long existed, Bell concludes the picture with a failed attempt to recapture the impractical illusions of the Apollonian. He discusses with his wife a series of dreams revolving around a meeting with his long deceased father. The gaucheness of these dreams, which see Bell lose money and lag behind his father on a horse ride through the desert, imply the loss of America's Apollonian authority to a culture of sectarian violence. The philosophical dislocation this provokes is evident in Bell's final line. After describing both dreams, he comments, 'and then I woke up', before staring at the camera in a state of disequilibrium.⁴⁹

A similar representation of Nietzsche's dichotomy is integral to *There Will be Blood's* final scenes. The epilogue of Anderson's film, set in 1927, sees Sunday (now a radio evangelist) ask Plainview for another oil deal to stave off an impending financial crisis. Irritated at Sunday's hypocrisy, Plainview mockingly purports to be 'the Holy Spirit' and bludgeons Sunday to death. Anderson's decision to end with this nihilistic embrace of Dionysian chaos has allegorical implications. It encapsulates the unraveling of the Bush administration's political vision at home and abroad; the degeneration of Plainview's Apollonian empire into internecine violence recalls the failure of the Iraq occupation, whilst Sunday's penurious state seems oddly anticipatory of the financial crisis of the late 2000s and its damage to the Republican coalition of conservative evangelicals and free marketeers.

Perhaps this context of schism, as well as the bathetic subversion of Apollonian and Dionysian beauty, manifests in Plainview's final, elliptical line; as he stands over Sunday's bloodied body, the businessman shouts an anticlimactic statement made congruent with the imperial overstretch of the late Bush era: 'I'm finished!'.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *No Country for Old Men*.

⁵⁰ *There Will be Blood*.