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Slide 1: Title - “Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Hard Eight* in the Context of the Independent Film Movement and the Director’s Filmography

Slide 2: Abstract - Paul Thomas Anderson's debut feature film, *Hard Eight*, was released in 1996 to moderately positive reviews but a disappointing box office return. Though Anderson is considered one of the most prolific and influential American filmmakers working today, his first film is an oft-overlooked work of both the independent film movement of the 1990s and his own filmography. Based on research conducted in Fall 2019, this presentation examines Anderson's film in both contexts. Utilizing various details surrounding the film's production and reception, I first seek to illustrate the factors that played into Anderson's desire to make the film and the minute impact it made upon its initial release. Then, under the lens of an auteur study, this presentation seeks to draw thematic and stylistic parallels between *Hard Eight* and two of Anderson's most acclaimed and popular films, *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007), demonstrating the much greater impact his debut feature would come to have on the rest of his illustrious and ongoing career.

Slide 3: *Hard Eight* made its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January 1996. It was based on Anderson’s own short film, *Cigarettes & Coffee*, which was well-received during its inclusion at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival Short Films Program and made Anderson a noticeable face at the Festival. While Anderson has cited filmmakers as diverse as Robert Altman, Jonathan Demme, Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese, and Orson Welles as influences on his career, this particular short, and the feature film it eventually inspired, were based less on any filmmaker’s inherent desire to emulate and more on Anderson’s personal desire to work with actor Philip Baker Hall, who would go on to play the protagonist in both films. Anderson had been a fan of Hall as an actor after viewing his supporting performance in the buddy cop film *Midnight Run* (1988) and his lead performance in Altman’s *Secret Honor* (1984), in which he plays President Richard Nixon. Because of Anderson’s attachment to Hall, much of *Hard Eight* is a showcase for Hall’s talents as an actor, as it mainly details the experiences and relationships of the protagonist, Sydney, a gambler who finds his shady past coming back to haunt after he helps his young protege out of a sticky situation.

Slide 4: After its respectable showing at Sundance, *Hard Eight* would eventually be shown at the Cannes Film Festival as an official selection in the festival’s Un Certain Regard section. Translating to “from another angle”, and running parallel to the prestigious and highly sought after Palme d’Or, the Un Certain Regard presents an annual selection of films with unusual styles and unconventional storytelling methods. The films in this section are typically those of young,

promising filmmakers seeking international recognition, a criteria befitting of Anderson at the time.

Though the Sundance and Cannes Film Festivals are designed to be feeding grounds for distribution companies, especially those that are independently-minded, to stake claims on promising films, *Hard Eight* would go over a year before finding its way into theaters on 28 February 1997 under the distribution of the Samuel Goldwyn Company. Established in 1978 by Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., the company originally specialized in the acquisition and distribution of art-house films from around the world to U.S. audiences. Before long, the company soon added original productions to their roster as well. With these films came more reasonably-sized budgets, which, in turn, gave producers the chance to hire bigger names for their films; as a result, a good amount of their budgets can be attributed to hiring big stars. Such a conclusion can be drawn from previous Goldwyn films like *American Buffalo* (Michael Corrente, 1996), which starred Dustin Hoffman; *Palookaville* (Alan Taylor, 1996), which starred Frances McDormand; and *The Rosary Murders* (Fred Walton, 1987), which starred Donald Sutherland. With other established names of its own rounding out the cast (Samuel L. Jackson, John C. Reilly, and Gwyneth Paltrow), *Hard Eight* was one of the last films produced and distributed by the company before they were renamed Goldwyn Films and began to operate as MGM's specialty films unit.

