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THERE WAS BLOOD: LACAN AND MURDER IN THE FILM *THERE WILL BE BLOOD*

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Abstract: In this paper I examine the theme of murder in Paul Thomas Anderson's 2007 film *There Will Be Blood*, and address the question of what lies behind the protagonist's apparent compulsion to kill his rivals. Making use of some ideas of Jacques Lacan and the Lacanian Serge Leclaire, I connect the compulsion to murder to the never-ending and ultimately impossible task of killing a child: namely, the ideal image of the wonderful child who we were required to be in the eyes of others, a task in which we must engage in order to live a creative and fulfilling life, and which lies at the heart of the psychoanalytic enterprise.

Key Words: Lacan, cinema, murder, lack, absence, envy.

> He searches for his brother. That little bastard: he wants to finally settle his account with him. But how do you kill someone who is already dead?
>
> (Serge Leclaire 1975, p. 11)

In Paul Thomas Anderson's epic film *There will be blood* (2007), there is much that happens, much that is said, much that is seen and heard by us, the audience. But watching the film, and in the silence that follows, what resonates louder even than the noise of the drilling, the shouting, the explosions, is the sound of absence. This story is dominated by what is not said, what is not heard, who is not present, what is not explained.

The start of the film is as extraordinary as all that follows: the first twenty minutes are almost entirely wordless. We see a man digging, gouging at the earth and rock, sweating, toiling. In the absence of words this becomes a visceral experience – our bodies are drawn into the action, as if we become both miner and that which is being mined, the earth itself. This is Lacan's domain of the Real, the place of no separation from the mother/other, a world of no words: 'In the realm of the Real… there is no language because there is no loss, no lack, no absence. There is only complete fullness, needs and the satisfaction of needs' (Klages 2001).

A strong identification between Earth and Mother is established in this sequence. The miner is immersed in the mud and filth of the earth as he digs for treasure – silver in the first instance. When he instead finds gushing oil, it is evocative of the body of the mother-infant, the blood, the afterbirth, the shit, the breast-milk, of the internal wounds that have already been inflicted, and is a precursor of the blood that will flow, as promised in the film's biblical title. This is no soft, sentimental notion of Earth-as-Mother. This mother is harsh, cruel, and gives up her milk most unwillingly.

During this opening sequence we see the miner one day climbing out of the narrow mine shaft and into the light of day, only to be sucked back down, back to earth by the force of its gravity, his leg sickeningly twisted and broken. But even as he lies there in excruciating pain, he picks up a piece of loosened rock, wipes it clean, sees the glinting silver embedded in it, and whispers 'There she is, there she is'. If the infant had words with which to think, surely this would be its first thought, as it discovers mother's treasure with its mouth: 'Ah, there she is, there she is'.

We are eventually introduced to the character, still unspeaking and unspoken of, when he signs his name on a form in the assay office – Daniel Plainview. This is ironic, because deceit and obfuscation define his presentation of himself to others and perhaps eventually to himself, and these thematic strands run through the core of the film's unfolding narrative. In his attempts to persuade and deceive, he more than once refers to himself as a 'plain-speaking man'.

Because there are almost no words in this opening scene, we are left only with dream-like images which remain after the film's end like memories of early childhood, with the same sense of uncertainty about what exactly happened, and whether it really happened at all. Most strikingly, the following story is wordlessly related: we see a man, one of Plainview's expanding team of miners, holding an infant. Soon after, we see a man killed down the mine by a piece of falling equipment – Mother's gravity again. Is it the man who was holding the child? Soon after, we see Plainview holding an infant. At no time do we see the child's mother. There is a suggestion that Plainview has adopted the son of the dead man as his own.

As this near-wordless introduction ends, we cut to a future where words are spoken and people and objects have names. This moment brings a sense of relief – at last we the audience are being spoken to, now all can be explained. In the language of Lacan, we might suppose that at this point we enter the symbolic order. But this is an illusion.

The symbolic order is the world of language, which is a formal and abstract structure. The act of speech, however, requires a speaker, and also a listener, an Other, the place from which one is heard and recognised (Leader 2005, pp. 58-60). For Lacan, all acts of speech carry with them an expression of the subject's desire to be heard, known, loved, 'to be recognised as singular, separate, having their own proper name' (Bacon 2008). But this desire can only be fulfilled by an Other, another subject.

