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# The Aesthetics of Oil: the Role of Oil in *Cities of Salt*, *Oil!*, *There Will Be Blood*, *Giant* and *Killers of The Flower Moon*

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# ABSTRACT

The main purpose of my thesis is the analysis of the aesthetics of petroleum, namely the ways in which petroleum is represented in different artistic forms. The work is divided into four chapters. The first chapter defines petrofiction as given by Amitav Ghosh and other scholars such as Martin Shockley, Hannes Bergthaller, Christa Grewe-Volpp, Sylvia Mayer, Stacey Balkan, Swaralipi Nandi and Graeme Macdonald. In this chapter I also analyze *Cities of Salt* (1984) by Abd al-Rahman Munif, the novel that Ghosh recognizes as the greatest example of petrofiction. The second chapter deals with Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (1927) and Paul Anderson's cinematic adaptation of the book, *There Will Be Blood* (2007). In particular, following the analysis of Stephanie LeMenager, I trace a link between these masterpieces and the reasons why oil representation is crucial to understand American culture, by highlighting the bond between oil and American automobile culture. The third chapter deals with George Stevens's movie *Giant* (1956), focusing on oil symbolism as regards issues linked to environment, society and economy. In particular, I explain the role that oil has in creating economic differences among people, as well as tensions for its possession. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I present Scorsese's movie *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023).

# INTRODUCTION

Nowadays oil has a very important role in society, economy and politics, so much so that the $20^{th}$ and $21^{st}$ centuries have been renamed as the age of 'petromodernity'. The presence of oil is amongst the major forces that shape human life. Oil has been referred to as a powerful fuel and versatile substance and it has been recognized as the most ubiquitous and yet, paradoxically, invisible commodity of modern and contemporary global history and economics. Even if for certain reasons it is like a 'spectral substance', oil has a unique force that produces singular effects, from various points of view.

Unfortunately, as Daniel Worden writes, "the difficulty of imagining life without, or beyond, fossil fuels stems from the fact that fossil fuels themselves connote futurity in late twentieth-century culture. It is difficult to imagine a future without petroleum, in part because petroleum underlies the normative vision of family, work, and social belonging in the late twentieth-century United States" (109).

As regards the role that it has in literature, scholars have debated for a long time regarding its presence and role in it. In fact, some claim that petroleum is almost completely absent in literature, while some others state the opposite and even identify a literary genre dealing with oil: petrofiction. According to the latter, petrofiction is a literary genre that examines the role of petroleum in society.

Actually, petroleum is represented not only in literature, but also in other artistic forms. The purpose of my thesis is precisely the analysis of the aesthetics of petroleum, namely the ways in which petroleum is represented in different artistic forms. In particular, I have focused on two books and three films. I have started with the analysis of *Cities of Salt* (1984) by Abd al-Rahman

Munif, the novel that Amitav Ghosh – the writer who coined the term 'petrofiction' – recognizes as the greatest example of petrofiction.

*Cities of Salt* is a perfect example of the so called 'slow violence', namely a gradual violence that reveals itself in an almost unseen way, a violence of a destruction that is delayed and dispersed across time and space. This kind of violence has different facets; it is both environmental and social, both economic and political. To this end, Munif, writing about America's oil-driven entanglements with Saudi Arabia, is able to give expression to social, political, economic and environmental issues; in fact, his novel shows the destruction and transformation produced by the pursuit of petroleum across the world-system's oil-bearing regions, as well as the effects that this pursuit leads to, namely political repression and unrest, environmental devastation and class struggle. Petro-capitalism is full of contradictions and, to this end, Munif uses the means of the novel to script them; in fact, through his writing he shows how petro-development promises of progress are false. The author is not the only person who denounced the negative effects of the prominent role that oil assumed in society.

To this end, Upton Sinclair had already published – in 1927 –, *Oil!*, a novel that narrates the story of Bunny, the son of an oil magnate, the rich tycoon J. Arnold Ross, known as Dad. The plot revolves around the character of Bunny, who undergoes a journey of personal and moral maturation in an era marked by great turbulence and change. In fact, those years were the years of the Californian oil boom. The oil boom brought about significant social and cultural changes; the emergence of wealthy oil magnates and entrepreneurs during this period contributed to the shaping of California's social fabric. Some of these social consequences impacted negatively to local communities and the social structure of the region. The oil boom attracted a massive influx of migrant workers seeking employment opportunities in the oil industry, which led to increased

pressure on local infrastructure, including housing, public services and healthcare facilities, as well as an increase in the cost of living. The growing demand for housing and consumer goods raised prices, creating economic challenges for local communities. All these elements generated social tensions; in fact, people found themselves dealing with conflicts related to resources, competition in the labor market and cultural dynamics. Moreover, despite the economic boom associated with oil, significant economic disparities emerged, as those involved in the oil industry earned considerably more than those in different sectors, creating economic divisions in society. In addition, oil industry provoked various environmental transformation, as exemplified in Sinclair's novel. *Oil!* explores also themes of class struggle, capitalism, and corruption.

Class struggle, a central theme in *Oil!*, remains a reality in many societies today. The widening gap between the rich and the poor, the fight for workers' rights and the power of the economic elite continue to generate socio-economic tensions. Sinclair's depiction of the conflict between the oil magnate and the workers mirrors a still-persistent conflict, a clash between the might of capital and the rights of the working class. The impact of the oil industry on the environment, a concern already present in the novel, particularly resonates with today's worries about climate change and sustainability. Sinclair's foresight in understanding the interconnections between industrial development, class struggle, corruption, and environmental health shows how ahead of his time he was.

Another important theme which is analyzed in the novel is the importance of the car, one of the most visible effects of the omnipresence of oil. *Oil!* reveals the so-called 'road culture' or 'car culture.[1] This theme, along with the others mentioned, is present in the cinematographic transposition of the novel, namely Paul Anderson's film *There Will Be Blood* (2007).

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[1] The expression 'car culture' refers to the car-centric, car-dominant, car-prioritizing, and car-biased beliefs and

The importance of the family automobile is represented also in George Stevens' movie *Giant* (1956), which deals also with the topic of the environmental degradation. The film, in fact, depicts the environmental as well as social effects of oil industry; *Giant*'s plot is heavily influenced by the expansion of the oil industry in Texas.

The aesthetics of oil, with its industrial landscapes, oil infrastructure and environmental consequences, emerges as a crucial visual element in the film. Moreover, the film delves into issues related to wealth inequality, cultural conflicts and the impact of industrialization on traditional ways of life. The film represents the radical change in the life of the Texan community and the cultural and economic shift in West Texas from a cattle ranching economy to an oil economy. The struggle for control of oil becomes a central theme, influencing the characters' decisions and the trajectory of the narrative.

Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) is the focus of the last chapter. Besides the themes of social, cultural, and environmental impact caused by the oil industry, already mentioned for the previous analyzed works, Scorsese's film offers a glimpse into the complexity of the relationships between indigenous populations and colonizers, offering ideas for an in-depth reflection on the historical injustices that still permeate contemporary society. In particular, the analysis of the role of oil reveals a crucial dimension within the plot, as this resource not only marked the economic rise of the indigenous Osage, but also unleashed greed, corruption and tragedy, as evidenced by their murders by white men who want to seize their richness. Furthermore, analysis of colonial dynamics highlights the persistent prejudice and discrimination faced by the Osage, despite their oil wealth.

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behaviors that characterize human beings.

In conclusion, my thesis focuses on the representation of oil effects on society, economy, environment and politics on diverse novels and films as perceived by their authors and directors. Even if these novels and these movies are different and belong to different years, they are all bonded by the same denounce of the devastation, under various points of view, that oil industry has caused and still causes.

# Petrofiction: an introduction through *Cities of Salt* (1984)

## 1.1 Petrofiction: between visibility and invisibility

According to writer and critic Amitav Ghosh, petrofiction is a literary genre that examines the role of petroleum in society. Gosh coined the term while reviewing Abdul Rahman Munif's novel *Cities of Salt* in the American magazine *The New Republic* in 1992. He noticed that, contrary to the Spice Trade,[2] the "Oil Encounter", namely "the intertwining of the fates of Americans and those living in the Middle East around this commodity" (Szeman 210) "has produced scarcely a single work of note" (Ghosh 29). In trying to understand the reasons of such scarcity in American literature, he assumed that what operated as a check for this literary production were probably political and economic motives, as well as the prevalent introspective character of American fiction and the American shame about the ruinous legacy of oil capitalism. As regards the almost complete lack of petrofiction in Arab literature, Ghosh stated that the founding cause of this deficiency is to be researched both in the mediocre development of culture and literature in the places where oil is physically present the most and in the "resentment that so many in the Arab world feel toward the regimen that rule the oil kingdoms" (30). In his opinion, "to the principal protagonists in the Oil encounter […], the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic" (29). The matter is that the territory of the novel is monolingual, whereas the territory of oil is multilingual. Moreover, the world of oil, a world that is displaced,

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[2] The Spice trade was a commercial and colonial endeavor that delivered spices such as cloves, ginger, cinnamon, salt and pepper to many parts of the world. A great variety of books about this route has been produced. To cite some of them : *The Lusiads* by Luís Vaz de Camões (1572); *The Moor's Last Sigh* by Salman Rushdie (1995); *Nathaniel's Nutmeg: Or the True and Incredible Adventures of the Spice Trader Who Changed the Course of History* by Giles Milton (1999); T*he Scents of Eden: A Narrative of the Spice Trade* by Charles Corn (1998).

heterogeneous and international, can barely go at the same pace as the world of the novel, which conveys the sense of belonging to a place (Ghosh 30).

Martin Shockley too, in the introduction to a 1967 anthology of southwestern writing had written that "with minor exceptions... oil culture is not represented in literature" (Shockley in Barret and Worden, xxi). A similar opinion is held by Hannes Bergthaller, Christa Grewe-Volpp and Sylvia Mayer, who actually recognize that literature and the arts haven't paid so much attention to petroleum. To explain the reasons of this almost total invisibility, they hark back to the invisibility of petroleum in everyday life; in fact, as Graeme Macdonald maintains in "Monstrous Transformer", petroleum is "made 'unseen', either by privatization, securitization and military enforcement *or* by its mediated mystification" (Macdonald 293). Also Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi recognize the fact that oil has not been represented in the American imagination, both because of the shame caused by the awareness of the human and environmental damages of its extraction and because of the spatial amnesia that renders the sites of extraction invisible.

Some scholars have a different opinion regarding the presumed invisibility of oil in literature. Among them, Graeme Macdonald stands out, by affirming that oil is explicitly and violently visible in literature. To sustain his thesis, he analyses two novels and cites many other pieces of literature[3], among which stick out Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* (1990),[4] Ken Saro-Wiwa's

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[3] The pieces of literature cited by Macdonald are examples of petrofiction as they deal with socio-ecological, physical and financial forms of dispossession caused by oil-extraction.

[4] Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* (1990) is a book about the Osage tribe during the Oklahoma oil boom.

*A Forest of Flowers* (1986),[5] Helon Habila's *Oil On Water* (2010)[6] and Charles Red Corn's *A Pipe For February* (2002)[7]. In addition to these novels, it is appropriate to cite Amitav Gosh's *The Circle of Reason* (1986)[8] and Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004)[9]. Though, it must be said that Macdonald sustains that there can be no "American" oil novel, for the simple reason that until there is no oil culture, given by the lack of self-consciousness of what the role of oil in society is, there can be no national oil novel.

Macdonald, by analyzing the novels *Greenvoe* by George Mackay Brown and *Cities of Salt*, adduces the concept of 'world literature', maintaining that the literature produced by oil cannot be categorized as 'national', due to its ubiquity, he affirms that the most appropriate word to use in order to refer to the literature created by oil is "world".

To define the concept of 'world literature', it is useful to refer to what Franco Moretti argues in "Conjectures on World Literature"; he writes that the world literary system has to be understood as one. What it is important to notice is the fact that world literature was born with the beginning of the era of fossil fuels; actually, as Imre Szeman states, the presence of energy sources, including oil and coal, is prerogative of this kind of literature. As specific moments of literature are in relation to developments in energy history and as, at the present time, oil presence is globally

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[5] Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Forest of Flowers* (1986) is a collection of nineteen darkly-comic short stories about life in Nigeria.

[6] Helon Habila's *Oil On Water* (2010) describes the experience of two journalists who try to rescue a kidnapped European wife in the oil landscape of the Niger Delta.

[7] Charles Red Corn's *A Pipe for February* is a novel that deals with what the Osage people went through during the 1920s, when oil profits had made them wealthy.

[8] Amitav Gosh's *The Circle of Reason* (1986) is the story of an Indian who is suspected of being a terrorist and leaves India for northern Africa and the Middle East.

[9] Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004) is the story of a teenager named Elvis who tries to get out of the ghettos of Lagos, Nigeria.

pervasive, Macdonald, with good reason, claims that world literature is a world petroliterature. This, in Imre Szeman's words, is" a literature that has to exist within a system organized around the capacities, fantasies and desires, and imaginative and physical possibilities of oil" (Szeman 214). Also Michael Niblett, in his article "Oil and World Literature", claims that every modern novel is, to a certain degree, an oil novel, because the present age is the age of petroleum and, as a consequence, oil is omnipresent in the substance and structure of modern life. To this end, being aware of the twine between energy and culture, Macdonald writes that "literary forms mediate the 'carbon flows, exchanges, relations and circulations' of the 'fuel-ecological *world*-system'" (Macdonald 291-292, *my emphasis*).

## 1.2 Abd al-Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*

Rob Nixon is Professor in 'Humanities and the Environment' at Princeton University, where he teaches environmental studies and creative nonfiction. He is an activist and writer; he works for the overthrow of apartheid and he focuses on environmentalism and public writing, particularly in relation to struggles for environmental justice in the Global South. Nixon is known because he has elaborated the concept of 'slow violence', namely a slow and relentless decline of the physical environment, a slow environmental erosion that goes unnoticed and that is caused by human actions. In his words, slow violence is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). The violence which Nixon refers to is not only environmental, but also social, economic and political, as Abd al-Rahman Munif's novel *Cities of Salt* (1984) shows.

*Cities of Salt* is a five-part cycle of novels that deals with the history of oil. It is a living and strong commentary on oil's impact and it shows the destruction of traditional spatial orders and the creation of enormous levels of material and social inequality that the substance creates.

Starting in the 1920s, oil came to exert an undeniable social influence upon the industrialized nations that were becoming dependent on consuming it and on those locations throughout the world where it was being extracted. As a consequence, a literature exploring the operational dynamics of the companies that came to dominate the oil industry emerged; *Cities of Salt* is part of this literature.