Slide 5: For all of its success on the film festival circuit, however, the film was doomed to perform below expectations, as it entered theaters in steep competition with a string of almost guaranteed successes. It is likely that the year long gap between the film's festival run and its wide release caused any potential hype to subside, but the last weekend in February 1997 saw the American box office dominated by the Special Edition releases of *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, as well as the crime drama *Donnie Brasco*, which was based on a best-selling autobiography and was fronted by two extremely marketable leads in Al Pacino and Johnny Depp, who at this point, was beginning to shed his heartthrob persona in favor of more dramatic work. At the time, an unknown name like "Paul Thomas Anderson" more than likely meant very little to the average viewer who was far more familiar with the thrilling adventures of the *Star Wars* franchise and the charisma of Al Pacino and Johnny Depp; thus the box office fate of *Hard Eight* was sealed as it only lasted in theaters for two weeks and, on a \$3 million budget, made back a little over \$222,000, accounting approximately 7.4% of its budget.

Slide 6: In spite of its minimal success, what *Hard Eight* lacked in significance as merely a single film in the independent film movement, it makes up for as a significant film in the subsequent career of Paul Thomas Anderson, at least if one is to consider Anderson as an "auteur" filmmaker. In defining the concept of an auteur study in film, Timothy Corrigan explains that this kind of critical writing "identifies and examines a movie by associating it with a director or occasionally with another dominant figure [...] It implies that the unifying vision

behind what you see on the screen is the director's and that there are certain common themes and stylistic traits that link films by the same filmmaker" (85). Anderson is solely responsible for writing each of the eight feature films he has directed and frequently works with the same group of actors, essentially obtaining nearly complete control over the filmmaking process from start to finish. More than this, Anderson's films demonstrate many thematic and formal constants that are now considered trademarks of his career. Thematic traits like the relationship between father and son, and the concept of toxic masculinity, as well as intriguing stylistic exercises, such as capturing scenes of greatest importance in real time and the building of suspense through music, are demonstrated to great effect in two of Anderson's most popular and well-regarded films, *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007). However, the similar manner in which these filmmaking choices are executed can be traced back *Hard Eight*

Slide 7: As his first feature-length film, *Hard Eight* fittingly establishes a handful of personality and relationship types that Paul Thomas Anderson would eventually explore in his later films. Anderson's films frequently divulge the kind of familial connections that can develop between complete strangers, and one of the most prominent of these relationship types is that of father and son, or, in the case of the films in question, surrogate father and son. The protagonist of *Hard Eight*, Sydney Brown (played by Philip Baker Hall), is a well-meaning gambler who meets a young, down-on-his-luck man named John (John C. Reilly) outside of a roadside diner. After learning that John lost most of his money at a casino, Sydney decides to lend a helping hand and take him back to Las Vegas to show him how to earn large sums of money in an efficient amount of time; John takes this information to heart and feels eternally grateful for the wisdom imparted to him by a total stranger. As their relationship develops, it would appear to the viewer that the two characters view each other like father and son, as Sydney imbues John with the necessary tactics to succeed in life and inspires him to have more confidence in himself. To an extent, the nature of their relationship is quite similar to that between adult film actor Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) and director Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds) in *Boogie Nights*, as well as the relationship between oil prospector Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) and his adopted son, H.W. (Dillon Freasier) in *There Will Be Blood*. With Dirk entering the 1970s adult film industry, and along with it, a life of fame and success that he was previously unaware of, he uses the guidance and techniques offered to him by his compassionate director, Jack, to ascend to a level of relevance that he has never known. Likewise, aspiring oilman Daniel uses his adopted son, H.W., to present himself as a family man to potential investors and achieve the same kind of relevance, though he does show a considerable amount of devotion to his son as he garners more and more power. The narrative structures of each of the films suggest that the stories have three distinct acts. With this in mind, the first act establishes the father-son relationships that are to be developed over the course of the film, and comes to an end when the strength of this relationship is at its zenith.