Lacan distinguishes between full and empty speech: full speech, which articulates the symbolic dimension of language, 'is a speech full of meaning… which forms the truth such as it becomes established in the recognition of one person by another'. Full speech is true speech, 'since it is closer to the enigmatic truth of the subject's desire' (No Subject Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis: Speech). Here the sense of identity is based on recognition of the subject as one who is an active agent in the world, but who is also subject *to* it. 'This identity accepts… that identity itself is contingent, unstable, not wholly or necessarily intrinsic but formed and nourished also from outside, from others… the name "subject" points towards both a sense of separateness and autonomy… and… of being tied to, part of, determined by something larger' (Bacon 2008).

On the other hand, empty speech carries no true meaning – the subject is alienated from his desire. This is the speech of the ego, of one who speaks to himself in the mirror, 'the self-composed, self-possessed person, the "self-made man"' who forgets the facts of his origins and of his continuing dependence on others, 'who says, without irony, "I know who I am"'. It gives expression to 'the Ego's impulse to omnipotence which demands that all recognition be self-recognition' (*ibid*).

Paradoxically, speech always in some way obscures the truth of who the subject is (Leader 2005, p. 60). Bion writes:

> It is too often forgotten that the gift of speech… has been elaborated as much for the purpose of concealing thought by dissimulation and lying as for the purpose of elucidating and communicating thought. (Bion 1970, p. 3).

This is the world into which we are borne as the self-made man Plainview begins to speak – not the symbolic order but an imaginary domain, a world of lies, deceit and obfuscation in which we can succumb to the illusion of knowing where we stand and who we are, but in which we in the end are lost. And it is a long way into the film before someone, extraordinarily, dramatically and with devastating consequence for Plainview, speaks his truth, the truth of his desire.

The relationship between psychoanalysis and the cinematic experience has been much explored. Cinema offers 'a unique opportunity to examine the unconscious outside of an analytic session' (McGowan 2008). But in the cinematic mainstream the enterprise has centred on providing the spectator with an illusion of omnipotence. All is explained and all is resolved. There is no trauma, or at least by the end the temporary threat of trauma has been expunged and all wounds healed. There is no more conflict – all is well with the world, and we can rest in peace. Succumbing to this illusion, our passivity as spectator is obscured: 'Most commercial films show us how we can subdue and master trauma, not, as psychoanalysis has it, how trauma subdues and masters us' (*ibid*).

Watching a film, the camera's eye becomes our eye, and we can believe that we are all-seeing, all-knowing. Everything that happens in the world that matters, we notice. But there is always an absence, a world beyond the gaze of the camera. If the film director is willing to allow us to encounter this absence, then we can enter the world of the unconscious desire of the protagonists, and of our own – because desire is evoked by what is missing, a lack. 'It is this absence, not the illusion of… visual omnipotence, that draws the spectator into the events on the screen… The encounter… is traumatic…, shattering the ego and dislodging the spectator from her or his position of illusory safety'. As a spectator we are led to 'a traumatic encounter with [our] own desire… one has one's own desire as a spectator exposed, in a way similar to the patient on the analytic couch' (*ibid*).

For Lacan, desire is the desire to be the Other, to be once more in the world of the Real, where there is no separation. It is a desire to be whole again, the centre of the universe. As such, it can never be fulfilled. Desire is created and sustained by a never-ending lack, and this lack ensures that we continue to desire (Felluga 2003).

Lacan distinguishes desire from *need* (which is a need for an object in order to satisfy an appetite), *demand* (which is a demand for love and recognition), and *wish*: 'A wish is something you want consciously. But desire is fundamentally barred from consciousness' (Leader 2005, p84). Desire is shaped by culture and language – the Symbolic Order: 'Our desire is never properly our own, but is created through fantasies that are caught up in cultural ideologies rather than material sexuality' (Felluga 2003).

For Lacan, one of the tasks of psychotherapy is 'to tease out the subject's desire from his incessant demands. The neurotic is someone who privileges demand, who hides his desire beneath the imposing presence of demand' (Leader 2005, p82). Lacan reasserts the classical Freudian notion of looking for expressions of the client's unconscious desire through

attending to dreams, the client's particular choice of words, slips of the tongue, the small details – 'on searching for desire in between the lines, where it is least obvious'. He emphasises the importance of 'focussing not on the message, but the point of redundancy, the little details which do not really need to be there… A dream may represent some obvious wish… but this wish is only an alibi' (*ibid* p84).