The novel was published following the 1970s oil crises. It tells the story of a desert village situated on a brook, Wadi al-Uyoun, in the early 1930s. The novel is a testimony of the transformation of a fictional Gulf country from a simple Bedouin country into an oil-producing State indirectly governed and exploited by American oil companies. It records the devastation of people's lives as well as the violation of their own traditions. Forced to leave their simple homes and tents, the people witness the destruction of their villages, which are substituted by American ports and cities. The inhabitants are confused because of the modern technological novelties and betrayed by their own greedy rulers, who give the foreign corporations the permission to do whatever they want apart from the country's people and traditions. The main character is Miteb al-Hathal, a simple Bedouin. He is a very stubborn person and it is for this reason that, when he opposes the tractors cutting down all the trees of Wadi al-Uyoun, he mysteriously dies, becoming a legend. He becomes a phantom, who appears whenever the villagers are stressed or rebel. Al-Hathal does not witness the building of the modern Western town of Harran, but his son Fawaz, with whom the story continues, does. Unlike Miteb al-Hathal, Ibn Rashed, another Bedouin who hosts the Americans and cooperates with them, thinks that the Americans will come anyway, so

he finds no reason in resisting them. The character of Mufaddai al-Jeddan, a traditional doctor who helps the sick without pay, is also contrasted and, indeed, left to die of his injuries at the end by Subhi al-Mahmilji, a doctor who has a good relationship with the emir and agrees with the use of new technologies. The killing of al-Jeddan disturbs the inhabitants, who have accepted the sudden transformation of their town and who have become enslaved to modern professional life.

The novel ends with a comparison between the old Harran and the new. From one side we have a world where the emir chats with the Bedouins in coffee-houses and where everybody is friendly; from the other we have a world where Mr. Middlcton of the oil company controls the inhabitants' livelihoods, the Lebanese doctor Subhi al-Mahmilji charges huge fees for any service and the emir spies on the townspeople with a telescope and makes use of the secret police.

"Every day it is gotten worse," says one resident of Harran, pointing toward the American territory; Americans are represented as a disease, as the root of the problems of the inhabitants of the Wadi. At a certain point, a series of events – a killing by the secret police, sightings of the troublemaking Miteb, the dismissal of twenty-three workers – encourages the workers of Harran to strike. They stop working and march through the town chanting. Then, led by two of Miteb the Troublemaker's sons, they attack the oil installation, ignoring the emir secret police and the oil company guards, and rescue some of their fellow workers who had been trapped inside. The book ends with a triumph for the workers: the emir leaves the city after ordering the oil company to reinstate its dismissed employees.

The final episode of the novel is an escapist fantasy: in fact, the work forces of the international oil companies in the Arabian Peninsula have never succeeded in becoming politically effective. As Graeme Macdonald says, "the anxiety that pervades the text's every level is partly related to the failure of Arabic resistance to core 'energopowerful' interests, driven principally by

US energy concerns from the mid-1930s through to the late 1970s, and fueled by capitalism's continuing reliance on maintaining supply" (297).

It is interesting to note, in the wake of what Munif observes, that the Arabic title of the novel is "Mudun al-Milh", which has the connotation of the wilderness or the desert, which is a reference to the character of universality of the country of Saudi Arabia; as explained before, Saudi Arabia could be any Middle Eastern location and its desert could be any desert that contains oil below its surface. The dominant social space of the novel, the desert, as will be analyzed later, becomes an object to shape, reform and exploit, a product to use and consume.

Nixon refers to Munif as the only twentieth-century writer who sought to give transnational life to the forbidding subject of oil. What actually and eventually represents the oil encounter in *Cities of Salt* is the relation between an unnamed Middle Eastern country and the United States that is rendered in the novel. Indeed, the novel clarifies the agreement between Saudi Arabia, the leading oil producer, and the United States, the principal consumer, a deal that reveals the rise of Arabian hydrocarbon despots encouraged, armed and sustained by American corporate and foreign policy interests.

According to Ghosh, Munif's *Cities of Salt* is the most notable example of petrofiction. He writes: "It so happens that the first novel in the cycle is also in many ways a wonderful work of fiction, perhaps even in parts a great one" (31). This opinion is shared also by Macdonald, who defines the novel as a "key historical petro-text for reading modernity's expanding and recursive oil frontier" (297), and by Ilana Xinos, who claims that Munif has succeeded in giving literary expression to the oil encounter. Also Corbin Hiday and Saima Basheer and Sohail Ahmad Saeed believe that *Cities of Salt* belongs to the genre of petrofiction; the last two even define the novel as an "exemplary of ground-breaking petrofiction" (Basheer and Saeed 294). To explain why

*Cities of Salt* can be considered as petrofiction, Hiday writes: "we encounter both expected and unexpected versions of what many have called petrofiction in which the characters grapple with a ubiquitous and totalizing system that relies on its relative invisibility" (220).

The reason why all these scholars can make these statements is the fact that Munif is able to give expression to the social, political, religious and environmental issues that are linked to America's oil-driven entanglements with Saudi Arabia. In fact, the novel, which can be rightly considered a five-volume journal of the contemporary history of Saudi Arabia, represents very well the impact that oil has had on the Arabian peninsula; as Macdonald notices, *Cities of Salt* is full of scenes that show the destruction and transformation produced by the pursuit of petroleum across the world-system's oil-bearing regions, as well as the effects that this pursuit leads to, namely political repression and unrest, environmental devastation and class struggle.

The novel has also a historical feature; it inserts itself in the period of the 40-year struggle (1930-1970) over Mesopotamian and Arabian resource on behalf of the United States. The US had made its way through the Middle East and caused the displacement of British power in that region. Fictionally, through the encounter between American petroleum prospectors and the people of the oasis, the novel represents the events that would lead to the first American oil company concession in the Persian Gulf, as well as the completion in 1950 of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline and the worker strikes that shook Dhahran in 1953. Moreover, Wadi al-Uyoun probably represents Abqaiq, an oasis which was transformed, like Wadi al-Uyoun, into Saudi Arabia's leading oil field and which became the opening place of the Tapline or the Trans-Ararabian Pipeline.

Another reason why *Cities of Salt* can be considered an oil novel is the substitution of water with oil as the most significant liquid resource. The novel falls under a period that was characterized by an unprecedented demand for oil, a demand that was not restricted only to the

United States; in fact, as Nixon observes, “oil blessing […] has moved to all Arab cities and become the force defining not only politics but culture, ways and life, and the human concerns in this region” (Nixon 73).

### 1.3 The transformations caused by oil

In *Cities of Salt* Munif deals with the issue of multiplicity, totality, and of the sociospatial relations between individual and system. This concept is found in Mited, the novel’s quasi-protagonist -the real protagonist being the community of Wadi al-Uyoun, who very well represents the link between individual and community. The community, besides being the protagonist, has also a function of narrator.

The link between individual and community is a link of disruption, since in the novel the disruption of individual lives and of communities are both visible. In fact, both the inhabitants of Wadi al-Uyoun as single and their communities live various forms of disintegration: moral, social and geographical. The displacement of Bedouins – they are forced to ground in Harran and form there a new community – that Nixon refers to as a consequence of “the rise of a transnational petromodernity that contained, from the outset, the seeds of its own undoing” (Nixon 74) is representative of this disruption.

Besides the co-presence of the individual and the collective, in the novel we are able to see the convergence around erasure and absence, as well as the idea of cyclicality and transformation. In the novel there is a tension between presence and absence, a tension that is rendered through the character of Mited. In fact, Mited appears and disappears, but his disappearances are perceived by no one, as if he were no longer alive. His spectral presence and the “intermitted reported sightings of him from the community” (Allen in Walonen 69) are representative both of the oil he

fights against – which is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere – and, as Allen suggests, "of the disappearance of an old way of life and of suspicions regarding the motivations of the foreign visitors" (Allen in Walonen 69). Because of his stubborn resistance during Wadi al-Uyoun's death caused by the tractors cutting down all the trees leads to his death; he becomes a legend and a phantom, appearing whenever the villagers are stressed or rebel.

Following Ghosh's description, after the destruction of the wadi, "Miteb mounts his white Omani she-camel and vanishes into the hills, becoming a prophetic spectral figure who emerges only occasionally from the desert to cry doom and to strike terror into those who collaborate with the oil-men". One could wonder why Mited should "strike terror into those who collaborate with the oil-men" (Munif 48); the answer lies in the "oil shock" scenes that represent the aggressive destruction and transformation produced by the pursuit of petroleum.

In the novel, in fact, it is possible to see the changes that oil produces, starting from the transformations it causes as regards the mere soil. We read: "the desert began to do incredible, unfathomable things [ …] there was a prolonged tremor within the earth, like a convulsion, and the insides of the earth began to spill out" (Munif 48). The ground literally shifts beneath the land upon which nomadic communities have depended for generations. Orchard trees are wiped out, as well as the cornfields; so, the new petro-world brought in Wadi al-Uyoun destroys and converts into artefact almost everything. As Macdonald points out, "the local 'world' is made bigger for and by oil" (298).

The entire region of Wadi al-Uyoun becomes skewed to the export of oil and to a political regime corresponding to oil interests: as a result of urbanization, land and resources are segregated and privatized, which leads to the modification of society. As the representative scene in which

Bedouins abandon their camels in exchange for wage-labor shows, local populations are rapidly incorporated into oil-related labor.

Local cultures and small-scale economies are transformed; for the former inhabitants of Wadi al-Uyoun, "nothing seemed real anymore" (Munif 109). Existence becomes dreamlike, hallucinatory: "Within days, everything in the wadi changed – men, animals and nature" (71).

> It happened as quickly as in a dream. [ …] As soon as the camp was erected, the men paced off the area, put up wire fencing and short white pickets [ …]. Then they opened up their crates and unloaded large pieces of black iron, and before long, a sound like rolling thunder surged out of this machine, frightening men, animals and birds. [It was] as fast as a magic trick (68).

The new oil-powered machines are figured as relentless monsters, roaring "night and day" (72). "So gigantic and strange were these iron machines that no one had ever imagined such things even existed [ …]. No one could describe the moment. [ …] No one could describe or imagine it" (96–98).

Munif's connection between the people of Wadi and their environment recurs in many passages, but it is in the symbolism of the trees and their uprooting that the significance of the way in which he links the palm trees to the people of Wadi lies. To this end, Munif writes:

> That tree, the fourth on the left, is just your age, boy. You grow every day, and it grows with you. Tomorrow you will plant a tree for your son, and he'll plant a tree for his son, and Wadi will get greener every day. People will keep coming to drink the water and hope never to die, and when they sit in the shade of the tree they'll say, "May God show mercy to whoever planted the trees and the green plants. (48)

This quote very well expresses the link between the people of the Wadi and their environment and the importance that it has for them. Unfortunately, with the arrival of the Americans, this environment is nearly destroyed and that, as a consequence, leads to a degradation of the inhabitants on the spiritual and human level.

Palm tree, “Nakhlah” in Arabic, means ‘what remains on the sieve after sieving’. In Islamic tradition, it is said that palm trees are created from the particles of clay remaining in the sieve after God sieved the particles from which Adam was created. Hence, the connection between palm tree and the Arabs is a connection of body and soul and this is the reason why Munif blames the violent uprooting of the palm trees by the Americans, because they disturb the spirit of Wadi al-Uyoun.

> This was the final, insane, accursed proclamation that everything had come to an end. For anyone who remembers those long–ago days, when a place called Wadi al-Uyoun used to exist, and a man named Miteb al- Hathal, and a brook, and trees... The trees shook violently and groaned before falling, cried for help, wailed, panicked, called out in helpless pain and then fell entreatingly to the ground, as if trying to snuggle into the earth to grow and spring forth alive again (105-106).

This quote renders efficaciously the destruction and ruin resulting from the knocking down of trees; these, described through a personification, are presented as human beings crying and suffering, which increases the intensity of the devastation caused by such an act.

“American Shaalan” is an image of the Wadi’s socioenvironmental shift. Shaalan “planted himself in Wadi Al-Uyoun not like the palm trees that had filled the wadi in times gone by” (134) nor the specific tree Meteb planted when his son was born, but “like one of the iron columns that now stood everywhere, and within a short time he changed very much indeed” (134).

The novelties introduced by the new petro-world are of a magnitude so great that the people from Wadi al-Uyoun are extremely astonished when seeing the "gigantic […] iron machines", so astonished that they can't even describe the scene they are present at. What they see is estranged and unprecedented, almost magic. These "iron machines" are even defined as "monstrous" and "diabolical", as they only bring destruction. It is a real curse, a "damnation", according to Macdonald's and Nixon's words. In particular, Nixon explains how oil becomes damnation in underdeveloped countries. He writes, "if fossil fuel resonated with a sense of time borrowed against an exhaustible past and an exhaustible future, 'resource curse'[10] holds in taut suspense notions of fortune and misfortune" (Nixon 69). Nixon continues his argument by saying that the expression 'resource curse' resonates with Munif's 'oil damnation', as both combine "utilitarian and numinous perspective on Earth, suggesting the vulnerability of the world of solid, useful goods to spiritual force fields- the curses and blessings that can have profoundly material effects" (Nixon 69).

Although he wrote *Cities of Salt* before the term 'resource curse' had been coined, Munif's novel is a great example of oil damnation, because, as Nixon indicates, among other things, the novel deepened the divide between a narrow class that would become rich and the uprooted, poor masses.

So, using Mclarney words, oil has a "contaminating" (Mclarney in Walonen 69) power; it contaminates and destroys the stable and ecologically harmonious community existing previously in Wadi al-Uyoun. This destruction constitutes the reason of the choice of *Cities of salt* as a title, a clear reference to the facility with which Wadi al-Uyoun –or, maybe all the cities of Saudi Arabia

[10] With 'resource curse' we mean the sort of paradox that arises when countries with an abundance of natural resources have less economic growth, less democracy, or worse development outcomes than countries with fewer natural resources.

or even of the world in general- is exterminated by oil: just as the waves of water dissolve the salt, the advent of the oil dissolves the wadi.

*Cities of Salt* has been criticized because of the lack of a single hero, a single protagonist. Indeed, the real protagonist of the novel is the community or, rather, the growing class consciousness of the Harranis. The narrative pattern is communal, with multiple characters and events and the story is about the collective imagination of the community, in direct opposition to an economic oppressor.