Slide 8: Just as much as they explore a sense of understanding and intimacy among strangers, Anderson's films also explore alienation and the kind of events that lead to the destruction of such healthy relationships. Anderson's protagonists typically begin as alienated, lacking an overall sense of purpose in the world; once they find that purpose, the second and third acts of his films see both the intended benefits and unintended consequences of their achievements begin to eat away at the protagonists as a newfound sense of toxic masculinity threatens to destroy the relationships they had cultivated during the first act. Each of the films concludes in a different manner in regards to the father-son relationships that they depict. The latter events of *Hard Eight* see Sydney helping John and his prostitute wife, Clementine (Gwyneth Paltrow), leave town after a violent altercation with one of Clementine's stingy clients, and also sees the details of Sydney's past come to light as John's friend, Jimmy (Samuel L. Jackson), blackmails Sydney. Knowing that his relationship with John will be forever altered should his protege ever discover the revealing information of his past, Sydney goes to extreme measures to ensure that this does not happen, but the film ends on an ambiguous note, with Sydney unsure if he will ever cross paths with John again. In the case of *Boogie Nights*, the film's transition from the 1970s to the 1980s takes a drastic toll on Dirk Diggler as fame goes to his head and he gets involved with the excess that defined the decade. His indulgences earn the ire of his once trusted director, and the viewer is treated to several sequences of Dirk struggling with dangerous vices that have ruined his career and come close to ruining his relationship with Jack, though the two eventually reconcile after Dirk comes to grips with the unpleasant person that he has become. Unlike these two, however, the latter events of *There Will Be Blood* result in the complete destruction of the relationship between Daniel and H.W., as H.W.'s deafness, which he gained as a result of an oil derrick accident, turns Daniel away from his son while a substantial amount of financial power (and greed) alienate him from society. By the end of the film, a now adult H.W., who until this point was unaware that he was adopted, brings an end to their relationship on his own terms as he leaves Daniel to start his own oil business. Thus, while the relationships in these films all end on different notes, Paul Thomas Anderson often places more emphasis on the series of events that lead to the resolution or permanent destruction of these relationships.

Slide 9: Anderson goes to great lengths to familiarize the audience with the characters and orient them with the setting and the circumstances surrounding key events within the narrative. In a technical sense, one of the most pivotal ways in which he accomplishes such a task is through cinematographer Robert Elswit's repeated use of the long-take, which allows Anderson to capture the scenes of greatest interest in real time. Elswit, who collaborated with Anderson on all three films among others in Anderson's filmography, first demonstrates this strategy of familiarity and orientation in *Hard Eight*. As the second act begins, after Sydney has recently met Jimmy for the first time, a long take lasting over a minute is used as Sydney roams about the casino floor before stopping at a craps table to bet on a hard eight. A short time after this particular scene, a more crucial instance of the long take and real-time pacing is used during the

sequence in which Sydney is called upon to help John and Clementine leave town after violently abusing her client. The sequence, occurring at a motel, interestingly begins with a long take as Sydney arrives at the scene, walks up a flight of stairs, and enters the room in which John and Clementine are deliberating what to do; it ends in the exact same manner as the three of them leave the room with Clementine's unconscious, bound client still in it, walk back down the stairs and leave in separate vehicles. In between the long takes, though various editing techniques are used, the entire scene in which Sydney helps John and Clementine assess what should be done lasts seventeen minutes, a reasonable amount of time to reflect a real-life situation.

Slide 10: *Hard Eight* sees the long take and real-time used to establish the protagonist in an environment that feels natural to them and again later in a situation that begins the weakening of his strongest relationships and the takeover of his toxic masculinity, a trend that is seen again in both *Boogie Nights* and *There Will Be Blood*. The opening scene of *Boogie Nights* is a three-minute long take that travels through the various parts of a nightclub in the San Fernando Valley and briefly acquaints the audience with every single major character that will come to be part of the unfolding narrative. Through this long take, Robert C. Sickels writes, "the era is lovingly recreated with a fine attention to detail that results in our wishing we were there, indulging ourselves in whatever ways we want. However, even in the relatively easy going first half there are cracks in the facade of good times, foreshadowings of the dark days to come" (52). Such dark events are foreshadowed in another pivotal long take utilized later on in the film during a New Years Eve party that marks the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s, and with that, an internal transition from carefree comraderie to toxic indulgence for the major characters. Viewed from the viewpoint of "Little" Bill Thompson (William H. Macy), Jack's assistant director, the long take travels through Jack's house as Bill searches for his wife until he finds her in bed with another man, which he has on various occasions up to this point. The long take follows Bill as he leaves the house for his car, takes a gun out of his car, goes back into the house, shoots his wife and the man she is with, and then kills himself as the New Years clock strikes midnight before the screen cuts hard to an intertitle reading "80s", effectively serving as a dark transition to the morbid events that are to come.

