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## “ARGHHHHH!” Unexpected Violence in Paul Thomas Anderson’s Films

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Paul Thomas Anderson’s films tend to include startling bursts of inexplicable violence. Three of his films in particular exemplify this tendency: *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and *Inherent Vice* (2014). Anderson’s attempts to catch the audience off guard with sudden bursts of auditory and visual activity, both in these films and across his body of work, serve as a method of characterizing mercurial protagonists who lash out against social expectations. Such rejections of the unexpected, in turn, contribute to a postmodern storytelling mode that rebuffs audience desires for linear narratives and formulaic conventions.

Anderson’s postmodern romantic comedy *Punch-Drunk Love* is a good example of this tendency. The film follows protagonist Barry as his relationship with a sister’s coworker empowers him to face his fears and develop a more affirmative expression of masculinity. The first two minutes of the film are deceptively calm. Featuring quiet shots with minimal motion, the opening sequence seems most interested in conveying Barry’s isolation. The heightened stillness serves to make what’s coming in the next sequence all the more shocking. This sequence begins when Barry steps onto the sidewalk outside. At first, the film conforms to the expectations it has set in its opening two minutes. The *mise-en-scène* offers a picturesque view of the sun rising over a still-quiet city street, the very image of a peaceful morning. No jarring edits distract us from the moment, and even the cinematography, previously dominated by a gently creeping camera, gradually falls still, leaving the audience’s attention fixed on a vanishing point shot of a deserted road. There’s no sound except for the diegetic, ambient noises of the morning, including the hushed blowing of the wind.

That all changes abruptly when a car cruising smoothly down the road unexpectedly hits the curb and flips, rolling and bouncing down the street. Suddenly, everything comes alive. The camera begins to move, tracking the car for a few feet before it rolls out



of sight. The vehicle tears through the *mise-en-scène*, a literal slash of violence that bifurcates an otherwise perfectly composed scene. Most notably, we hear the sound of the accident. It's so loud and unexpected that one is hard-pressed not to flinch.

Perhaps the most pressing question is “why?” Why would Anderson include a jump scare so early in the film? And why would startling bursts of violence become one of the protagonist's defining motifs? The answers to these questions are likely intertwined, and they become more and more apparent as the sequence continues. The next shot opens with a sudden cut to Barry, who has much the same reaction to the freak accident as the audience: a mixture of confusion, shock, and horror.



In this relatively brief shot, Barry is centered on the screen, the camera's sole focal point. We see him flinch multiple times, even backing away a little bit. In short, what we're witnessing is characterization on multiple levels. To start, we're encouraged to connect with Barry because he shares our reaction. His ordinary

response to this extraordinary circumstance helps him make sense to us—despite all the less sensible things we'll see him do later in the film. But there's something else at work here, too. Barry's reaction reveals a key aspect of his personality: he handles the unexpected poorly. His fears and insecurities make life's unexpected occurrences feel unbearably extreme, just as the excruciatingly loud audio that dominates this scene makes the accident far larger and more startling than it has any right to be (in the context of a film, at least).

As the sequence continues, we get an eyeline match back to the street, where the shrieking of the car's metal frame scraping against the road dissolves into the squealing brakes of a taxicab dropping off a harmonium. The *mise-en-scène* here is no less violent than in the auto accident. If anything, the sudden, inexplicable delivery of the harmonium takes up more of the screen and lasts for slightly longer than the accident did, all with no reduction in noise, making it the more alarming moment of the two.

The scene concludes with another cut back to Barry. Although he's no longer flinching, he doesn't seem any less alarmed by the sudden appearance of the harmonium than by the car crash. The same horrified anxiety is still plastered across his features, further underscoring Barry's tendency to defensively overreact to the odd occurrences that transpire around him—a tendency that marks his behavior throughout the film.