The novel criticizes imperial modernity; indeed, Munif, totally convinced of the power of writing as a tool for change, criticizes the age of industry, by describing the presence of the outsiders in the native soil of Wadi al-Uyoun as destructive. It illustrates how the promises of development made possible by petromodernity and the imperial notions of progress in fact reveal stasis and immobility. This stasis and this paralysis refer to various elements: in the novel, in fact, there is not only a fake promise of progress, but also a sense of paralysis felt by the Bedouins, who do not have a clear idea of their future. To this end, Munif writes: “They felt afflicted by total paralysis; in this isolated place, which had lost even its name, they were only a band of men besieged, not knowing what to do or what their lives would be like in the days to come” (191). Emblematic is, in this regard, the last sentence of the novel: “No one can read the future” (ivi 627). This sentence very well expresses an uncertainty concerning the future; moreover, it constitutes a reference to our current moment of climatological anxiety. The sentence also marks a particular irony of the novel, because the principal character, Miteb, can in fact read, or imagine, the future. To be precise, this such future-oriented anxiety appears early on via Miteb’s skepticism; in fact, in the novel we read: “He sensed something terrible was about to happen. He did not know what it

was or when it would happen and took no comfort in the explanations offered him from all sides" (ivi 31).

As Hiday says "the promise of fossil capital's forward march through modernity stalls and can be imagined only as stasis and paralysis combined with destruction and despair" (Hiday 225) From this perspective, Munif can be seen to use the means of the novel to script petro-capitalism contradictions. In fact, through his writing he shows how petro-development promises are false.

Munif's criticism is directed also towards some of the people of Wadi al-Uyoun who, seeing in the Americans a culturally different community with better standards of living, strong contacts with the emir, familiarity with modern technology and, moreover, yearning for material richness, try to align themselves with them. "How is it possible for people and places to change so entirely that they lose any connection with what they used to be? Can a man adapt to new things and new places without losing a part of himself?", the author asks (Munif 134).

The novel shows the inhumane treatment that the lower class of Bedouins has to suffer because of the Americans and the emir's police force and satirizes the Arab elites. This is the reason why the novel was banned in Saudi Arabia. Being alienated, the working class of Harranis unites to protest against the bourgeoisie, namely the American company, the emir and his men and the Arabs of the upper class; the protest becomes more intense when two incidents occur, namely the laying off of twenty-three employees by the Americans and the murder of the Harrani citizen Mufaddi al-Jeddan, the only healer in Harran until the arrival of the upper-class doctor, as well as emblem of the pre-capitalist Bedouin, a lower-class figure openly antagonistic to petro-capitalism. Munif's criticism is also directed towards the division of society, a society exposed to the perfidies of the petro-despots and divided into rich and poor nomads.

In *Cities of Salt*, Munif plays with the temporal spheres of past, present and future. He uses the utopia of the past to highlight the present dystopia, namely the damages caused by the cruel empire of machines. We are in front of a narrative chronology that shifts between analepsis, questioning about the future and retrospection for a world already passed.

The picturing of the original and primitive pre-industrial state of nature, a form of existence in which man and nature are in harmony with each other, mirrors that nostalgia for a time prior to oil typical of the majority of oil-encounter fictions, in which the pre-oil world does not completely disappear, but accompanies oil-driven modernity. This pre-oil world is a sort of golden age, "the natural economy, the moral economy, the organic society, from which critical values are drawn are a contrast to the thrusting ruthlessness of the new capitalism" (Raymond Williams in Basheer 36- 37).

Memory is the nucleus of Munif's narrative. This memory is geographical, cultural and racial. The novel is permeated by an aura of authenticity which, in a sense, recaptures the lost lands of which the author talks about in his novel. Munif, through Wadi al-Uyon, tries to bring back to memory those cities lost in amnesia. He does that not in a nostalgic sense but "to connect past catastrophes to an even more catastrophic future that is trapped between oil's receding tides and the advancing tides of environmental changes, where the cities of salt would dissolve in the waters of the tide and vanish into amnesia" (Nixon 7). The catastrophes which Nixons refers to are marked by displacement, a displacement that is temporal, geographical, rhetorical and technological and that is a symbol of the human violence that the humans themselves and the environment suffer. According to the author, such displacements, "smooth the way for amnesia, as places are rendered irretrievable to those who once inhabited them, places that ordinarily pass unmourned in the corporate media" (Nixon 7).

# Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007)

## 2.1 Sinclair's *Oil!*

*Oil!* is a novel published by Upton Sinclair in 1927. It is set during the first two decades of the twentieth century in the middle of the Southern California oil boom that, at the time, provided 22% of the quantity of oil present in the world, which represented more than the production of any country outside the United States (Juhasz in Walonen 64). It narrates the story of Bunny, the son of an oil magnate, the rich tycoon J. Arnold Ross, known as Dad. The plot revolves around the character of Bunny, who undergoes a journey of personal and moral maturation in an era marked by great turbulence and change.[11] Bunny's journey begins in the context of the oil business in Southern California, where, alongside his father, he discovers oil under the field of the Watkins' ranch. The Watkins are a poor family of farmers who became friends with the Rosses, and Bunny's oil discovery in their land marks the beginning of a series of discoveries, not only geological but also ethical and personal.[12] The character of the father represents the archetype of the American self-made man, a millionaire who has built his empire with determination and cunning. He is the classic mean-spirited and ruthless American businessman representative of human materialism, whose aim is capital accumulation through the oil tract. He is also the estate man who acquires properties that later drills on at rock-bottom rates. He embodies the avaricious logic of usage and the capitalist economic exploitation that takes place when the legal stewardship that governs the

[11] Walonen, Michael K. ""The Black and Cruel Demon" and Its Transformations of Space: Toward a Comparative Study of the World Literature of Oil and Place." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 14.1 (2012): 56-78.

[12] *Ibidem*

usage of land is absent or laxly applied; moreover, for him it's completely normal to bribe local officials so that public money can be used to build a road to his oil wells. Dad's business practices, often ethically questionable, put Bunny in conflict with his own values. The contrast between Bunny's moral beliefs and his father's actions reflects the tensions between social classes and the growing awareness of injustices in American capitalism practices.

When they meet the Watkins, who are leasing out some oil property of theirs, Dad and Bunny find oil and buy a series of ranches. The two get to know three brothers – Paul, Eli and Ruth Watkins – and Bunny and Paul become close friends. Paul Watkins is a key figure, as he embodies the revolutionary spirit and the fight for workers' rights. His transformation from a farmer's son to a supporter of the working class functions as a lens to the growing divide and tension between social classes in the 1910s and 1920s. In fact, Paul, after having been introduced to radical thought by a freethinking lawyer who took him on as an apprentice, becomes extremely attached to communism and labor struggle. Later, however, he is forced to fight against the Soviet proletariat forces in Siberia at the end of World War I, as part of the American expeditionary force, and when the conflict is over he remains in Siberia to fight the Bolsheviks. Also Bunny becomes increasingly involved with socialism, because of both his friendship with Paul and with a classmate, Rachel. After a brief period in the armed forces and few relationships, he takes up college life and starts to feel a love interest for Paul's younger sister, Ruth, who, among other things, represents an emotional and ideological connection to the workers' struggle.

As drilling begins at the Watkins ranch, Bunny starts to realize that his father's business methods are not ethical. Vernon Roscoe, Dad's business partner and a potential antagonist in the novel, personifies greed and corruption within the industrial sector. His presence and actions underscore the theme of corporate greed. Dad and Roscoe, in exchange for the rights to drill on

government oil reserves, help to buy Senator Warren Harding's[13] way into the White House in the 1920 presidential election. This episode is based on the 1924 Teapot Dome scandal, where members of Harding's government were bribed to lease oil-rich land in Wyoming and California to oil entrepreneurs like Edward L. Doheny[14] – a model for Ross – and Harry F. Sinclair.[15] Nonetheless, their fictional counterparts, Ross and his business partner view bribery as patriotic, since, in their opinion, it convinced government officials to see what was best for the country. In fact, Dad distributes the grafts to local officials to have paved access roads built at taxpayers' expense. Indeed, the epilogue of the Teapot Dome Scandal saw Harding's Secretary of the Interior, Albert B. Fall, convicted of accepting such bribes for oil land leases and sentenced to one year in jail.

After a worker is killed in an accident and an oil well is destroyed in a blowout, Dad's workforce goes on strike and after Roscoe and Dad's plans are discovered, Roscoe escapes from an investigation and continues to work for the United States abroad, by seeking to secure land concessions for oil exploration from foreign governments. Dad, instead, flees to Europe, where, after becoming fascinated with Spiritualism, he dies. As Roscoe does not want Dad's money to fall into Bunny's hands, he makes the boy's family fortune disappear. The novel ends with the death of Paul, from a beating at the hands of an anti-communist mob breaking up a labor meeting.

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[13] Warren Gamaliei Harding (1865-1923) was the 29th president of the United States.

[14] Edward L. Doheny (1856-1935) was an American oil tycoon who drilled the first successful oil well in the Los Angeles City Oil Field in 1882. He co-founded the Pan American Petroleum & Transport Company, the California assets of which became Pan American Western Petroleum Company.

[15] Herry Ford Sinclair (1876-1956) was the American industrialist founder of the petroleum corporation "Sinclair Oil".

## 2.2 Upton Sinclair and the Californian Oil Boom

Through *Oil!*, Sinclair paints a multifaceted picture of early 20th-century America, a period in which dynamics of power, ethics and class intertwined with historical and social changes. The novel thus becomes a lens through which to examine the complex aspects of that era, reflecting the concerns and hopes of a generation grappling with the evolution of the American Dream[16].

The interactions among the characters not only are representations of personal relationships, they also stand as symbols of conflicts and alliances among different spheres of society. Bunny's internal conflict, in particular, reflects an individual's struggle to find their place in a rapidly evolving world, torn between familial loyalty and growing ethical convictions. Themes of greed, propaganda and the solace of religion are explored through these complex relationships. Sinclair uses the context of the oil industry as a microcosm to examine these broader themes, highlighting how corporate greed affects not only business but also politics, society and individual morality.

To better understand the unfolding of the story, its symbolism, its meaning, and the evolution of the characters, it is necessary to analyze the historical and geographical context of the novel, as well as some details of the author's life. Upton Sinclair, born on September 20, 1878, in Baltimore, Maryland, and passed away on November 25, 1968, in Bound Brook, New Jersey, embodied the essence of a committed writer, capable of profoundly influencing his era. His education, first at the College of the City of New York, and postgraduate studies at Columbia University, not only instilled in him intellectual rigor but also a keen sensitivity towards social inequalities and injustices, central elements in his works.

[16] The American Dream is the set of ideals in which freedom is considered as the opportunity for individual prosperity, success and social mobility. Originated with the U.S. Constitution, it underwent several interpretations and applications, following the U.S. societal, cultural, and economic changes.

From his teenage years, Sinclair demonstrated an early talent for writing, publishing his first four books before turning thirty. Works like *King Midas: A Romance*[17] (1901) and *Prince Hagen*[18] (1903) already showed narrative maturity and an interest in social themes, although they did not achieve great commercial success. However, it was *The Jungle*, initially published in serial form in 1905, that established Sinclair as an important voice in American literature. This work, resulting from his undercover investigation in the Chicago meatpacking plants, exposed with stark truth the living conditions of immigrant workers and the unacceptable practices in the meat industry.

The historical context in which Sinclair lived and wrote, the Progressive Era[19], played a fundamental role in his evolution as a writer and thinker[20]. This period, characterized by fervent activism for social, economic and political reforms, provided fertile ground for his critical reflections. Moreover, his active participation in politics, notably his candidacy for Congress with the Socialist Party, reflects his belief that literature, and thus novelists, should be a tool for social change.

In his novels, Sinclair courageously tackled themes of working-class oppression, the corruption of capitalism and deep social inequalities. *The Jungle*, in particular, is a striking example of how a literary work can become a powerful catalyst for change. Although Sinclair's

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[17] *King Midas: A Romance* is a novel dealing with the story of King Midas, a king who loves gold above all else.

[18] *Prince Hagen* is the story of Prince Hagan, who comes to this earth from Nibelhim for a completion of his education. His first exploits are at school, then in the thick of New York's corrupt politics as a 'boss'. Later, after he has inherited the wealth of the Nibelungs, he enters the society life of the metropolis.

[19] The Progressive Era (1896–1917) was a period of social activism and political reform across the United States focused on defeating corruption, waste, and inefficiency.

[20] Kaplan, Lawrence. "A utopia during the progressive era the helicon home colony 1906-1907." *American Studies* 25.2 (1984): 59-73.

original intention was to raise public awareness about 'wage slavery'[21] and promote socialism, the novel ended up shaking public opinion about the more gruesome aspects of the food industry, leading to the enactment of federal food inspection laws[22].

Beyond *The Jungle*, Sinclair continued to explore the social issues of his time in novels like *King Coal*[23] (1917), *Oil!* (1927) and *The Flivver King*[24] (1937). Through these works, he provided a penetrating and often disturbing portrayal of working conditions in the coal, oil and automobile industries. His ability to describe the lives of workers and the injustices they faced realistically and committedly made his novels not only emotionally impactful stories but also historical documents of invaluable worth.

Sinclair's influence, however, extends well beyond his historical period. His works have left a lasting legacy, not only in the field of literature but also in labor rights, food safety and public health. His vision of the writer as an agent of social change has inspired generations of authors and activists, making him a central figure in American literary and cultural history. His works reflect a deep understanding of the social and economic dynamics of early 20th century America and remain an eloquent witness to the struggles and hopes of an era.

Upton Sinclair's *Oil*! immerses readers in the dynamic and chaotic milieu of Southern California in the 1920s, an era characterized by profound shifts in both the social fabric and

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[21] The expression refers to the exploitation of labor by business, by keeping wages low or stagnant to maximise profits.

[22] In 1906, after the publication of *The Jungle*, some laws passed: the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act. The former was a consumer protection law whose purpose was to ban foreign and interstate traffic in mislabelled or adulterated food and drug products; the latter was a law that made it illegal to mislabel meat and meat products sold as food and guaranteed the respect of sanitary conditions.

[23] *King Coal* is a novel that represents the poor working conditions in the coal mining industry in the western United States during the 1910s.

[24] *The Flivver King* describes the intertwined stories of the American industrialist Henry Ford and Abner Shutt, a fictional Ford worker.

economic landscape. This period, especially under President Harding and the shadow of the Teapot Dome scandal, positioned the region at the heart of a tangled nexus of historical and political developments that significantly shaped its trajectory towards a series of economic booms. Among them, the oil industry was at the forefront of this era's transformation.