Slide 11: While not as heavily reliant on long takes, *There Will Be Blood* features many scenes of importance that are paced in real time while still utilizing the long take to a certain extent. In particular, the scene in which Daniel's oil derrick explodes, resulting in H.W. 's deafness, unfolds using real time pacing to tap into the anxiety of the characters in this particular situation. As soon as Daniel picks up an oil-covered H.W. from the scene, a long take is admittedly used to demonstrate the actual amount of time it takes Daniel to carry H.W. to a nearby mess hall, where he discovers his son's injury. The real time effect is sustained after Daniel leaves the mess hall to assess the situation, and the scene as a whole lasts around seven minutes, ending with Daniel focused more on the vast amount of oil he has come upon than the state of his son, beginning the

steady unfolding of their relationship. Real time is used to even greater effect in the film's final scene, in which the rivalry between Daniel and young preacher Eli Sunday (Paul Dano), which has been building up throughout the film as Daniel repeatedly refuses to consent to Eli's demands of him for the sake of his own financial gain, finally comes to a head. Taking place in the basement bowling alley of Daniel's mansion after H.W. has cut ties with his father and after Daniel has been living as a recluse for several years, the sequence lasts for fifteen minutes and sees Daniel finally getting the better of his opponent as he convinces Eli to unwittingly denounce his faith as payment for drilling of vital areas of land. Once Eli learns that these areas have already been drilled, Daniel immediately takes advantage of Eli's weakened mental state, openly taunts him, and then proceeds to violently chase him around the alley before killing him with a bowling pin. With this one last piece of business taken care of, the real time pacing of the sequence effectively captures Daniel in the exact state he was in as the film opened: alone, with nothing but his masculinity.

Slide 12: The manner in which Anderson signals both the takeover and dangerous effects of toxic masculinity within the protagonists of his films can be viewed as a consistent exercise in suspense, for the audience is aware that such a change in character is likely to occur, but unaware of when or how it will occur. One of the ways in which he signals such a change, and builds up the suspense of a particular scene as a result, is through carefully-made choices in both diegetic and non-diegetic music. Again, this exercise first makes itself known in *Hard Eight*, in a scene towards the end of the film in which Sydney resolves to keep the secrets of his past hidden by killing Jimmy, who has discovered that he once worked as a mobster and killed John's father. As Sydney breaks into Jimmy's house when he is not there and waits for his target to arrive, the tension of the sequence is also conveyed directly through the non-diegetic score, which reflects the stylings of psychedelic rock music, likely a popular musical form around the time at which Sydney worked as a mobster. The music gradually builds up in volume as the night wears on, as the audience is subjected to events involving a jubilant Jimmy at a casino, and as Jimmy arrives back at his house with a prostitute; it reaches a particularly loud volume as Jimmy and the woman are about to enter the house, but suddenly stops without warning once they do. The only sounds that the viewer hears following this are the sounds of gunshots and screams as Sydney mercilessly kills Jimmy and the woman looks on helplessly. The film does not feature any more music for the rest of its duration as Sydney leaves the house and returns to the diner in which he and John met with his toxic, masculine personality in full form.