In the case of the film, we must search in between the words and beyond the gaze of the camera. The starting point is the Lack, that which we can infer but which is not spoken or seen.

I pick up the narrative of the film continuing on from the opening sequence.

Following Plainview's accidental discovery of oil, his business and his wealth grow exponentially. Plainview has a young boy with him whom he introduces to the world, and to us, the audience, as 'my son and partner, HW', and 'my wonderful son'. Accompanied by the boy, he continues to cajole, seduce and persuade, assuring everyone that 'I'm a family man, and I run a family business'. From the outset HW is used by Plainview in the service of his own ambition.

One day he is approached by a young man, Paul Sunday, who lives in an impoverished, infertile corner of California, saying that there is oil on his family's land, and that he will tell Plainview where it is for £500 – a fine sum for him, but pennies in comparison with the vast sums Plainview will earn from it. Plainview travels with HW to the family's small goat farm, and, obscuring his true interest, tricks Sunday's father into selling it for only £5000, money with which Paul's older brother Eli hopes to build a new and bigger church. Eli is a quiet-spoken and unprepossessing young minister who nevertheless is the spiritual leader of the local people, head of the church in which he practices a form of charismatic evangelical christianity. Together with Plainview we witness him performing a kind of exorcism to heal an old woman of arthritis. During it he claims to have 'found a new voice' of god, a voice which emanates from his stomach: 'My stomach speaks – with a whisper, not a shout'. After the service, Plainview comments sardonically: 'Great show'.

From their first encounter onward we see Plainview and the minister locked in a battle of wills, a power struggle, each seeking to outmanoeuvre and do down the other. But at the same time there is an unspoken recognition that they need each other. For Plainview, having Sunday on his side means having the good will and backing of the local people in his enterprise. For Sunday, the wealth that Plainview's oil business brings means a bigger, church, a growing congregation, and increasing power.

It is tempting to see this relationship as a parable of the tense, uneasy symbiosis in which capitalism and christianity co-exist, of 'our dysfunctional relationship with capital and natural resources' (Bradshaw 2008), or reflecting the USA's 'grand narrative of discovery and conquest' (Dargis 2007). While this perspective is valid, to accept it as being 'what the film is about' is to fail to see what lies dark and obscured in its depths.

As Plainview's well proceeds to extract its treasure from the ground, one day there issues from it an alarming hiss, belch and gurgle, followed by a cataclysmic eruption of spouting oil. HW is caught in the explosion, and is rescued from the roof of the derrick by Plainview and carried to safety. But even as HW lies there traumatised and permanently deafened, Plainview quietly celebrates the fact that the explosion has announced the presence of a vast reservoir of oil which promises wealth beyond even his imagining.

Soon after, Sunday approaches Plainview asking for the money he is owed for the sale of the land. Plainview instead slaps and beats him, in a rage knocking him to the ground and 'baptising' him in a pool of mud – a pre-echo of his own baptism to come. He berates him: why didn't you come and heal my son?

HW is no longer of use to Plainview in his business. Plainview decides to send him away and into the care of a teacher of deaf children, who becomes his companion and interpreter. He doesn't tell HW what he is doing – he could of course have done so even though HW is deaf – instead abandoning him on the train and with no words of explanation or love or sorrow.

Some time after, a strange man arrives on Plainview's doorstep, announcing himself to be his half-brother Henry. Plainview is suspicious, but Henry has documents which appear to prove that he is who he says. Plainview agrees to take him in and give him work, and he becomes a close confidant. Indeed we see Plainview talking to him with an openness and candour that we have not seen before. He tells Henry: 'I have a competition in me… I hate people. I want to earn enough money so that I can get away from everybody'. But one day, to test him, he makes reference to a childhood memory of a local dance, a memory he knows Henry would share, and it is apparent that this man knows nothing of it. Realising he has been fooled, he extracts the real story from the stranger: that he had been a friend of Henry's, but that Henry had died of tuberculosis. He had taken Henry's diary and gleaned from it the information he needed to take his place, hoping that he could catch a small piece of Plainview's wealth by getting close to him.

