

**The Specter of Disillusionment:
A Psychoanalytic and Ideological
Analysis of Paul Thomas Anderson's *One
Battle After Another***

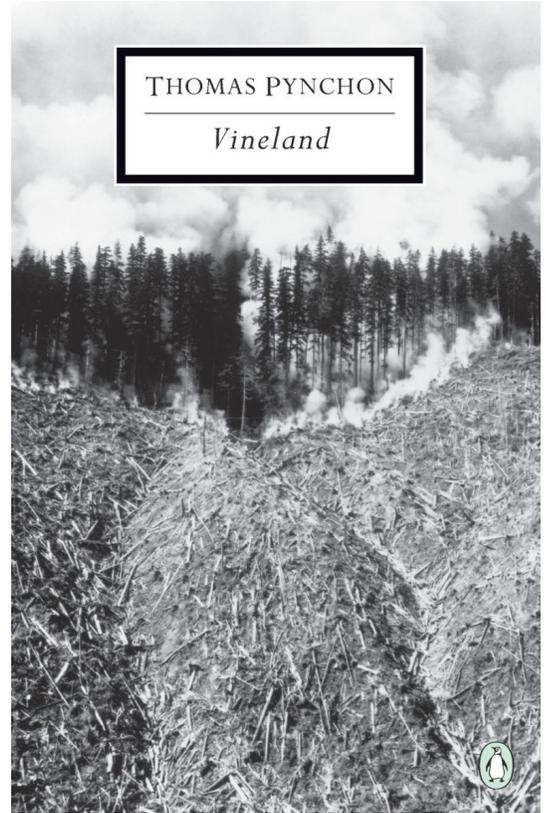


**Introduction: The Cinematic Apparatus and the
Architecture of Crisis**

In the pantheon of contemporary cinema, few texts operate as simultaneously symptomatic and diagnostic as Paul Thomas Anderson's *One Battle After Another* (2025). Crowned Best Picture at the 98th Academy Awards, the film is a sweeping, multi-tonal hybrid that oscillates violently between the registers of a paranoid political thriller, a screwball comedy, and a melancholic family melodrama.¹ To comprehend the profound cultural resonance of this work requires an analytical methodology that transcends traditional

aesthetic critique. The film functions as an ideological state apparatus—a sophisticated cultural technology wherein the contradictions, traumas, and structural violences of late-capitalist American society are exposed, subsequently aestheticized, and ultimately neutralized for safe consumption.¹

Adapted loosely from Thomas Pynchon's 1990 novel *Vineland*, the film abandons the buffer of historical allegory that characterized Anderson's earlier works, thrusting its narrative directly into the immediate, palpable emergencies of the 2020s.¹ It is a text fundamentally concerned with the afterlife of revolutionary identity, the crushing weight of creeping authoritarianism, and the ways in which political exhaustion maps onto the intimate sphere of the family.¹ However, the film's most potent ideological labor lies not in its overt political declarations, but in its structural omissions and psychoanalytic displacements. By translating the sprawling, diffuse horror of systemic racial capitalism into the hyper-concentrated, individualized pathology of specific antagonists, the film executes a masterful "censorship of the political dimension".¹



This exhaustive report dissects *One Battle After Another* through a rigorous critical theory framework. It reconstructs the narrative architecture in its entirety, interrogates the auteur's ideological context, and conducts a deep psychoanalytic character analysis focusing on the intersections of ethnicity, power, and *jouissance* (surplus-enjoyment). Furthermore, the analysis explores the allegorization of state violence via the concept of the "American bulldog," the pervasive ideology of citizen apathy, and the film's performance against the metric of the Bechdel test, ultimately revealing how Hollywood manages to commodify the very anti-fascist dread it purports to critique.¹

Plot Reconstruction: The Architecture of a Fractured Rebellion

The narrative of *One Battle After Another* is bifurcated by a sixteen-year temporal ellipsis, contrasting the explosive idealism of a militant past with the paranoid, survivalist exhaustion of the present.¹ The plot operates less as a traditional hero's journey and more as a rhizomatic mapping of institutional failure and generational inheritance.