It is worth remembering, in fact, that Sinclair comes to petrofiction because his wife owned land at the edge of Los Angeles where oil had been discovered. When he attended meetings of landowners attempting to fashion sales to oil companies, Sinclair began to understand up close the synergy between the promise of mobility and the rapacity of the business model.

The discovery of new oil reserves near Los Angeles and in the San Joaquin Valley catapulted California into the forefront of national oil production[25]. The dramatic surge in oil output, escalating from 4 million barrels in 1900 to a staggering 100 million by 1914, not only fueled the economic growth of the state but also radically altered its physical landscape[26]. Indeed, the extensive drilling and extraction operations, primarily focused on Kern County and the Los Angeles Basin, left an indelible mark on the region's natural and urban environments.

This industrial expansion and landscape reshaping profoundly influenced also Southern California's society. The booming oil sector triggered a significant migratory influx as people flocked to the region, drawn by the promise of employment in the burgeoning industrial sector. This influx catalyzed a swift urbanization process, reshaping the region's social fabric with the emergence of new social strata and a reconfiguration of wealth and power dynamics.

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[25] Libby, Joseph Edward. *To build wings for the angels: Los Angeles and its aircraft industry, 1890-1936*. University of California, Riverside, 1990.

[26] Clayton, Blake C. *Market madness: A century of oil panics, crises, and crashes*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

The California oil boom of 1927, ironically the same year of *Oil!*'s publication, was a pivotal period in the state's history, characterized by a surge in oil exploration, technological advancements and economic transformation. The discovery and exploitation of significant oil reserves had a profound impact on California's economy. The state experienced rapid economic growth, attracting investors, workers and entrepreneurs seeking opportunities in the oil industry. The 1920s witnessed crucial technological developments in oil extraction methods: rotary drilling, in particular, became widely adopted, enabling more efficient and cost-effective oil extraction from beneath the ground. The influx of people to areas with oil reserves led cities like Los Angeles and Long Beach to expand rapidly, accommodating the growing workforce and supporting the burgeoning oil industry. Moreover, the oil boom coincided with the rapid industrialization of the United States and the increasing popularity of automobiles. This surge in industrial activity and the growing demand for petroleum products contributed to the prominence of the California oil industry. The rapid expansion of this industry, however, caused ecological consequences related to pollution and resource depletion which led to environmental degradation of the region.

Even though the oil boom of 1927 had a lasting impact on the state's economy, infrastructure and cultural identity. The 1920s and 1930s were only the peak of a phenomenon that had originated almost a century earlier. In Southern California, large oil and gas seeps in Ventura, Santa Barbara, Kern and Los Angeles Counties received the most attention in the 1850s and 1860s, in part because one of California's oldest and most-used roads passed along nearly all the seep areas on the western side of the San Joaquin Valley. With the discoveries of McKittrick oil field in 1898, Kern River oil field in 1899 and the Midway Area of Midway-Sunset oil field in 1900, another oil boom was on. By 1900, wells in Los Angeles, Coalinga and Kern River oil fields were the leading producers and the annual state oil production had reached 4.3 million barrels.

Production continued to rise and by 1905 the annual state oil production reached 34 million barrels, with Kern River, the largest field, producing 15 million barrels. New fields were discovered and new gushers – eruptions of oil and gas from exploratory wells – occurred with surprising regularity. Finally in March 1910, well Lakeview' came in, the greatest gusher of them all. Lakeview Oil Company started drilling on January 1, 1909, in Midway-Sunset oil field, about 2 miles north of the City of Maricopa.

As regards the geography of *Oil!,* where some names of places and people are in disguise, numerous parallels exist between the opening setting of the novel, Beach City, and the city of Huntington Beach, in California. Huntington Beach was originally called 'Pacific City', for which Beach City is a play-off of both names. The novel states that the area had street names like 'Telegraph' and 'Beach City Blvd'. The actual Telegraph Road, indeed, would be the last street crossed before getting off the highway onto Beach Blvd in the town of Buena Park to travel south to Huntington Beach. James Arnold Ross and Bunny stay in a hotel at the intersection of fictional Beach City Blvd and Coast Drive, similar to the actual Beach Blvd and what would later develop into Pacific Coast Highway, where a hotel and water resort once resided in the early 1900s. In the novel, Beach City is covered in beet and cabbage fields. Huntington Beach historically was covered in beet and celery fields and its confirmed oil wells were located on a series of bluffs.

The oil boom brought about significant social and cultural changes: it attracted a diverse population seeking employment and wealth opportunities. The emergence of wealthy oil magnates and entrepreneurs during this period contributed to the shaping of California's social fabric. Some of these social consequences impacted negatively to local communities and the social structure of the region. It attracted a massive influx of migrant workers seeking employment opportunities in the oil industry, which led to increased pressure on local infrastructure, including housing, public

services and healthcare facilities, as well as an increase in the cost of living. The growing demand for housing and consumer goods raised prices, creating economic challenges for local communities. All these elements generated social tensions; in fact, people found themselves dealing with conflicts related to resources, competition in the labor market and cultural dynamics. Moreover, despite the economic boom associated with oil, significant economic disparities emerged, whereas those involved in the oil industry earned considerably more than those in different sectors, creating economic divisions in society.

In his novel, Sinclair masterfully captures these social and political undercurrents, where rapid industrialization and economic prosperity coexisted with deep-seated social inequalities and ethical dilemmas. The ascension of the oil industry not only heralded an era of unprecedented affluence but also ushered in novel forms of corruption and class conflict. As shown before, Sinclair's narrative starkly reveals the corruption permeating public offices and the fierce global competition in oil production, providing a rich historical backdrop to the tale of an ambitious oil tycoon and his son Bunny. Bunny's empathy for the plight of oil field workers and his alignment with socialist movements mirror the broader social and political tensions prevalent at the time.

## 2.3 Petromodernity: the transformations caused by oil and its symbolic role

Sinclair's novel provides also examples of various transformations provoked by oil extraction, such as great alterations to physical environment. In fact, the Ross's oil drilling changes the territory's shape from a small pastoral community to the site of a big, industrialized camp, with derricks, massive reservoirs, workers' barracks and a state-of-the-art refinery. Emblematic in this sense is the part where a huge change to the landscape is represented by a road constructed through the mountains:

> Men of money had said the word, and surveyors and engineers had come, and diggers by the thousand, swarming Mexicans and Indians, bronze of skin, armed with picks and shovels; and great steam shovels with long hanging lobster-claws of steel; derricks with wide swinging arms, scrapers and grading machines, steel drills and blasting men with dynamite, rock-crushers, and concrete mixers that ate sacks of cement by the thousand, and drank water from a flour-stained hose, and had round steel bellies that turned all day with a grinding noise. All these had come, and for a year or two they had toiled, and yard by yard they had unrolled the magic ribbon (Sinclair 5).

This passage is a proof of environmental mutation and indigenous people exploitation provoked by the power of enterprise and capital: thousands of men gather to destroy the landscape to build a road. That Sinclair has a thorough knowledge of the process of oil extraction is visible in the third chapter, where it is described with extensive details:

> Far down in the ground, underneath the Ross-Bankside No.1, a great block of steel was turning round and round. The under surface of it had blunt steel teeth, like a nutmeg-grater; on top of it rested a couple of thousand feet of steel tubing, the 'drill-stem,' a weight of twenty tons pressing it down; so, as it turned, it ate into the solid rock, grinding it to powder (ivi 65).

As the passage shows, the drilling process consumes nature and forced it into a new configuration, as well as the pumping process:

> Then they would go down for another fifty; and presently they would find they didn't have to go so far, the pressure was shoving the column of water up in the hole. Then you knew you were getting near to the end; one or two more trips of the bailer, and the water would be shot out of the hole, and mud and water and oil would spout up over the top of the derrick, staining it a lovely dripping black … There she came! There was a cheer from all hands, and the spectators went flying to avoid the oily spray blown by the wind (ivi 77-78).

Mud thus is pumped through tubes and then it backs up to the surface with the detritus of the bore itself. The whole process is filtered through the consciousness of the preadolescent Bunny: "There she came! . . . The spectators went flying to avoid the oily spray blown by the wind. They let her shoot for a while, until the water had been ejected; higher and higher [. . .] she made a lovely noise, hissing and splashing, bouncing up and down" (ivi 78).

Speaking of 'oil extraction', Frederick Buell, in 'A Short History of Oil Cultures', distinguishes between 'exuberance' and 'catastrophe' as two reactions to this phenomenon. He explains that if the first indicates the predominantly positive assessment of oil that characterized the first part of the 20th century, a period in which petroleum was linked to progress and social advancement, the second suggests an assessment that, from the 1960s onwards, considers the use of petroleum as a threat to society and the environment.

Oil has a significant symbolic role in the United States, representing various crucial aspects of the country's history, economy and culture. It is often associated with the energy independence of the United States: in fact, the discovery and exploitation of domestic oil reserves have contributed to reducing the country's dependence on foreign oil imports. The idea that

ambition and dedication can lead to success and wealth found a tangible example in the search for and extraction of oil.

Hannes Bergthaller notices that energy systems have profound cultural effects, and petroleum is not an exception. Oil, in fact, has more and more influenced the economy, politics and culture of different countries in the world, so much so that the 20$^{th}$ and 21$^{st}$ centuries have been renamed as the age of 'petromodernity' – which LeMenager defines as "modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil" – (LeMenager 68) and its cultures as 'petrocultures'. Imre Szeman, in tune with Bergthaller, writes in his essay "How to Know about Oil" that "the presence of oil is amongst the central forces shaping human life – if not the single ur-force[27] to which all other narratives can be connected" (Szeman 149). Moreover, to indicate the ubiquity and the big influence that oil exercises, LeMenager uses the term 'petrotopia', "signifying petroleum-utopia[28], to refer to the now ordinary US landscape of highways, low-density suburbs, strip malls, fast food and gasoline service islands and shopping centers ringed by parking lots or parking towers" (LeMenager 73). A significant example of 'petrotopia' is the city of Los Angeles, where, in similar fashion, the auto-infrastructures are named 'autopia' by the British architect Reyner Banham. In the early 1970s, on the verge of the world oil crisis[29], Banham fell in love with the city exactly because of its ubiquitous freeways and noticed that the city infrastructure seemed to have been built for the purpose of 'direct personal gratification'.

[27] Ur: a prefix meaning 'original' or 'earliest'.

[28] Petrotopia is the utopian future projected by petroculture, which claims that oil extraction will create communal wealth and lead to a better life.

[29] In 1973 there was a world oil crisis caused by the sudden increase of the prince of oil and its derivatives.

As Lemenager explains, nature leaves the place to roads, which contributed to create the so-called 'road culture' or 'car culture[30]'. Moreover, as Walonen recognizes, "no other commodity or natural resource has interlinked the disparate peoples of the world and altered the spatial conditions within which they carry out their lives to anywhere near the extent that oil has" (Walonen 56). Furthermore, in accordance with what Bergthaller observes, oil can even alter the spatio-temporal sphere. Bergthaller, in fact, following the path of the earlier mentioned critics, argues that among the defining features of petromodernity, besides acceleration, deterritorialization[31]and displacement of substance, there is also time-space compression. To better explain these concepts, it is useful to introduce the importance of the automobile, starting from the end of the 19th century invention of the car, which drastically changed every aspect of the American lifestyle. Firstly, the car gave the possibility to overthrow the spatiotemporal frontiers, as it guaranteed the displacement of people from one place to another in a very fast way. Secondly, but equally important, it represented a new idea of what was to be an American citizen, as it facilitated the discovery of the country for every potential car owner. The car, then, became a patriotic symbol, which was very well expressed by the motto 'See Europe if you will, but see America first',[32] coined to encourage the exploration of the country by car. A real auto-tourism developed, which was aided by the fact that the car "was conceived as a means of achieving a premodern vision of nature that had been lost to the railroad [...]. Like preindustrial transport by horse, cars allowed

[30] By 'car culture' we refer to the car-centric, car-dominant, car-prioritizing, and car-biased beliefs and behaviors that characterise men.

[31] Deterritorialization is the process by which a social relation, named 'territory', has its current organization and context altered, mutated or destroyed.

[32] The motto 'See Europe if you will, but see America First' was coined in 1905 by Fisher Harris, Secretary of the Salt Lake City Commercial Club..

closer, slower viewing than had been impossible in trains" (LeMenager 82). The premodern vision of nature, which rendered the experience in it more pleasurable and lifelike, is well represented in *Oil!*. Bunny, from his seat[33], while his father is driving, sees jackrabbits, butcher birds and roadrunners, as well as "deep gorges, towering old pine trees, gnarled by storms" (Sinclair 6).

As LeMenager explains, the car and the act of driving are associated with being alive and happiness. This was something already noticed by Jean Baudrillard[34] and Marshall McLuhan[35], when they write respectively that "movement alone is the basis of a sort of happiness" (Baudrillard in LeMenager 83), and "the car [ …] allows for a simulation of living, and living more, or feel. Cars made the human body more valuable, pleasurable, and fun" (LeMenager 92).

Accordingly, *Oil!* as well depicts the freedom of mobility and speed afforded by the oil-powered automobile, Confirming, thus, what LeMenager writes, oil has symbolized happiness for North Americans, particularly those who most benefited from oil revenues and infrastructures. Moreover, on the global scale, as Peter Hitchcock writes, the American oil industry extended American power through exploration and extraction around the world.

Automobility and the "entrenchment of oil within […] cherished ideas of property, freedom, family, and home" (Huber in Bergthaller xvi) constitute the 'American way of life', a lifestyle characterised by, as Bergthaller reports, by privatised social reproduction[36], single-family housing, automobility. As Buell notices, the 'American way of life' portrayed driving as integral to the American way of life, both patriotic and constituent of citizenship.

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[33] In the same historical moment that Sinclair writes, Frederick Olmsted Jr., the son of the architect of Central Park, was designing the infrastructure for passenger-side fancies like Bunny Ross's.

[34] Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) was a French sociologist, philosopher and poet.

[35] Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a Canadian philosopher, considered the 'father of media studies'.

[36] Social reproduction is the reproduction of social structures and systems.

The high value of the car and of the act of driving is showed also in Ray Bradbury's science fiction short story "The Pedestrian" (1951). The short story ends with a driverless car that whisks the walker away to a psychiatric clinic "for Research on Regressive tendencies" (LeMenager 73). The fact that not driving a car is considered a 'regressive tendency' is emblematic of the fact that the car represented a strong ideal of progress. Walking is judged not only regressive, but also a crime, as it is represented in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), the classic of the same author, where the character of the rebellious uncle is arrested for being a pedestrian.