Something eerily similar happens early on in *There Will Be Blood*. Loosely based on Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel *Oil!*, *There Will Be Blood* tells the rags to riches to crime story of protagonist Daniel Plainview. The film ends with Daniel killing his rival in a bowling alley, the last in a series of

ruthless actions he performs throughout the film to grow his oil business. But the film begins well before he turns murderous. The opening moments depict Daniel as a poor silver miner. Four minutes into the film, we find ourselves watching a bucket slowly rising out of the mine as Daniel attempts to hoist it with a pulley ahead of a dynamite detonation. We're once again treated to a scene with minimal sound (only the diegetic creak of the pulley) and steady cinematography that tracks the slow ascent of the bucket, then its sudden descent when Daniel loses his grip. The dark, claustrophobic mise-en-scène of the mine contrasts with the bright, expansive spaces in which we see Daniel trying to pull the bucket up. The editing offers ordinary cuts that alternate between views of Daniel and his bucket, emphasizing his lonely and repetitive labor.

Once again, this calm setup is abruptly ripped away in a moment seemingly designed to startle the audience. The dynamite explodes with no warning, surprising the audience with an extremely loud wave of sound and an abrupt cut from a dark bucket shot to dust billowing up into Daniel's brighter world. Once again, the sound seems artificially amplified,



making it inherently jarring. There's an element of narrative discontinuity at work here as well. Though the audience is aware that Daniel lit the charges, and though nothing notable has happened since he did, Anderson still manages to catch us off guard with the explosion. This is in part due to the implicit narrative contract he subverts. When we see a character start to pull a bucket on a pulley, the expectation is that they will ultimately succeed in lifting it. Here, we see Daniel's efforts violently interrupted instead.



As the smoke clears and the explosion's reverb fades, we see Daniel move closer to investigate the shaft. We get a sort of transitional shot, half-way between the light of the overworld and the darkness of the mines, as he climbs down the ladder. Then, incredibly, a second burst of unanticipated violence occurs. The ladder breaks with a sharp snap, and

we see Daniel fall down the shaft, vanishing into darkness. The next shot takes us under him, allowing his body to blot out the light from above as he falls onto the camera. The sound of Daniel's body hitting the ground and his grunts of pain are just as loud as the explosions were before they too fade away into silence over a black screen.

Just as in *Punch-Drunk Love*, this scene, complete with its shocking violence, serves as a metaphor for its protagonist. Daniel seems to be caught somewhere between darkness and light, prone to nearly inexplicable episodes of savage anger that ultimately foreshadow his complete descent into darkness at the film's conclusion. Like Barry, Daniel is unpredictable to the point of becoming antisocial, given to the same sort of erratic outbursts that catch the audience so off guard in these two scenes. Sudden violence thus serves as a continued motif in both *Punch-Drunk Love* and *There Will Be Blood*. We see Barry smash windows, bathrooms, and street thugs. Daniel executes one enemy on a whim and beats another to death with a bowling pin in the film's shocking and memorable closing scene.

Although the motif of sudden violence lives on in *Inherent Vice*, the following examples offer notable contrasts to the two films discussed above. *Inherent Vice*, an adaptation of Thomas Pynchon's 2009 novel of the same name, tells the story of Doc Sportello. Doc is an unconventional private detective who spends the film trying to solve a beachside mystery in a state of uneasy cooperation with the police. Unlike the previous two films, the motif of sudden violence isn't pervasive throughout *Inherent Vice*. Instead, it's concentrated in two scenes.

The first scene occurs about thirty minutes into the film. Doc is having what seems to be an ordinary conversation with a woman involved in the case he's investigating. He looks at a picture of a baby, ponders it for a moment, then abruptly contorts his face and unleashes a horrified scream. Doc and the woman then continue talking

as if nothing happened. The scene features a surprisingly unremarkable mise-en-scène. When Doc screams, he's in the center of the shot, and the camera is close enough to clearly mark him as the focal point. Other than a small segment of wall behind him, he's the only thing in the shot that isn't white. Even the back of the photograph blends neatly into the background, creating the illusion that he is screaming at nothing at all.