The Prologue: Revolutionary Jouissance and Betrayal

The film commences with an adrenaline-fueled prologue set approximately sixteen years prior to the main narrative. "Ghetto" Pat Calhoun (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Perfidia Beverly Hills (Teyana Taylor) operate as lovers and vanguard members of a far-left revolutionary cell known as the "French 75".¹ The narrative inciting incident is a brazen, tactically complex raid orchestrated by the French 75 on the Otay Mesa Detention Center to liberate detained immigrants.¹ During this explosive operation, Perfidia corners the facility's commanding officer, Steven J. Lockjaw (Sean Penn). Rather than merely neutralizing him, she subjects Lockjaw to profound sexual humiliation, forcing an arousal at gunpoint.¹ This encounter establishes a perverse, enduring psychosexual dynamic between the two, inextricably linking the state's coercive power with libidinal transgression.¹

Following this operation, Pat and Perfidia conceive a daughter, Charlene.² Pat advocates for domestic settlement, but Perfidia, addicted to the aestheticized thrill of militant action and struggling with severe postpartum depression, refuses to abandon the armed struggle.¹ The cell's operations continue until a catastrophic bank robbery results in the murder of a security guard, leading to Perfidia's capture.² Exploiting the leverage of her incarceration and his own obsessive fixation, Lockjaw coerces Perfidia. To avoid a life sentence, she capitulates to the state apparatus, providing intelligence that allows Lockjaw's forces to systematically hunt down and execute key members of the French 75.¹ Perfidia enters the witness protection program, only to subsequently flee the arrangement and disappear into Mexico, abandoning both Pat and their infant daughter.¹ A surviving comrade, Howard Somerville, procures stolen identities for the fractured family, allowing Pat and Charlene to vanish from the grid entirely.²

The Present: Stoned Paranoia and the Return of the Repressed

Sixteen years later, the narrative transitions to the sanctuary city of Baktan Cross, California.¹ Pat now lives under the alias "Bob Ferguson," existing in a state of subjective destitution and "stoned paranoia".¹ He has become a functionally inept, hyper-protective single father to his teenage daughter, now named Willa (Chase Infiniti).¹ Bob has raised Willa to believe her mother was a fallen revolutionary hero, shielding her from the trauma of Perfidia's betrayal and his own political impotence.²

Concurrently, Steven J. Lockjaw has ascended to the rank of Colonel, becoming a prominent, ruthless architect of the United States' anti-immigration security apparatus.² Lockjaw's ultimate ambition, however, transcends military rank; he seeks initiation into the "Christmas

Adventurers Club," an ultra-wealthy, secretive cabal of white supremacist elites who dictate policy from the shadows.¹ The Club's ideology demands absolute racial purity, strictly prohibiting its members from engaging in or having a history of interracial relationships.¹ When the Christmas Adventurers uncover evidence of Lockjaw's past liaison with the Black revolutionary Perfidia, Lockjaw realizes that Willa's existence constitutes fatal "racial contamination" to his social ascent.¹ To secure his initiation, Lockjaw initiates a ruthless, covert manhunt to eliminate Willa and erase his history.¹

The Pursuit: The Degradation of the Network

Lockjaw utilizes a massive immigration and drug enforcement raid on Baktan Cross as a smokescreen to deploy troops to capture Bob and Willa.² The surviving nodes of the French 75 are activated. Willa is extracted from her high school dance by Deandra (Regina Hall), a former revolutionary ally, who transports her to a covert convent of revolutionary nuns.² Here, the illusion of her mother's heroism is shattered, and Willa learns the devastating truth of Perfidia's betrayal from the very women who once served alongside her.²

Meanwhile, Bob's home is raided. Escaping through a subterranean tunnel, he is rescued by Sensei Sergio St. Carlos (Benicio del Toro), a community leader and Willa's karate instructor who operates a sophisticated underground railroad for undocumented immigrants—a "Latina Harriet Tubman situation".¹ The pursuit narrative highlights Bob's profound ineptitude; his revolutionary discipline has eroded into stoner panic, resulting in forgotten passwords and botched rendezvous attempts on the crisis hotline.²

Lockjaw, utilizing digital surveillance and tracing Willa's phone—which she kept against her father's paranoid warnings—locates the convent, arresting Deandra.² In a harrowing sequence, Lockjaw takes Willa hostage and administers a rapid DNA test, which confirms that he is her biological father.¹ Desperate to hide this truth from the Christmas Adventurers, Lockjaw hands Willa over to Avanti Q, a bounty hunter, with orders to execute her.²