LeMenager explains that *Oil!* confers an illusion of democratic access to oil, in the sense that it creates the illusion that oil and its profits belong to everyone.

## 2.4 *Oil!* as a critique to the effects of oil economics

Besides its strictly environmental aspects, *Oil!* is a warning cry against the erosion of democracy that occurs when big business buys its way into government, a reflection on the corrupting face of greed, and a testament to the persecution of far leftist social reformers. As LeMenager writes, in fact, "Sinclair's novel *Oil!* is committed to international socialism, equating the oil business with the technophilic horrors of World War I and a global economic restructuring that denies human-scale values" (LeMenager 69).

Sinclair shares an interest with Munif in workers' political opposition to the effects of oil economics. Much of *Oil!* depicts a growing hostility of the oil magnates towards the oil companies' labour practices, whether through strikes at oilfields or through the promulgation of alternative

modes of economic justice, principally inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917[37]. Indeed, the last chapters of the novel increasingly focus on the struggles over the interpretation of the Russian revolution and its effects in American political life. J. A. Ross (Dad) views socialism and communism as obstacles for his business, while Paul, on the contrary, is convinced that the greed of the oil barons will only produce more war and little long-term benefits for the American working class.

Sinclair's *Oil!*, then, warned about global petromodernity from the moment of peak-oil discovery in the US – again, the late 1920s. However, it is more precise to state that the position of the novel on oil itself is ambivalent, or rather, multifaceted. In fact, if from one side *Oil!* is a critique against oil profit-logic, the final lines have a clear didactic aim, by conveying the message that, under a different social system, oil would not cause the destruction and loss represented so far in the book.

> There will be other girls with bare brown legs running over those hills, and they may grow up to be happier women, if men can find some way to chain the black and cruel demon which killed Ruth Watkins and her brother—yes, and Dad also: an evil Power which roams the earth, crippling the bodies of men and women, and luring nations to destruction by visions of unearned wealth, and the opportunity to enslave and exploit labor. (527)

It is essential to notice that, nonetheless, oil in the passage is referred to as 'black and cruel demon' to underline its destructive power. Instead, the ambivalence as regards oil is represented by the character of Bunny, whose entry into manhood often resonates with the implied reader's naiveté

[37] The Russian Revolution of 1917, led by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, brought to the overthrowing of the Russian Tsarist Empire and led to the formation of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

about the realities of the oil business. His thought constantly oscillates between Dad's beliefs and Paul's ones and this is played out also in his relationships, particularly in his love for Vee Tracy, a star of silent film, on one side, and Ruth Watkins, Paul's sister and arguably the better leftist activist, on the other.

*Oil!* still resonates powerfully today with its exploration of themes such as class struggle, capitalism, corruption and environmentalism. The enduring relevance of these themes in the contemporary context not only testifies to Sinclair's visionary acumen but also to the ongoing nature of these issues in modern society.

Class struggle, a central theme in *Oil!*, remains a reality in many societies today. The widening gap between the rich and the poor, the fight for workers' rights and the power of the economic elite continue to generate socio-economic tensions. Sinclair's depiction of the conflict between the oil magnate and the workers mirrors a still-persistent conflict, a clash between the might of capital and the rights of the working class.

Capitalism, as Sinclair describes it through the oil industry, portrays a system where greed and the pursuit of profit can lead to severe social and ethical consequences[38]. This critique of capitalism has not lost its relevance, especially considering current global economic tensions, where power dynamics and resources distribution remain pressing issues[39]. Corruption, both in the public and private sectors, is another theme Sinclair explores that remains painfully pertinent as contemporary oil industries, like many others, continue to be a breeding ground for unethical practices, raising questions of ethics and integrity.

Perhaps the most current theme in *Oil!* Is, however, environmentalism. The impact of the oil industry on the environment, a concern already present in the novel, particularly resonates with

[38] Hitchcock, Peter. "Oil in an American imaginary." *New Formations* 69.69 (2010): 81-97.
[39] *Ibidem*

today's worries about climate change and sustainability. Sinclair's foresight in understanding the interconnections between industrial development, class struggle, corruption, and environmental health shows how ahead of his time he was.

The historical significance of *Oil!* in the literary landscape is notable. The novel highlighted the issues of the oil industry and its social implications, influencing not only the literature of its time but also how subsequent generations viewed the relationship between business and ethics. The overarching message of *Oil!*, a critique of capitalism and corruption in the oil industry, continues to serve as a warning about the dangers of corporate greed and the importance of social responsibility. Its legacy is evident in current discussions about the need for greater regulation and transparency, not just in the oil industry but in all economic sectors.

## 2.5 Paul Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*

Sinclair's novel inspired the realization of the movie *There Will Be Blood* (2007), named by the British daily *The Guardian* as the best film of the 21st century. The protagonist is the oilman Daniel Plainview. In 1898, he finds silver in New Mexico; even if he breaks his leg, he manages to take a sample to an assay office and he receives a silver and gold claim. In 1902, he discovers oil near Los Angeles and establishes there a drilling company. After the death of a worker in an accident, Daniel adopts the man's orphaned son, H.W. The boy becomes his nominal business partner; in this way Daniel can present himself to potential investors as a family man. In 1911, Daniel meets Paul Sunday, a young man who tells him of an oil deposit under his family's property in Little Boston, California. Daniel visits the Sundays' property and meets Paul's twin brother Eli, a local preacher. Daniel tries to buy the farm from the Sundays at a good price by saying that he needs it to hunt quails, but that does not convince Eli, who knows the land has drilling potential.

In exchange for the property, Eli demands $10,000 for his church. An agreement is made and Daniel acquires all the available land in and around the Sunday property. There is one holdout, William Bandy. A After Daniel undoes the agreement to let Eli bless the well before drilling begins, a series of misfortunes happen: an accident kills one worker, and a gas blowout deafens H.W. and destroys the drilling infrastructure. Eli thinks that the disasters are caused by the fact that the well has not been blessed. When Eli publicly demands the money that he still has to receive, Daniel beats and humiliates him. At the dinner table that night, Eli attacks and rebukes his father for having trusted Daniel. A man arrives at Daniel's doorstep saying that he is his half-brother, Henry, and Daniel hires him. H.W. sets fire to their house, because he wants to kill Henry. Daniel sends H.W. to a school for the deaf in San Francisco. A Standard Oil[40] representative offers to purchase Daniel's local interests, but Daniel refuses and instead strikes a deal with Union Oil[41] to build a pipeline to the California coast. However, Bandy's ranch is still an obstacle. Daniel becomes suspicious of Henry because the latter cannot recognize a local joke and confronts him one night at gunpoint. 'Henry' confesses that he was a friend of the real Henry, who died of tuberculosis, and that he had pretended to be Henry because he wanted Daniel to give him a job. Although the impostor promises to leave and never return, Daniel murders him and buries his body. The next morning, Daniel is awakened by Bandy, who knows of Daniel's crime and wants him to publicly repent in Eli's church in exchange for an easement for the pipeline running across his land. As part of his baptism, Eli humiliates Daniel and obliges him to confess that he abandoned his son. Later, during the construction of the pipeline, H.W. reunites with Daniel, and Eli becomes a missionary.

[40] Standard Oil Company was an American oil production, transportation, refining and marketing company active from 1870 to 1911.

[41] Union Oil was a petroleum explorer and marketer in the late 19th century, through the 20th century and into the early 21st century.

In 1927, H.W. marries Paul and Eli's sister. Daniel, now extremely wealthy but a chronically embittered alcoholic, lives alone in a large mansion. H.W. asks his father to dissolve their partnership so that he can create his own independent drilling company in Mexico. Daniel angrily mocks H.W.'s deafness before revealing his true origins. H.W. tells Daniel he is happy that they are not related and walks out with Daniel. While Daniel is drunk is in his mansion, Eli, now a radio preacher, visits him. Since Bandy has recently died, Eli offers to sell Daniel the Bandy ranch property rights. Daniel agrees on the condition that Eli denounce his faith and credibility. Once Eli consents, Daniel reveals that the property is now worthless, the oil reservoir has already been drained his neighboring wells, as if a milkshake has been stolen using a long straw. Desperate, Eli confesses he has lost money while speculating in the 1929 stock market crash. Daniel murders Eli with a bowling pin. When his servant appears to ask about the tumult, Daniel says "I'm finished".

## 2.6 An analysis of the film and the symbolic role of oil

*There Will Be Blood* is a film made of bitumen, of bodies that become one with the earth and the black that imbues it. The first twenty minutes of the wordless screening leave a deep impression on the viewer as if to offer a reading on the origins of a well-defined kind of capitalism, one that creates enormous profits through the exploitation of the bowels of the Earth. It is into this womb that Daniel goes to steal first silver and then oil. In this stark depiction of 'black gold fever'[42], the camera lingers on arid and savage scenery, on the rough rocks of the California soil and on the mangled bodies of the miners; it lingers on Daniel Day-Lewis's close-ups and on his oil-blackened face, which over the course of the film becomes increasingly fierce and inhuman, until it becomes

[42] The expression 'black gold fever' refers to the greed and excitement caused by the "oil rush", and historically marks its consequentiality with the "gold rushes" of 1848-55 in the West, and of 1869-90 in Canada.

a mask of evil. The central focus of the plot is precisely Plainview's character with his irrepressible lust for wealth, which will lead him to be devoured by a blind rage against everyone around him. His rapacious spirit of competition and his secret, rabid hatred will be the demons that drag him into the spiral of madness.

*There Will Be Blood* features some significant differences from its literary source. The first difference lies in the title, which suggests a connection between oil and blood. It serves as a promise, a promise that is fulfilled in the final scene when Daniel Plainview bludgeons Eli Sunday to death with a bowling pin. The extraction of oil becomes a metaphorical process that involves sacrifice and bloodshed, highlighting the brutality inherent in the pursuit of wealth and power. Whereas the single word with the exclamation mark of the title of Sinclair's novel captures the sense of excitement and discovery that the author associates with the gusher, Anderson's title promises that specific consequences will follow from finding oil, namely violence. Although the film hints that there will be a lot of bloodshed, the few scenes of violence are treated almost delicately. It is only at the end of the film that there is actual blood, but throughout the rest of the film, which runs just over two and a half hours, the only fluid one sees flowing is oil. Just as the circulation of blood maintains life in the human body, oil will become the 'lifeblood' of the American economy. Daniel is nothing more nor than less than a vampire, taking oil from whoever he can in whatever way he can using whatever means he can. Oil, in a symbolic sense, becomes the blood that gives life to Daniel.

As the film progresses toward its final scene, the source text seems to fade into the background. In fact, Julian Murphet[43] argues that the film seems 'inspired' by the novel rather than

[43]Julian Murphet is a Marxist literary scholar specialising in North American literary history and with interests in film studies, literary theory and the uses and abuses of 'race'.

adapted from it. Indeed, Sinclair's 1927 novel presents a sprawling, multilayered depiction of early twentieth-century America, showing how oil tycoons such as J. Arnold Ross helped spur the transformation of California into a locus of urban growth and entertainment. *There Will Be Blood*, on the other hand, focuses largely on Daniel Plainview – the cinematic incarnation of Ross–, excising almost all portrayals of the economic and sociopolitical backdrop of early twentieth century America. However, the conclusion of the film punctuates a uniquely self-conscious depiction of the relationship between the film and its source text, which unfolds not through a shared plotline but through the motifs of blood and oil and the related subjects of production and transformation.

As regards the narrative structure, the film simplifies the novel's plot, primarily focusing on the story of Daniel Plainview, portrayed by Daniel Day-Lewis, reducing the number of characters and subplots present in the book. Some characters in the film have slightly different characteristics or backgrounds compared to the book and some minor characters may have been omitted or combined to fit the film's runtime.

The film's ending has some modifications compared to the novel's conclusion; overall, the cinematic adaptation of *There Will Be Blood* respects the general spirit of Upton Sinclair's novel but inevitably includes differences due to the narrative and stylistic requirements of filmmaking. Both the book and the film stand independently and are appreciated for their cultural and artistic significance.

Like the novel on which it is based, *There Will Be Blood* may be read as a critique of capitalism, with a focus on how this economic system has developed in the United States and on its potentially corrosive effects on social life and individual psychology.

In *There Will Be Blood* oil plays a profound and symbolic role throughout the narrative. The film explores the complex relationships between wealth, power, ambition and the human condition. Daniel Plainview's relentless pursuit of oil mirrors his desire for control and dominance, whereas the wealth generated from oil becomes a measure of success and influence: oil extraction, thus, becomes symbolic of the corrupting influence of wealth and greed. As characters strive for control over oil reserves, their moral compass becomes distorted, leading to ethical compromises and ruthless actions. The battles over oil-rich land underscore the cutthroat nature of the oil industry and the lengths people will go to secure their interests.

Similarly to the novel, the film also touches on the destructive nature of the oil industry. The drilling and extraction processes depicted in the movie hint at the environmental impact and the toll it takes on the landscape, which can be seen as a commentary on the cost of pursuing wealth and progress. The pursuit of oil, in fact, contributes to the isolation and alienation of the protagonist, Daniel Plainview. His obsessive focus on oil extraction distances him from personal relationships, leading to emotional detachment and loneliness, and in this sense the quest for oil can be interpreted as a metaphor for the American Dream and the ruthless pursuit of success. Daniel Plainview embodies the ambitious entrepreneur who will stop at nothing to achieve financial prosperity, reflecting a darker side of the American Dream.

Another feature the movie shares with the novel is that oil becomes intertwined with themes of moral ambiguity. The presence of oil is juxtaposed with the hypocrisy and moral conflicts within the characters, emphasizing the grey areas in the pursuit of wealth and power. The unpredictability of oil sites, with its hidden reservoirs and uncertainties, serves as a metaphor for the unpredictable and volatile nature of human ambition and fate. It could be said then that the film uses oil as a symbol to foreshadow the unpredictable outcomes and consequences of characters'

actions, hence adding layers of meaning to the narrative and making it a central element in the exploration of the characters and their moral descent.

Another important symbolic role of petroleum occurs in the movie when Daniel Plainview "I drink your milkshake!", which became a popular meme when the film was first released because of the absurdity of the line when taken out of context. However, as Phipps notices, the scene encompasses a dark and deeply layered parody on America's relationship with capitalism and religion. When Eli offers to sell the claim to the Bandy land, Daniel tells him that he has already drunk the "milkshake" – meaning he has already extracted all the oil from Bandy's land from underneath. Eli's "milkshake" from which he drinks with his long straw stands metaphorically for the oozing pool of crude oil bubbling tantalizingly beneath the land he could not purchase... In a much larger sense – the sense Daniel is explaining to Eli – the milkshake is a broader symbol of every underhanded dirty deal that businessmen such as himself use to cheat those without the resources to protect what rightfully – if not necessarily legally – belongs to them.