The scream here might be interpreted as an attempt to snap the audience out of the drowsy back-and-forth of conversation and refocus them in preparation for important information (such as a key plot point), but if the pattern of the motif holds, there's something we can learn about Doc's character here, too. Perhaps what's at stake is his complicated relationship with reality. The idea of screaming at nothing or screaming into the void dovetails nicely with the psychedelic themes prevalent throughout the film. Where the audience sees a normal photograph, Doc clearly sees something deeper, and perhaps more terrifying. Whether this perception is real or an illusion produced by Doc's perpetual marijuana high is ancillary to the point; as a character, Doc is always looking deeper into things, for better or worse.

In a similarly shocking moment at the end of *Inherent Vice*, the motif of sudden, loud violence returns. The shot preceding the disaster is unremarkable. Doc sits in the middle of a warm indoor



landscape, smoking his weed with nary a care in the world. The camera is still, and the gentle female voice-over is still wrapping up from the previous scene. Then, we get a smash cut to Doc's door the very moment that his on-again, off-again police ally, Lieutenant Bigfoot, kicks it down. The new camera angle, sharper lines in the mise-en-scène, and (of course) the startling crash of



diegetic sound have no setup whatsoever. They just happen. The scene continues with Bigfoot nonchalantly walking over the fallen door, creating even more noise by further shattering the already broken glass. While there are no further jump scares, the surrealistic sequence continues with Doc and Bigfoot apologizing to each other in unison and Bigfoot eating Doc's entire bowl of marijuana.

As before, this scene feels like it could be a psychedelic trip. And as before, the sudden outbursts of noise and violence seem to herald a critical moment of character development. After all, Doc and Bigfoot's final conversation of the film brings a sort of closure to their complicated relationship. Bigfoot's use of Doc's presumably illegal weed indicates a closeness or similarity between the two characters even though they've been portrayed as polar opposites until now. Their concurrent speech hints that this collaboration may have finally brought them to a shared understanding. And yes, even Bigfoot's unwarranted, noisy entrance parallels the only other moment in the film that a character does such a thing: the scene of Doc screaming at the photograph. Perhaps this inexplicable self-expression indicates that Bigfoot has finally invaded not just Doc's house but also his psyche, or at least his psychedelic interpretation of the reality around him.

While Doc and Bigfoot are far from normal, they are not quite the same kind of socially-maladjusted characters we see in Barry and Daniel. Yet the fact that Anderson still uses jarring audio jump scares to characterize them demonstrates the auteur's dedication to this particular approach. Once again though, it begs the question: why? When there are so many simpler and more audience-friendly ways to convey character information, why rely on this motif again and again for so many different characters?

I suggest the answer lies in Anderson's penchant for postmodern techniques and narratives. If he blatantly rebels against master narratives in other areas of his filmmaking, why not follow suit with his characterization? After all, it's not unprecedented in postmodernism; in his book *Blossoms & Blood*, historicist Jason Sperb points out that this sort of setup harkens back to the films of Stanley Kubrick. Sperb argues that Anderson, like Kubrick, constructs "long narrative sequences of inconsequence and isolation, disrupted suddenly by bursts of shocking violence" (205). Ultimately, Sperb seems to suggest that association with inexplicable violence is a demonstrably postmodern strategy for characterizing individuals of a certain type. I suggest that in Anderson's

films, that type is one who is (or becomes) trapped in mental or physical isolation. For all their differences, one key thing Barry, Daniel, Doc, and Bigfoot have in common is that they feel profoundly isolated from much of the world around them. Like the eccentric protagonists of so many alienating postmodern films, they fit uneasily into normative social roles, leaving them in a sort of identity moratorium within which they're never quite able to settle into a fully recognizable form. Thus, they act out. While their moments of chaotic violence may seem to come from nowhere at first glance, it's symbolically emblematic of their inability to actualize the love, respect, or understanding that they want from a society with which they can't properly interact.

Ultimately, Anderson's decision to use uncontrollable violence to represent so many of his protagonists makes sense, at least insofar as it doesn't make sense. That is to say that Anderson uses this strategy to subvert audience expectations regarding characterization in order to characterize people who subvert audience expectations regarding social norms. This deeply thought-provoking technique does a superb job of forcing audiences to challenge their beliefs—not just about how films define their protagonists, but also about how film protagonists are defined by society. 🍷

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