Plainview kills his 'brother', and afterwards we see him reading his real brother's diary, out of which a small photograph falls, a picture of a small child. We don't discover whether this is young Daniel or young Henry. He sits looking at it and weeps. We see him burying 'Henry', digging at the earth with a pick-axe in an echo of the opening scene.

In order to maximise his profit, Plainview plans to run a pipeline to the sea. But his way is blocked by one land-owner, William Bandy, who has so far resisted all attempts to buy him out. Plainview goes to him, confident that he can persuade the man to let him run the pipe over his land, with his usual combination of charm, deceit, bullying and money. But the man asks for only one thing: that Plainview submit himself to a baptism at Eli Sunday's church, confess his sins, and become a member of the congregation: 'I want you to be washed in the blood of Christ'. Plainview protests, but realises that it is the only way to get what he wants. Reluctantly he attends a church service at which he is called up to be baptised. Sunday uses this an opportunity to take some revenge for his previous humiliation, revelling in slapping him and soaking him, and forcing him to loudly confess his sin of having abandoned his child.

Following this episode Plainview brings HW back to live with him. But he seems to have been in some way maddened by what has happened, lapsing into increasingly bizarre and eccentric behaviour. Years pass, and Plainview now lives alone with his butler in a vast and vulgarly extravagant mansion, gradually descending into a fug of half-crazed alcoholism.

Meanwhile HW has married his childhood sweetheart Mary Sunday, Eli's younger sister, who from the onset of his deafness had learnt to communicate with him by signing. In an extraordinary pivotal scene which vibrates and pulsates with the emotional charge which it generates, he goes to Plainview accompanied by his interpreter, and through him, using sign language, tells his father that he wants to go away with Mary to Mexico to set up his own business, that it is no longer enough for him only to be part of his father's. In other words, he bids for autonomy. Plainview's response is hostile: 'You'll be in competition with me then'. HW protests that he simply wishes to live his own independent life. Plainview cruelly goads him: 'okay, if that's what you want to do, why don't you tell me? You can speak, after all'.

With some effort, uttering the first words he has spoken in years, he tells him in a slurred voice that he is going to Mexico with Mary. Enraged and maddened by what he perceives as a rejection of him, Plainview responds: 'You're killing us. You're killing the image I have of you as my son'. For the second time he attempts to obliterate HW, telling him that he is not really his son – 'you're a bastard I found in a basket in the desert' – and

that he only adopted him because he would be a useful tool in selling his business – all of this translated from and into sign language via the interpreter. But his response is self-defeating: HW stands, signs that he is glad he isn't his father, and departs forever, leaving Plainview alone, crazed and abject.

Plainview is left in an even more desolate and whisky-sodden state. And now back into his life comes Eli, smartly attired and apparently successful from his new life in Las Vegas, working as a radio preacher. He announces that the old man Bandy has died, and offers to sell his oil-rich land to Plainview for £100,000. In a last act of humiliation, Plainview's condition is that Eli proclaim loudly and repeatedly, as if to his congregation, that he is a false prophet and that god is a superstition. When he has done so, Plainview points out that the land is worthless, all the oil having been drained through the wells that surround it. He explains that it is as if he has drunk up Eli's milkshake from a glass with a very long straw.

Eli is left utterly defeated, desperate and in a state of moral and psychological collapse. He reveals that he has lost a lot of money in failed investments – it is now 1927 and the start of the Depression – and there is a suggestion that he has also 'wandered from the path of the Lord' into a life of venality and dissolution. Seeing Eli in this state seems to evoke a murderous rage in Plainview. It is not enough to have defeated him – he continues to taunt and rave at the forlorn minister. He evokes the image of two brothers competing for the same milk: 'You weren't the chosen one, Eli. It was your brother Paul… what were you doing when he was suckling at your mother's breast?'. And finally, in a taunt which takes us back to the visceral beginnings of the film and of himself, he says to Eli: 'You're afterbirth. You slithered out in your mother's filth'.

In this scene is enacted the last chapter of a prodigious struggle between Plainview and Sunday. Plainview appears to have achieved an utter humiliation and final defeat of the minister. But, not satisfied with having crushed him psychologically, Plainview proceeds to do so literally. He pursues Sunday, rendering him unconscious with a blow to the head. As he lies prone, Plainview proceeds brutally to smash his skull, killing him outright. Hearing the disturbance, the butler calls out for Plainview, whose response, heavy-laden with ambiguity, is 'I'm finished' – as if he has completed a task, rather than that his life is effectively over.