In conclusion, the milkshake represents wealth, success, and resources – specifically, the oil beneath the ground and, by 'drinking someone's milkshake', Daniel Plainview is exploiting someone's resources and profiting from them.

But the act of drinking someone's milkshake is not just about extracting resources, it also symbolizes dominance and the exertion of power. Daniel is willing to destroy his relationships and exploit others for personal gain, illustrating the isolating nature of extreme ambition and greed. The milkshake scene, thus, can be seen as a point of no return for the character, marking a turning point in the narrative where Daniel fully embraces his ruthless and unscrupulous nature. The innocence associated with a simple milkshake here is corrupted and symbolizes the loss of moral integrity. The milkshake speech is the culmination of all of Daniel's experiences throughout the

movie and represents the character's truest intentions and his personal philosophy regarding competition. Daniel, in fact, eliminates Eli as a threat to his power and revels in the preacher's pathetic groveling. Eli's confession may take place in a mansion instead of a church, but his lamentations give Daniel the pleasure of turning the tables on Eli. In this case, though, Daniel isn't content to simply accept Eli's forced apology. He also admits stealing the Bandy oil that Eli just offered him, flexing his dominance even further by explaining oil drainage, his strategic manoeuvre, with the juvenile milkshake imagery. Daniel does not see his enemies on equal footing, but as victims to crush under his heel, hence the preacher is no more than a naive and stupid child who leaves his delicious, sugary drink unprotected from smarter, more experienced men worthier of the prize.

In *There Will Be Blood* the opposition between innovation and tradition is vividly portrayed through the conflict between science and religion (which is something that emerges also from the novel). The film juxtaposes the relentless pursuit of wealth and technological progress, represented by oil and drilling, with the traditional values and moral constraints associated with religious beliefs. The character of Daniel Plainview, who embodies innovation and technological progress, is thus juxtaposed with the presence of religious traditions and moral values, primarily represented by the charismatic preacher Eli Sunday. The town's church and its religious community, in fact, serve as a symbol of tradition, morality, and spirituality.

The conflict between science and religion is manifested in the clash of values which the two characters embody: Daniel' s ruthless pursuit of wealth through oil extraction is devoid of moral considerations, while Eli emphasizes traditional moral values and the spiritual well-being of the community; Daniel's exploitation of the land for oil reflects a utilitarian and profit-driven mindset, contrasting with Eli's emphasis on faith, community and the moral consequences of one's

actions; Daniel's actions, driven by a desire for progress, ultimately erode the traditional values and social fabric represented by the church, which symbolizes the traditional, spiritual and communal aspects of life. Its decline in the face of industrial expansion reflects the diminishing influence of tradition and religion in the wake of technological progress.

While Plainview embraces capitalism and greed, Sunday uses religion to exploit people's weaknesses and maintain his control over the community, their contrast between two forms of power as well: economic and spiritual power. If we shift the discourse toward religion, we find hypocrisy and manipulation on the part of both Plainview and Sunday, since they both exploit religious rhetoric to get what they want. This attitude highlights the instrumentalization of religion for personal gain and power. Plainview too does not even entertain the possibility that Eli's desire might be motivated by anything other than his will-to-power. There is no question in Plainview's mind that Eli uses religion merely to rationalize his motives and dispositions: both men are ambitious for wealth and power, they have simply chosen different means of getting it.

To conclude, *There Will Be Blood* delves into the complexities of human nature, capitalism and the interplay between religion and modernity. It stands as a powerful commentary on the inherent conflicts between ambition, spirituality, and the changing landscape of a rapidly modernizing world. In doing so, the film provides a profound exploration of the characters, primarily Daniel Plainview, and their interactions within the context of the burgeoning oil industry at the turn of the 20th century. Daniel Plainview embodies the relentless ambition of capitalism, showcasing the darker aspects of the American Dream. The narrative unfolds as Plainview exploits both the land and the people around him in his quest for oil and success. He uses religious rhetoric to manipulate and gain the trust of the community, highlighting the tension between genuine faith and the opportunistic use of religious symbols for personal gain. The character of Eli Sunday adds

depth to this exploration, as he engages in a power struggle with Plainview, revealing the corrupting influence of both economic and spiritual aspirations. The climactic scenes are visceral and symbolic, serving as a culmination of the moral decay that has unfolded throughout the story. The film's conclusion leaves viewers with a sense of foreboding, contemplating the destructive forces unleashed by unchecked ambition and the toll it takes on the human soul.

# George Stevens's *Giant* (1956)

## 3.1 The plot

Oil and cinema are almost the same age: they both appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. Oil, and more precisely money derived from oil, created the film industry. The use of oil as a source of energy and raw material quickly spread to various sectors of industry. The birth of cinema, however, is often attributed to the pioneering experiments of inventors such as Louis Le Prince[44], Thomas Edison[45] and the Lumière brothers[46] in the late 19th century.

In today's panorama of world cinema, oil has taken a special place: it is not just a decoration, but a real 'actor'. Oil has technologized and commercialized the film industry; films gather multimillion-dollar audiences and, as a result, return the millions invested in their making.

*Giant* is a 1956 film directed by George Stevens based on the novel of the same name by Edna Ferber. It is an epic family drama that covers a long period of time. The cast includes stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, and James Dean. The plot follows the story of a wealthy Texas family through generations, dealing with issues such as racism and social change. The film received widespread praise for the actors' performances, Stevens' direction and its social relevance. James Dean, who played one of the main roles, died shortly after completing filming, making *Giant* one of his last films and contributing to his posthumous legend.

The story begins in the 1920s when wealthy young Texas cattle rancher Jordan 'Bick' Benedict goes to Maryland to purchase a racehorse. Here he meets and marries Leslie Lynnton, a

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[44] Louis Aimé Augustin Le Prince (1841-1890) is considered the Father of Cinematography, as he was the inventor of early motion-picture camera.

[45] Thomas Edison (1847-1931) was the inventor of the motion picture camera, the kinetoscope and the kinetograph.

[46] Auguste (1862-1954) and Louis (1864-1948) Lumière were the inventors of the cinematographic projectors and among the first film-makers in history.

young upper-class woman. Jordan and Leslie return to the Benedict family ranch in Texas, where Leslie meets the traditions and the way of life of the place. The Benedict family is embroiled in internal conflicts and cultural clashes. Bick and Leslie face racial tensions when Bick's son Jordan Jr. falls in love with a Mexican girl.

Among Bick's farmhands, stands out Jett Rink, a poor but ambitious young man, who enjoys Luz's sympathies but who secretly loves Leslie for her strong and rebellious temperament. Luz dies in an accident falling from a horse and leaves Jett a small plot of land which, despite Bick's insistence, he refuses to sell to the Benedicts. Jett aims to become a rich and prestigious man like the other landowners and to be accepted by them: finally having his own land is the first step towards the life he wants. Jett works hard to pursue his dream and soon discovers significant oil deposits in the inherited land, which give him the wealth he dreams of. Other landowners in the area also benefited from this discovery, including the Benedicts, despite Bick himself having previously always refused to have oil exploration carried out on the land.

In the following years, family clashes between Leslie and Bick continue, in particular regarding the education of their children, who do not want to continue their father's business. The major fracture is highlighted in particular when Jordan, the eldest son who has undertaken a career as a doctor instead of taking care of the family properties, marries Juana, a Mexican nurse. Her daughter Judy marries her longtime boyfriend Bob, a true Texan, with whom however she decides to have a farm of their own, instead of taking over the management of the family property.

A few years later Jett inaugurates a sumptuous hotel inviting all the most prominent Texan families, to finally demonstrate his belonging to that world. The Benedict family is also present among them and Jett takes advantage of this to court Luz, who is won over by such prestige. Meanwhile, Juana has to deal with an episode of racism: the staff of the hotel hairdresser refuses

to serve her because she is Mexican and Jordan's intervention is of no avail, as he is treacherously beaten by Jett, who however has to deal with reality: he is snubbed by his guests, busy entertaining each other. Leslie confronts him and, faced with the evidence that he was and is in love with her, tells him that she never loved him and that courting his daughter out of spite won't change things. Jett has an altercation in the wine room with Bick who wants to avenge the insult to Jordan, during which, seeing a drunk and disintegrating Jett, he refuses to hit him and, after telling him that it's not worth getting his hands dirty because he's finished now, simply causes numerous shelves of wine to cascade down; Jett then re-enters the reception room, staggering and too drunk to give the speech. Having dozed off in the chair, he wakes up alone in the now empty room, while a violent storm breaks the windows; here, completely drunk, he holds a pathetic conference declaring his unrequited love for Leslie, the cause of so much resentment towards the Benedict family. Luz participates in this scene accompanied by her uncle, who in this way realizes the reality and stops defending Jett.

Returning from the disastrous inauguration, the Benedicts stop to eat in a diner. Here we notice the change in Bick, who defends his nephew and daughter-in-law from racist comments from the owner with whom he soon comes to blows in a memorable fistfight in which, however, Bick gets the worst of it. The Benedicts retreat to their home where, despite the conflicts and bitterness, they will continue their life peacefully, always together and still in love. The camera frames the two last grandchildren, one white and the other mixed-race. The film renders a clearer message about the impotence of tycoons in the face of the Benedict family, happy to be at home babysitting their grandchildren. Jett Rink is last seen alone in his banquet hall, after all of his guests have left; he drunkenly falls over a table and passes out, isolated in his decadent consumption.

## 3.2 1920s-1950s: a period of changes

*Giant*'s plot is heavily influenced by the oil industry in Texas. The rise of the Benedict family is linked to the expansion of the oil industry, and this provides a backdrop for exploring the economic and social consequences of oil extraction. The film takes place over a period of time spanning several decades, starting in the 1920s and continuing through the 1950s. This period coincides with major social changes in the United States, including the years of the Great Depression[47] and changes in economic and cultural dynamics.

The 1920s are often known as 'The Roaring Twenties' due to the cultural explosion and economic abundance. America saw an economic boom which led to increased industrial production and the rise of the culture of consumerism. The Jazz Age ushered in new lifestyles and saw growing activism by women for the right to vote. From an economic and oil sector development perspective, by the dawn of the 1920s, the Second Industrial Revolution[48] had transformed the United States into a global economic power and attracted millions of Americans to the cities. With a concomitant increase in immigration, the 1920 United States census was the first in which the majority of the population lived in urban areas. Although World War I had strained the country's finances, the fact that the United States entered the war late and that the fighting took place abroad helped it secure a more dominant economic position relative to its allies. During the 1920s, the American economy continued to accelerate. One reason was the country's growing electrification. The percentage of US households with electricity rose from 12 percent in 1916 to 63 percent in 1927, and its ever-widening use in factories led to increased productivity.

[47] The Great Depression (1929-1939) was a period of economic depression caused by the fall in stock prices in the United States.

[48] The Second Industrial Revolution was a phase of scientific discovery, industrialisation and mass production from the late 19th century into the early 20th century.

The advent of mass production methods such as the assembly line, which stimulated the growth of the automotive industry, also contributed to the economic boom. The decade saw the number of passenger cars more than triple, which in turn spurred the expansion of transportation infrastructure and oil and gas industries. Furthermore, the entire economic sector benefited from the laissez-faire[49] economic policies of US Presidents Warren G. Harding (1921-23) and Calvin Coolidge (1923-29).[50]

The prosperity of the 1920s was followed by the Great Depression that began with the Wall Street stock market crash in 1929. America faced mass unemployment, poverty and severe economic hardship. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's[51] New Deal[52] sought to mitigate the effects of the Depression through public works programs and economic reforms. Between 1923 and 1929 the gap between profits and wages had widened enormously in favor, obviously, of the American capitalists. The large portion of the wealth produced had gone into the pockets of large industrialists and had left very little for the working class. Even the agricultural world certainly could not look to the future with optimism. Throughout the 1920s, farmers in the Western and Southern United States faced falling prices for their produce, which accelerated waves of bankruptcies among small, independent farmers and the slide into extreme poverty among sharecroppers. The deflation of agricultural products was due to a mix of internal and international factors, such as the end of the war –during which their demand grew enormously– and the mechanization of agricultural production.

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[49] Laissez-faire is a type of economic system in which there is no economic interventionism in the transactions between private groups of people.

[50] John Calvin Coolidge Jr. was the 30th President of the United States of America.

[51] Franklin D. Roosevelt was the 32nd President of the United States of America, from 1933 to 1945.

[52] The New Deal was a series of programs, financial reforms and work projects enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1933 and 1938.

The 1940s saw America emerge from the Great Depression due to participation in World War II. American industry was fully mobilized to support the war effort, leading to increased employment and industrial output. The war also led to significant social changes, including advances in civil rights and the rise of the women's movement.[53]

As already mentioned, after the war, the United States experienced a period of great economic prosperity. On the one hand, the wonderful abundance of consumers and the realization of the 'American dream' for millions of families; on the other, political anxiety and forced unity, all in the shadow of the Cold War[54].

### 3.3 Oil symbolism in the film

In the film's narrative, oil symbolism is a key element. This natural resource, in fact, is not only a source of economic wealth, but a powerful symbol of social change, economic power and moral challenges. The aesthetics of oil, with its industrial landscapes, oil infrastructure and environmental consequences, emerges as a crucial visual element in the film. The struggle for supremacy in the oil industry adds a level of tension and drama to the story. The film delves into issues related to wealth inequality, cultural conflicts and the impact of industrialization on traditional ways of life. Oil acts as a catalyst for change, influencing social relationships, wealth distribution and social structure within the plot and it influences the overall narrative of the film and the characterization of the characters.

[53] The women's liberation movement was a political movement that saw the rise of a feminist intellectualism starting from the late 1960s primarily in the industrialized nations of the Western World.

[54] The Cold War was a period of geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union and their allies, that started in 1945, after the end of World War II, and lasted till 1991.