Slide 13: Whereas the non-diegetic score of *Hard Eight* is utilized as a tool to strengthen a full takeover of toxic masculinity, the score of *There Will Be Blood*, composed by Radiohead guitarist Johnny Greenwood, is at its most effective when signaling the initial arrival of the toxicity that will be the death of Daniel's relationship with H.W., but the suspenseful effect it creates is nevertheless noticeable. In the previously mentioned scene in which Daniel's oil

derrick erupts, the score complements the real time pacing of the sequence, beginning as the initial tracking shot of Daniel carrying H.W. away from danger also begins. What the viewer first hears of the score in this sequence is a steady drum beat that is meant to mirror a beating heart, effectively underscoring the anxiety that Daniel must be feeling as he tries to protect his son. However, once Daniel leaves H.W. behind and returns to the derrick, a cacophonous collection of string and percussion instruments is added to this initial drum beat. Caitríona Walsh elaborates on the meaning of these added instruments: “The scene’s collective musical components are a skillful means of drawing forth subterranean realities and darker themes of power, greed, and corruption, of relationships doomed to go awry [...] These unrelenting, somatic bodily rhythms affirm that there is no going back, what has been done cannot be undone. They underscore Daniel’s triumphant dictum: ‘There’s a whole ocean of oil under our feet! No one can get at it except for me.’” (43). That such an unyielding swarm of music begins to take full effect as Daniel turns his attention to the profits that he is about to gain through this accident signals an internal metamorphosis from a man with determination into someone much more sinister who is solely determined to dominate any and all who stand in his way, even if doing so means forsaking his relationship with the one person who may actually care about him.

Slide 14: Though *Boogie Nights* does offer an original score of its own, the most suspenseful moments of the film, unlike the previous two, are created in a decidedly different manner through a contradictory use of diegetic music, and occur after Dirk Diggler’s toxic masculinity has already alienated him from those who care about him. *Boogie Nights* arguably achieves the greatest amount of success among the three films through this strategy, particularly during the film’s climax, which sees many of the main characters coming to realize how difficult their lives are without one another. For Dirk, this self-realization occurs during a drug deal gone spectacularly wrong. The scene in question is set in the mansion of drug dealer Rahad Jackson (Alfred Molina), whom Dirk, along with fellow actor Reed Rothchild (John C. Reilly) and their friend Todd Parker (Thomas Jane), tries to scam for money by selling him a half-kilo of baking soda as cocaine. The three of them know that Rahad and his accomplices are capable of killing them should they discover they are being scammed, and the environment is made all the more dangerous with one of these accomplices freely firing a pistol around the mansion living room. However, what dramatically underscores the tension in this particular scene is Rahad’s stereo, which plays popular, upbeat rock and roll hits from the 1980s, including “Sister Christian” by Night Ranger and “Jessie’s Girl” by Rick Springfield, all of which Rahad sings and dances to while the deal is going down. The positive, carefree vibe that these songs would induce in any other setting run counter to the hazardous setting of the drug deal, and they are so catchy that the viewer may be unable to help themselves from acknowledging their presence by singing along as the initially welcoming and friendly Rahad does. The potential for distraction makes the scene all the more uncompromising, for the outcome of the botched deal is easy to predict, but the same cannot be said for when or exactly how the outcome will arrive, which makes it all the more

unnerving and shocking once a gunfight breaks out, leaving Rahad's accomplices and Todd dead, and Dirk and Reed with nothing but their own pity for what their lives have devolved into.

Slide The narrative and stylistic practices favored by Paul Thomas Anderson are utilized to different extents and in different manners throughout his filmography, but no matter the manner in which they are used, they nevertheless are able to achieve the appropriate effect on audiences, allowing them to identify traits that unmistakably make Anderson's films his. The consistency in the execution of such narrative and stylistic choices are not only indicative of the unwavering control that Anderson possesses as an auteur filmmaker, but also of his intended purpose in making these films and what he expects the audience to take away from their respective stories. Whether this intention is for the audience to feel sympathy for the characters as they find themselves weakened by their indulgences, or a deep sense of contempt towards characters that willingly sacrifice their morality, humanity, and relationships in exchange for their personal goals and desires, what is important is the role that Anderson's choices as a director play in elaborating upon these intentions and producing the proper response from the viewer. However, what is perhaps most important when considering Anderson's place in the film industry is the foundation provided by his debut feature, *Hard Eight*, without which he would not have been able to experiment with and further explore such narrative and stylistic techniques to the varying degrees that he has in the time since its release.