In the film's final cataclysmic scene a puzzle is presented to us. The question we are left with is: Why murder? Why did Plainview need to kill Sunday? Why was it not enough for him to have achieved vast wealth and to have reduced the minister to an abject and bankrupt state, financially and psychologically? In order to begin to attempt to find a

solution, we must *interrogate* all that has preceded it, much as we might interrogate a client, in the sense that we ask questions in order to discover what is hidden from us. We might also usefully ask: if this film were a client's dream, what would the dream be about? What would it reveal of their unconscious desire?

As we have seen, there was an earlier murder committed by Plainview, and two quasi-murders in the form of his attempts to *obliterate* HW. I suggest here that all these acts are connected. Freud of course knew all about murderous fantasy, the wish that a sibling, father or other rival no longer exist (Freud 1899/2006, p. 266). Lacan, discussing the nature of envy, cites the Confessions of St. Augustine, who, witnessing his younger brother feeding at his mother's breast, felt embittered, poisoned, an urge to tear him to pieces. This ideal narcissistic image of plenitude and completeness is in sharp and painful contrast to Augustine's experience of his reality, the constraining and disturbing reality of having a body which is dependent on others, vulnerable to its own needs, discomforts and frailties, to whatever others might inflict, and to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. 'Such is true envy – the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself' (Lacan 1979, p. 116).

But in his essay *A Child is Being Killed*, the Lacanian Serge Leclaire goes much further than this. He suggests that in order to live a creative and fulfilled life, first we must kill the 'wonderful child', the omnipotent unspeaking infant, born under the gaze of the parents and which bears witness to their dreams and desires – the saviour who is born to fulfil the impossible task of filling a lack in the lives of others. This 'wonderful child' is also 'the forsaken one… lost in total dereliction, facing terror and death alone' (Leclaire 1998, pp. 2-3).

The task of killing this primary narcissistic image of wholeness and eternal pleasure is impossible and never-ending, to be undertaken anew each day: 'Whoever does not mourn over and over the loss of the wonderful child he might have been remains in limbo – in the milky luminosity of a shadowless, hopeless waiting… whoever believes he has won the battle against the figure of the tyrant once and for all cuts himself off from the sources of his creative spirit' (*ibid*, p. 3).

The image 'fully deserves to be called *infans*. It does not and never will speak. Precisely to the extent that one begins to kill it can one begin to speak. To the extent that one goes on killing it can one go on truly to speak, and to desire' (*ibid,* p. 10). We tend to confuse this first death with the second, final death, because:

> it frees us from recognising that most imperative of constraints which rules us – that of being reborn every day to speech and to desire, while unendingly mourning the passing of the tantalising infans. It also gives us the illusion of succeeding in a struggle against death, a struggle in which failure is guaranteed whatever its nature (Leclaire 1975, p. 4).

Leclaire suggests that speaking, which he links to desiring, is an existential act which, like all acts, is bound up with a loss – specifically, the loss of the image of omnipotent self-sufficiency. The image, the *infans*, which is the unconscious desire of the Other, cannot speak. To speak is to speak as a desiring subject, as an *I*.

The task of the psychoanalyst then is to reckon with the absolute power of the *infans*: 'he must never stop perpetrating the murder of the child, even as he recognises that he cannot carry it out' (Leclaire 1998, p. 2). Consequently we are always and forever dealing with loss and the mourning of it.

So, following Lacan, and in the light of Leclaire's ideas, let us interrogate this film by looking 'in between the lines'. First of all, as I have mentioned, we do not see HW's mother. When, early in the film, a woman asks him 'Sir, where is your wife?', he replies 'she died in childbirth'. Of course the woman is really enquiring about HW's mother, believing him to be Plainview's son. Later his 'brother' asks where the mother is, to which he responds 'I don't want to talk about those things'. Although there are allusions to Plainview's sexual liaisons with women – he is asked to confess this 'sin' when he is baptised – we see nothing of them, and he appears not to sustain any sexual relationship. Women, as mother, lover, other, are present only as an absence, a lack.

What about his own family? There is no mention of it, certainly not until the false Henry arrives. Again he rebuffs all enquiries. He refuses to speak of his origins. We are told nothing of his parents or of his relationships with them. But from 'Henry' we discover that Plainview had a younger brother, and also that the brother was born to another woman. The implication is clear: Plainview's mother has gone, and is probably dead. Did she die in childbirth? We don't know. Similarly, we can deduce that after losing his first wife his father re-married and formed a new family. We know nothing else about him.