As mentioned, the plot of the film mainly develops around the characters of Bick Benedict and Jett Rink. Both of these characters are involved in the oil industry, which becomes a crucial part of their conflicts. In fact, oil is a source of rivalry between the two men. The interactions between Bick and Jett, along with their relationships with other characters, reflect the changing social landscape of Texas. The characters of Bick and Jett are the means through which *Giant* explores the complexities of the American Dream: their contrasting lead to reflections on the pursuit of success, society's expectations and the costs associated with the pursuit of wealth. The two men undergo a transformation due to their involvement with oil. Bick Benedict's character is shaped by his role as an oil tycoon, representing the challenges and responsibilities of wealth and power. Jett's path from poor laborer to wealthy oil tycoon reflects the transformative nature of the oil industry. Rink's character does not change throughout the film; however, oil allows him to expand his influence. Instead of judging Rink, the film indicts Texas and mid-century America by revealing how Rink's oil buys him status. Toward the end of the film, in fact, Rink is preparing to run for political office and is the recipient of a flattering introduction before a ballroom full of Texas society from a friend of Benedict's who complained earlier in the film of the Rink oil strike commenting "You should have shot that guy a long time ago. Now he's too rich to kill". These sentences make us understand that oil gives so much importance that it even forbids people from being killed.

Land and oil wealth influence the characters' identities and relationships. The struggle for control of this legacy becomes a central theme, influencing the characters' decisions and the trajectory of the narrative. Competition for control of oil resources leads to strained relationships, creating a central conflict in the narrative. In fact, oil wealth causes tensions and conflicts also within the Benedict family, owner of an oil company; the struggle for control and management of

resources depicts the challenges that families face when they find themselves in the center of an economic boom.

In *Giant*, oil represents a source of enormous wealth and power; it can be seen as a symbol of modernity and progress. The film explicitly dramatizes the radical change in the life of the Texan community and the economic and cultural shift in West Texas from a cattle ranching economy to an oil economy; in fact, Texas is portrayed as a site of radically uneven development, prompted by the modernizing effects of the oil industry. This symbolizes the social and economic change that the oil industry can bring to a rural community, with new opportunities and conflicts arising due to economic growth. The arrival of the oil industry in the history of the Benedict family can be interpreted as a step towards modernization, bringing new technologies and models of urban life into the rural context; in fact, the enormous oil deposits discovered on the family's property led to a significant change in their fortune and social standing and to a certain degree of wealth that became a symbol of status and influence.

As already mentioned, *Giant* was released during an era of social change. It was a period of consumerism. In fact, after the Second World War, a growing middle class flourished alongside the booming United States economy. Nearly half of all families in the country belonged to the middle class, the consumer class. Bigger homes, bigger cars and bigger families indicated success and status and a sense of ownership. And that is visible thanks to the presence of the automobile. To this end, it is important to notice that *Giant* was written and filmed during the imperative to construct the interstate highway system, legislated through the Federal Highway Act of 1956.[55] After the war, the Benedicts arrive at a new vision of social belonging that is constructed around the family automobile, which serves as a marker of independent mobility and renewed possibilities

[55] The Federal Highway Act of 1956 established an interstate highway system in the United States.

in postwar culture. To this end, it is with good reason that Kristin Ross argues that in *Giant*, "an intimate connection between consumption, family belonging, and the automobile is forged" (Ross in Worden 118).

The environmental issue is an important topic in *Giant*. Depictions of the oil industry often explore its social dynamics and environmental effects, shedding light on the intricate intertwining of economic interests, power structure and the consequences of resource extraction. The environmental impact of oil extraction is a recurring theme. The films portray oil spills, deforestation and pollution which can have devastating effects on ecosystems, wildlife and the health of local populations. This portrayal raises awareness about the real environmental challenges associated with oil exploration. Oil exploration and extraction can have significant impacts on the environment. The symbolism of oil in the film can also represent the destruction of the natural environment due to industry, with oil wells modifying the landscape and generating negative impacts on the earth. The film highlights the environmental consequences and ethical issues raised by the representation of oil; in fact, it raises questions about oil company liability, power dynamics and the implications for environmental sustainability. Overall, although oil is not the focus of the film, its presence in the context of energy and resources could be interpreted as part of the film's environmental message.

Another fundamental theme in *Giant* is the economic and social inequality. The film portrays the economic boom associated with oil extraction, showing the creation of wealth and job opportunities. However, oil deepens the social disparities that can arise, with a concentration of wealth among a few while others face economic and social challenges. And that is visible in the movie, considered the fact that the wealth is concentrated in the hands of white people; moreover, the movie casts cattle ranching as a racist enterprise, reliant on exploited Chicano workers.

In spite of that, *Giant*'s focus on Texan culture also allows for the development of a liberal, anti-racist allegory. In fact, the film dramatizes the domestication and naturalization of the oil industry in the postwar United States, while endorsing a multiracial vision of Texas. Leslie takes an immediate interest in remedying the living and working conditions of her husband's employees and raises Bick's racial awareness. Leslie's activism is initially thwarted; the only way that Bick is finally swayed to accept Chicanos as equals is when is his son Jordy marries the daughter of one of Bick's ranch hands, Juana, and has a dark-skinned son named Polo, after Juana's father. Bick's social awakening, then, occurs not through an awareness of exploitative working conditions and structural racism but, instead, through a new familial connection to his Chicano workers.

## 3.4 Black as oil

Even if the film was originally shot in color, the version of *Giant* known to most remains in black and white: the use of black emphasized the messages of the film: it deals with racial themes through the character of Angel Obregón II, played by Sal Mineo, the young Mexican adopted by the Benedicts. Community opposition to his interracial relationship with the Benedicts' daughter highlights the racial tensions of the time. It is known, in fact, that the film also explores class struggle through the dynamics between wealthy, white ranchers, represented by the Benedict family, and plantation workers, often black, including Mexicans.

Black and white was still common in the film industry in the 1950s, even though color technology was available. The use of black and white may have been chosen for artistic and narrative reasons. In many cases, black and white is used to emphasize the drama and emotional depth of a story, focusing attention on the actors, plot and visual details without the distraction of color. In the period when cinema was still in black and white, the use of black was a fundamental

component of the color palette. Direction and cinematography have developed specifically to exploit the shades of grey, black and white to create dramatic effects and unique atmospheres. Black is often used to create a sense of darkness and mystery in scenes. Its presence can highlight moments of tension, suspense or intense drama. For example, the use of black in shadows can heighten the atmosphere in a film noir. Black can be associated with different emotions and moods. For example, it can represent sadness, loss, grief or deep drama. The choice to use black in certain contexts can intensify the emotional impact of a scene. All these symbolic uses are present in *Giant* with the aim of enhancing the emotions of the protagonists. Moreover, as Eric Lott notes, blackface was often a way for white performers and audiences to stage otherness in the nineteenth century. Lott writes: "The black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening – and male – Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them" (25). Black is often associated with oil, since the latter is a dark, viscous liquid. The use of black in an oil context can symbolize the presence and influence of oil in people's lives, economy and society. In addition, this color also represents Jett's maniac desire to flirt with Leslie; covered in 'black oil', he laughs maniacally, appearing as a monstruous figure.

Oil can cause environmental pollution and the use of the color black is used to visually represent degradation caused by oil spills or other oil-related industrial activities. At the same time, the oil industry can often be associated with intrigue, economic and political power and the use of black may reflect the mystery and uneasiness behind the decisions and actions of those who control this resource.

## 3.5 Other films related to oil and its aesthetic symbolism

In addition to *Giant*, there are several films that deal with oil and incorporate its aesthetic symbolism in significant ways. These films often explore themes related to the oil industry, greed,

power and the social and environmental consequences of oil extraction. Examples of films that touch on these themes include, besides the already analyzed *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *The Fountainhead* (1949), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *Syriana* (2005). These films provide narratives that engage audiences with the social and environmental complexities of the oil industry. They are briefly analyzed below.

*The Fountainhead* (1949), based on the novel by Ayn Rand, follows architect Howard Roark, played by Gary Cooper, and includes a subplot related to the oil industry. Much like *Giant*, the oil industry is often associated with progress and modernity. The discovery and use of oil shows the technological and industrial advancement in the period in which the film is set. Oil is also a representation of economic power and ambition. Oil ventures can represent financial success and the fulfilment of the film's characters' dreams of power and influence. The presence of oil in the context of the film reflects the contrast between the traditions of the past and the rise of new industrial forces.

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) focuses on an alien called Klaatu, who arrives on the Earth with a warning message about the need to live in peace and respect the environment. While the film does not directly revolve around oil, the theme of environmental awareness is present, and could be interpreted in relation to the use of natural resources, including oil-based energy. Klaatu's message about the need to live in peace and respect the environment can also be interpreted as a call for greater environmental responsibility on the part of humanity, including the sustainable management of resources such as oil. It should be noted that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* came out during a time when environmental awareness was emerging as a social and political issue. The film can be read as a reflection on the need to address environmental threats and avoid the irresponsible use of natural resources.

*Syriana* (2005), directed by Stephen Gaghan, explores the geopolitical intricacies and power dynamics associated with the oil industry. It explores the complex dynamics of oil, international politics and business, offering an intricate perspective on the connections between power, geopolitics and the global economy. The symbolism of oil is evident in several elements of the plot: oil is represented as a precious resource that offers enormous power and influence on those who control it. Oil companies and governments that hold oil reserves become protagonists in a struggle for global domination. Oil is linked to themes of corruption and intrigue. The film explores corruption within oil companies, governments and intermediaries, revealing how greed and the desire for power influence the characters' decisions and actions. Oil also represents the dependence of developed nations on energy resources. The plot reflects the global implications and economic dynamics of oil supply, with a focus on relations between the West and the Middle East. The film, set in a very different geopolitical context than *Giant*, in which America still held the lead in oil production, explores the side effects of the oil industry, including political and social upheavals in oil-producing countries.

# Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023)

## 4.1 The plot

*Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) is a film directed and produced by Martin Scorsese based on the homonymous book written by David Grann and published in 2017. The book deals with the true story of a series of murders that involved the Osage community in Oklahoma and that took place in 1920s. It begins with the discovery of rich oil reserves in the land of the Native Americans of the Osage tribe in Oklahoma. Because of this unexpected wealth, the Osage became one of the richest tribes in the world in the 1920s. However, the community began to be hit by a series of mysterious murders, in which members of the tribe were killed by people who wanted to gain control of their wealth. The federal government took an interest in the case and sent the FBI to investigate. The book follows FBI agent Tom White[56] and his team as they investigate these murders, uncovering a web of corruption, greed and racism involving government officials, lawyers and even members of the victims' families. The investigation reveals a vast conspiracy to rob the Osage of their lands and oil riches. Ultimately, those responsible are brought to justice; however, the book highlights the profound injustices suffered by the Osage community and the difficulty in ensuring true justice in a context of systematic corruption. In fact, government officials, lawyers and other community members are involved in an elaborate plan to steal oil riches from the Osage, demonstrating how self-interest has prevailed over justice and ethics.

The book also explores the systemic racism that permeated society at the time, highlighting how the Osage were seen as 'unfit' to manage their wealth and suffered discrimination in the investigative field. Although the FBI brought the conspiracy to light and some perpetrators were

[56] Thomas Bruce White Sr. (1881-1971) was the American law officer known for solving the Osage murder case.

convicted, there was a certain difficulty in ensuring complete justice; in fact, many offenders escaped the harshest punishments.

From a cinematographic point of view, in addition to the important choice of the cast, which includes Leonardo DiCaprio, Rober De Niro and Lily Gladstone, among others, and with the masterful direction of Martin Scorsese, the plot is quite faithful to the book, but with appropriate adaptations. The story is set in Fairfax, Oklahoma, in 1920: members of the Osage Nation discover that a great deal of oil lies beneath the land in their possession and this discovery soon makes them extremely rich; yet the law requires court-appointed guardians to manage the money of full and half-breed members, deeming them incompetent.

In 1919, greedy Ernest Burkhart returns from World War I to live with his brother Byron and his uncle William Hale. The latter, a reserve deputy sheriff nicknamed 'King', poses as a benefactor and friend of the Osage, speaking their language and bestowing gifts on them, but secretly plans to kill them and steal their wealth. He immediately suggests that his nephew woos Mollie Kyle, a young Osage woman whose family owns many oil rights. Ernest, who along with Byron immediately commits armed robbery against the Osage, meets Mollie through his day job as a taxi driver; a romance develops between them and the two are married in a ceremony that mixes Catholic and Osage elements.

Hale, in the meantime, plans the death of several wealthy Osage individuals. This is because Ernest would inherit more rights if members of the Kyle family, including his ailing mother-in-law Lizzie, were to die. Minnie, Mollie's sister, succumbs to a mysterious illness, prompting Hale to instruct Byron to kill another sister of the two girls, the rebellious Anna. The Osage council blames white residents of the reservation and urges the tribe to react. A newsreel

depicting the 1921 Tulsa race riot,[57] in which whites destroyed a thriving black community and killed numerous people, raises concerns among the Osage that a similar attack could happen to them.

During Mollie's third pregnancy, enraged Hale forces Ernest to add poison to Mollie's insulin, as she suffers from diabetes. Mollie's condition worsens. The 'King' also orders the death of Henry Roan, Minnie's first husband, to collect his life insurance, and instructs the nephew to arrange the murder. However, Ernest fails, prompting Hale to remedy the situation by blowing up the man's house.

The sheriff and local judges are corrupt and no investigation is conducted; a representative of the Osage Nation trying to lobby Congress is assassinated in Washington. Mollie hires William J. Burns, a private investigator, but he is promptly murdered. Despite her illness, Mollie then travels to Washington with an Osage delegation and seeks help from President Calvin Coolidge. An embryonic FBI led by Agent Tom White and his assistants arrives in Fairfax, quickly uncovering the truth. Hale tries to cover his tracks by having many of his henchmen killed, but White arrests both him and Ernest. Ernest is found in a confused state because, suspicious of his wife's condition, realizing what was being done to his beloved spouse. Meanwhile, agents find Mollie seriously ill, provide appropriate medical care and inform her about the toxic substances mixed with her insulin.

White urges Ernest to expose Hale, whose lawyer, WS Hamilton, convinces the young man to retract the accusations by alleging police abuse. However, after one of his daughters dies of

[57] The Tulsa race riot was a two-day-long white supremacist terrorist massacre that took place between May 31 and June 1, 1921, when white residents attacked black residents and destroyed businesses and homes of the Greenwood District – a colony built by black freedmen – in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

whooping cough, Ernest decides to proceed against his uncle to be close to his family. Mollie meets her husband after he tests, but she leaves him when he refuses to admit poisoning her.

A final filmed segment for a radio program provides an update on the events. Ernest and Hale were sentenced to life imprisonment but were later released on parole after many years, despite protests from the Osage to the parole board. Byron did not serve his prison sentence due to a hung jury; the Shoun brothers, who provided poison to Ernest for Mollie along with the insulin and were implicated in other deaths, were not prosecuted due to lack of evidence. Mollie divorced Ernest after the trial, remarried and died of diabetes at the age of fifty in 1937. She was buried with her family: her parents, sisters and daughter. Her obituary made no reference to the Osage tribe murders. Ernest, abandoned by his family, ended up living in a trailer with his brother and his uncle died in a nursing home at the age of eighty-seven. The final scene, shown from above, depicts numerous Osage celebrating their surviving culture in a grand tribal dance.

As regards the title, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, it suggests a broader reflection on the history of the United States, in particular on the unjust acts committed against Native American populations and on the need to address such injustices. In fact, in the 1920s there was a series of murders known as the 'Killers of the flower moon': members of the Osage Nation, attracted greed and corruption and were killed. In the film, the killers are those who caused the death of Osage people. The reference of the 'killers of the flower moon' comes directly from the book Hales gives Ernest: it is the story of the Osage natives. In the book, it is written that Osage use the expression 'flower moon' to refer to a certain kind of purple flowers that in May are overtaken and broken by the growth of taller plants. Metaphorically, Scorsese intended to say that what other plants do to the flowers of the hills is what men like Hale and Burkhart do to the native Osage, in the name of their own greed.

As an example of these murders, the finding in May 1921 of the decomposed body of Anna Brown, a woman from the Osage Nation, in a ravine in northern Oklahoma can be cited. The case was dismissed as an accidental death by poisoning, even though there was a bullet hole in the woman's head. After two months, her mother Lizzie Q, who had received her daughter's inheritance, also died under suspicious circumstances. Two years later, his cousin Henry Roan was shot and killed, as were several other members of their family.

## 4.2 The Osage: their origins and their richness

The Osage are a Native American tribe belonging to the Dhegiha branch of the Siouan linguistic stock,[58] whose other members are the Omaha, the Ponca, the Kansa and the Quapaw. Their history is rich and complex, characterized by a deep connection to the lands they once occupied, the challenges faced during the westward expansion of the United States and the tragic consequences related to the natural resources discovered on their lands. They were one of the largest and most powerful native tribes on the Great Plains; they initially settled in the Piedmont Plateau between the James and Savannah rivers, located in present-day Virginia and the Carolinas. Subsequently, they moved to the Ozark Plateau and the prairies of what is now western Missouri. At this juncture, they established villages along the Osage River. The Osage remained in this region until the early 19th century, when they ceded their lands in Missouri to the United States government and relocated west to the Neosho River valley in Kansas.

[58] The Dhegihan languages are a group of Siouan languages – being Siouan a language family of North America located primarily in the Great Plains, Ohio and Mississippi valleys and southeastern North America – that include Kansa, Osage, Omaha, Ponca and Quapaw.

Known for their semi-nomadic lifestyle, they had a life closely linked to buffalo hunting, which provided them with food, hides and other essential materials. In the 17th century, they came into contact with European explorers, especially with the French – who sought to convert them to Christianity and established missions in the region in which they lived – and the Spanish. They played a crucial role in the fur trade system, exchanging furs with Europeans; their buffalo hunting prowess and strategic location made them important intermediaries between Great Plains tribes and European traders. However, their contact with Europeans also led to disease epidemics that decimated them. Upon settling on the Kansas reservation, they distinguished themselves by steadfastly maintaining their traditional way of life, resisting assimilation into mainstream American culture. They continued to dress in traditional attire, build traditional homes and discouraged the consumption of alcohol introduced by traders.

After living for centuries in what is now the Midwest of the United States, with the westward expansion of the United States in the 19th century, the Osage were forced from their ancestral lands and were confined to smaller reservations. In particular, the adoption of the Removal Act[59] of 1830 in the United States facilitated the westward push, forcing many tribes to move from their ancestral lands into less desirable territory; at the end of the 19th century the US government sold the Osage a small plot that no one wanted, hilly and unsuitable for cultivation, in the Oklahoma Territory. A few years later, however, the Osage discovered that under that inhospitable land there was oil, of which they were the sole owners.

[59] The Removal Act of 1830 and other legislation authorized the forced relocation of indigenous tribes from desirable lands to make way for settler settlement and resource extraction.

With the discovery of oil on their reservation, the population experienced unprecedented wealth growth. In 1895, Henry Foster[60] secured a comprehensive lease covering over 1.5 million acres. After Henry's death, his brother Edwin managed the 'Foster lease' and in 1896, facing financial challenges, organized the Phoenix Oil Company, later reorganized into the Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company (ITIO).

However, it was only after the 1900s that producing wells were successfully established. In 1907 each member of the Osage population, made up of just over 2,200 individuals, received the right to royalties on the oil production of the Osage Mineral Estate,[61] which were also passed on to all their heirs. In the years of great expansion of the oil market, the Osage rented their land to white prospectors through contracts managed by the United States Department of the Interior and became very rich.

The Osage's 'underground reservation' generated wealth surpassing all American gold rushes combined. The Foster lease was renewed in 1906 but lost sole drilling rights in 1916. Competitive leasing on tracts up to five thousand acres became the norm. Public lease auctions in Pawhuska began in 1916, reaching a record bid of $1,990,000 for a single 160-acre tract. Developments, like the Burbank Field,[62] produced over 103 million barrels in 1926, contributing to a total of 319 million barrels extracted from Osage County by 1930. In 1923 alone the tribe brought in more than $30 million, today's equivalent of more than $400 million. With these revenues, the Osage sent their children to study at prestigious private schools, built mansions,

[60] Henry Vernon Foster (1875-1939) was president of the Foster Petroleum Company and of ITIO, namely the Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company.

[61] The Osage Mineral Estate is the oil, gas and other minerals sub-surface of the approximately 1.47 million acre Osage Reservation.

[62] The Burbank Field is an oil field located in northeastern Oklahoma.

purchased luxury cars and travelled to Europe. Their story was told by all the main newspapers in the nation, and this attracted many whites to Oklahoma: some were entrepreneurs or people looking for work in oil companies, others instead arrived to steal their wealth from the Native Americans.

In contrast to other landholders, the Osage maintained collective ownership of subsurface mineral rights. Tribal members received 'headrights', ensuring an equal share in mineral sales rights equivalent to the income from 658 acres. An average Osage family received over $65,000 annually in 1926, totaling more than $100 million in royalties and bonuses by 1939.

The term 'headright' refers to a land distribution system used in several American colonies during the colonial period and later also in the United States: a government entity or company allocated land to individuals or families based on the number of people in their family or the number of 'heads' they owned. For example, a family with five members could receive a headright of five hundred acres.

The history behind the headright system begins in the late 1800s, when the Osage were driven from their reservation in Kansas. When the US government finally passed a statute in 1906 to allot Osage land, it included two important provisions. First, land would only be distributed to members of the Osage tribe. Second, the rights for mineral resources like coal, gas and oil would still be owned by the tribe as a collective. The rights to the oil, in particular, would turn out to be incredibly valuable. To divvy up the profits from the collectively owned mineral rights, a new system was put in place. An equal share of the money coming in – what would come to be called a 'headright' – was given to each of the 2,229 Osage members on the tribal rolls in 1907. Private companies would lease land from the tribe in order to extract oil, gas, gravel, or coal, and then pay

a percentage of what they made into a trust managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs[63]. The BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs), in turn, would distribute payments from that trust to headright holders. Once the oil was really flowing, the Osage Nation became the wealthiest community in the world per capita. People received payments worth hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in inflation-adjusted terms. News spread quickly, though, about all these suddenly wealthy people and attracted a raft of swindlers and conmen to Oklahoma.

The headright system had a significant impact on the distribution of land and the development of the colonies and the United States throughout history, as its goal was often the encouragement of migration to new lands. People were encouraged to settle in unexplored or newly colonized regions. Owning a headright conferred the right to own and cultivate the specified amount of land. This system helped distribute large portions of land to those willing to move and settle new colonies or territories.

It is important to note that, while the headright system had the potential to distribute land more equitably, abuse and manipulation often occurred. In fact, unfortunately, in the face of the increased demand for natural resources that characterized the 19th and 20th centuries westward expansion in the United States, the lands traditionally occupied by Native Americans became an object of economic interest.

The reasons why the United States needed oil were various. Shortly before the onset of World War I, the United States initiated a transition in its naval fleet, shifting from coal to oil as the primary fuel source. Oil presented several advantages, such as enhancing the speed and range of ships and simplifying the refueling process. Additionally, it addressed the navy's challenge of

[63] The Bureau of Indian Affairs is a United States federal agency within the Department of the Interior responsible for implementing policies and laws for Native Americans and Alaska Natives, as well as for managing lots of acres for indigenous tribes.

projecting power in the Pacific Ocean, as coal from the western US was unsuitable for marine steam engines, necessitating the shipment of supplies from Wales or Appalachia. In contrast, the availability of oil in California facilitated the US Navy's ability to extend its influence across the Pacific.

Moreover, military innovations, including submarines, airplanes, tanks, and motorized transport, relied on oil. Oil also became integral in munitions manufacturing when scientists developed a process to extract toluene, an explosive substance, from oil. During the war, the US supplied over 80 percent of Allied oil needs, assisting in transporting oil to Europe after its entry into the conflict.

The advent of the oil-powered internal combustion engine in the late nineteenth century and its widespread adoption in the transportation sector during the twentieth century brought about a transformation in the US economy. Oil powered automobiles, trucks, ships, and airplanes, revolutionizing transportation and reshaping the physical, economic, and social landscapes. Additionally, oil-powered machinery and petrochemical-based agricultural products led to unprecedented increases in agricultural production.

By 1920, the United States accounted for nearly two-thirds of global oil production, and the availability of inexpensive oil prompted significant societal and economic changes, fostering a growing demand for oil. The number of registered cars in the US surged from 3.4 million in 1916 to 23.1 million by the late 1920s. In the 1930s, the US transitioned to a 'motorized' urban environment, reducing reliance on public transit and solidifying high levels of oil usage in American society. Oil constituted almost one-fifth of US energy consumption by 1925, a figure that rose to one-third by World War II.[64]

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[64] Painter, David S. "Oil and the American century", in *The Journal of American History*, volume 99, 2012.

Economic interest in the extraction of oil and other natural resources placed significant pressure on the removal of Native Americans from their lands. As a consequence of that, Native American lands were expropriated and the Osage's land rights violated, with the encouragement of U.S. government policies. In fact, even if in the 1920s, many treaties between the US government and native tribes guaranteed specific territories and rights to indigenous populations, when tribal lands were found to be rich in resources such as oil these treaties were often violated or ignored. These violations have left an indelible mark on the history of indigenous peoples in the United States.

Lawlessness was widespread: as the legal institutions were extremely fragile and permeated by high corruption, much of America remained a country whose laws were not fully entrenched. In 1925, Congress passed a law prohibiting non-Osage people from inheriting headrights owned by people with Osage or other Native American ancestry. But complaints about the federal government's dealings with the Osage Nation's assets continued.

Treaty violations significantly contributed to the loss of Native American lands, as oil extraction often required reducing the size of tribal reservations. Government authorities pushed for the subdivision of tribal lands into smaller parcels, making it easier for oil companies to access them. The loss of tribal lands and the expansion of the oil industry had a devastating impact on Native American communities. In addition to the loss of their natural resources and territorial autonomy, communities were often exposed to difficult living conditions and problems related to environmental pollution.

The administration of the Osage oil resources was managed by a system known as 'Guardianship' or 'Guardians of the Osage Nation's Estate', which led to exploitation and abuse. Believing that the Osage were unable to handle all that wealth due to racist prejudice, the United

States Congress passed a law providing for the assignment of a guardian to every person who had at least 50 percent Osage blood. Unfortunately, while some administrators genuinely sought to help their wards navigate the challenges of sudden, massive wealth, many exploited them. According to the 1924 Indian Rights Association report,[65] guardianships had corruption baked in. Elements aligned with settler colonialism and anti-monopolistic views insisted that individuals who were non-white lacked an understanding of the value of petroleum and could not be trusted with the control of this vital resource. This sentiment, compounded by concerns about looming oil monopolies, led to the construction of a white-supremacist oil-field politics. The enforcers were usually lawyers or white businessmen who had moved to the area, who began to take advantage of the law to enrich themselves at the expense of the Osage. In 1924 the Interior Department charged more than twenty enforcers with illegally taking millions of dollars from the Osage, but all avoided prison through plea deals. Moreover, as already explained, some guardians began to kill or order the murder of the Osage who had been entrusted to them, in order to inherit their lands. Between 1921 and 1923 alone there were 13 suspicious deaths or overt murders of Osage men and women who had guardians, but by 1925 the deaths had risen to several dozen. People were often poisoned or shot dead, but in one case a bomb was also detonated in a house. The ones who killed the women were often their white husbands. Today, the Osage Nation murders are largely thought to have been the case that helped birth the FBI and modern law enforcement, which relies on extensive investigations, undercover operations, and the use of informants to crack complex criminal cases.

[65] The Indian Rights Association was a social group dedicated to the well-being and acculturation of Native Americans in the US. It was founded in 1882 and it lasted till 1986.

To conclude, the narrative of David Grann first, and of Martin Scorsese later, opens a glimpse into the complexity of the relationships between indigenous populations and colonizers, offering ideas for an in-depth reflection on the historical injustices that still permeate contemporary society. In particular, the analysis of the role of oil revealed a crucial dimension within the plot, as the wealth derived from this resource acted as a catalyst for key events in the story. Oil did not only mark the economic rise of the Osage, but also unleashed greed, corruption and tragedy, as evidenced by the murders of members of the tribe. Furthermore, analysis of colonial dynamics has highlighted the persistent prejudice and discrimination faced by the Osage, despite their oil wealth.

The historical context was also explored, highlighting the fragility of legal institutions and the widespread corruption that characterized America in 1920s. These elements contributed to the impunity of those who committed crimes against the Osage, fueling the intricate plot and revealing the systemic inequalities that persisted.

In the historical context outlined, the colonial dynamics between Americans and Osage natives emerge as a founding element. The struggle for control of resources, particularly oil, has accentuated tensions between the two communities. The Osage, once custodians of their lands, have been brutally hit by a series of murders orchestrated to deprive them of the benefits of natural resources. Though the murders began over a century ago, they still echo in the lives and finances of the Osage people. Today, the Osage Nation notes on its website, approximately 26 percent of Osage headrights remain in non-Osage hands and can be passed on to non-Osage entities at will.

Today, the Osage have managed to preserve their tribal sovereignty and continue to manage their natural resources; they work to preserve their culture, language and traditions through educational programs and cultural initiatives.

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