To find that he has been tricked by the stranger is excruciating for Plainview. His brother has returned to him, has become a companion, and is now after all revealed to be dead. There is no surprise in Plainview's decision to kill him. In a sense he kills his dead

brother. When afterwards he sits weeping as he looks at the picture of the young child, a poignant scene, we see most clearly his longing for something he has lost.

This is not the first murder: earlier, when HW is deafened, Plainview cruelly banishes his no longer useful 'son'. Yet it is apparent in scenes both preceding and following this that he genuinely loves him. We must conclude that he is only able to love the 'glorious child', his 'wonderful son' who is able to be part of who he is and what he does, who exists only as his image. Now HW is no longer intact, and, more pertinently, can no longer hear what Plainview says. How then can he be shaped into the child that Plainview requires him to be? He can no longer be defined by Plainview's words.

And again, much later, when HW is an adult – an adult, moreover, who has formed and is maintaining a successful sexual relationship with a woman – his bid for separation and autonomy is received by Plainview as an unbearable rejection. Plainview dares him to *speak* his words, and he does so – an extraordinary, powerful act. This is the central moment of the film, around which all else revolves, because here for the first time HW articulates his true desire, to be allowed to be a man who is not defined by his father's thoughts and imagination. Plainview's response speaks volumes: 'You're killing *us*. You're killing the image I have of you as my son'. For Plainview, the relationship is symbiotic, and HW is necessary for his survival.

The way in which this scene becomes a battle between the two men, while at the same time Plainview seems desperately to need the Other, echoes his relationship with the minister Eli Sunday. And his cruel and murderous treatment of HW is a pre-echo of the bloody final scene.

We can think of these strands running through the story as expressions of Plainview's unconscious world. How then can we begin to understand the murder of Eli Sunday? Eli is in Plainview's eyes a powerful man, even though the nature of that power is quite different from his own. In a sense it is a battle that neither man can win. But when Plainview performs on Eli his profane 'baptism' in the mud, and berates him for not healing HW, we can easily imagine that he also desires that he himself be healed, made whole again, and is enraged that Eli cannot or does not do so.

Plainview's incipient madness appears to be triggered by the confrontation with Eli at his baptism, where he is forced to confess the sin of his first 'murder', the abandonment of HW. We can understand all of his attempts to obliterate others – HW, Eli, 'Henry' – as outward expressions of his futile efforts to kill the glorious child that he was once required

and failed to be. Plainview appears to become increasingly psychotic, and it could perhaps serve as a definition of psychosis that he is unable to distinguish between these two kinds of death.

There are strong resonances of Plainview in Leclaire's brilliant discussion of the case of Pierre-Marie – who is also someone who needs to kill a brother who is already dead. So it could equally be said of Plainview that 'life is full of difficulty and affliction, haunted by the paralysing presence of death'. He devotes most of his energy to the depression of his passions and desires, and it 'only bears fruit – which he can't enjoy – in the field of his professional endeavors'. He searches for his brother in order to settle his account with him. 'But how do you kill the dead?' (Leclaire 1998, p. 11).

Plainview's ambition is evident, but his hopes and dreams remain hidden from us. His demand obliterates his desire (Leader 2005, p82). The demand is the demand for the completeness of the other/mother, that he might not feel the lack of the mother's love. We can understand much better now the identification of Earth and Mother made at the film's beginning – an identification maintained through the film in references to milk and mother's breast – because we know what he was really always digging for.

In his narcissistic torment, Plainview sees himself reflected in all around him. At the moment of the final murder, he sees in Eli his own abject desolation and defeat. He has fallen from grace, from a life full of golden promise, a promise of treasure to be found. Plainview has lost everything, but we know that he always had lost everything, that he lost everything back at the beginning, in the time when there were no words. For him there is no woman who can replace his mother, who can fill the lack in him. He lives a life of eternal competition with his brother for his mother's milk and the loving gaze of his father, a fight to be what he never will be – the chosen one. We witness what Plainview finally becomes as he disintegrates: once again the child 'who is already abandoned, lost in complete dereliction, standing alone in the face of terror and death' (Leclaire 1975, p11).

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