Concurrently, the Christmas Adventurers dispatch their own clean-up operative, a Lacoste-wearing assassin named Tim Smith, to eliminate Lockjaw, deeming him an unmanageable liability.¹ The film's third act is highly complex, featuring multiple factions with distinct motivations converging on a single geographic location. A visual mapping of the narrative's intersecting pursuit vectors during the film's climax illustrates how the forces of the State, the Elite Cabal, and the Revolutionary Remnants converge upon the character of Willa. This clarifies the chaotic, multi-directional threat environment—Lockjaw hunting Willa, the Club hunting Lockjaw, Bob pursuing Willa—that defines the movie's structural argument.

The Climax and Epilogue: Generational Transfer and

Obsolescence

Avanti Q, suffering a crisis of conscience regarding the execution of a minor, refuses to kill Willa and instead delivers her to a far-right militia.² However, in a final act of rebellion, Avanti frees Willa, resulting in his death during a shootout with the militia.² Willa secures Avanti's vehicle and a pistol, fleeing toward the Anza-Borrego Desert.² The narrative vectors collide on the undulating "Texas Dip" highway.¹ Tim Smith successfully tracks Lockjaw, shooting him in the face and causing a catastrophic vehicle crash, leaving the Colonel for dead.² Tim Smith then redirects his pursuit toward Willa. In a subversion of patriarchal action tropes, Bob fails to arrive in time to save his daughter.¹ Willa exploits the blind summits of the desert road to lure Tim Smith into a crash.² When Smith fails to recite the proper French 75 revolutionary countersign, Willa executes him.²

Bob finally arrives at the wreckage. Traumatized and hyper-vigilant, Willa holds her father at gunpoint, demanding the countersign. Bob correctly answers, "Green Acres, Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville Junction," before Willa emotionally breaks down and embraces him.²

The resolution is profoundly cynical yet generationally hopeful. Lockjaw survives the crash, severely disfigured, and presents himself to the Christmas Adventurers Club, claiming his involvement with Perfidia was a case of "reverse rape".² The Club feigns acceptance, only to usher him into a chamber where he is fatally executed via poison gas and cremated.¹ Back in Baktan Cross, Bob presents Willa with a letter from Perfidia, expressing regret and a desire for future reunion.¹ The film closes with Willa—having fully inherited the violent mantle of political struggle—driving off to join protests in Oakland, while Bob remains on his couch, manipulating a smartphone, accepting that his era of historical agency has definitively closed.¹

Auteur and Ideological Context: Anderson's Cartography of American Decay

Paul Thomas Anderson has long operated as one of Hollywood's preeminent cartographers of American psychic decay. His previous opuses—*There Will Be Blood*, *The Master*, and *Phantom Thread*—interrogated the corrosive intersections of capitalism, charismatic cults of personality, and obsessive dependency.¹ Crucially, however, these earlier texts utilized historical displacement, examining contemporary American rot through the buffering lenses of the early 20th century or the post-WWII era.¹ Even his first foray into adapting Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, was a hazy, sun-soaked journey through the disorienting aftereffects of the 1960s.¹⁵

With *One Battle After Another*, Anderson initiates a stark ideological rupture within his own filmography. Confronted by the palpability of the 2026 domestic crisis—creeping fascization, militarized border enforcement, and deep civic polarization—the auteur abandons historical allegory.¹ The film forces the quintessential Andersonian protagonist (the broken, obsessive man) to navigate an explicitly contemporary landscape defined by ICE raids, facial recognition, and sanctuary cities.¹ By adapting Pynchon's *Vineland*—originally a critique of the Reagan-era War on Drugs—and transposing it into the 2020s, Anderson asserts a cyclical permanence to American authoritarianism. As Anderson himself noted, the political climate dictates that it is always the "same shit, different year".¹⁶

The formal execution of this vision is breathtaking. Anderson's decision to shoot in 35mm VistaVision—a high-resolution, horizontal film format traditionally reserved for sweeping epics of the 1950s—grants the contemporary setting a terrifying, hyper-real clarity and a monumental weight.¹ Jonny Greenwood's original score acts as an abrasive counterpoint, a cacophony of manic percolation and operatic synth surges that actively resists emotional manipulation while amplifying the underlying anxiety of the surveillance state.¹

Yet, the film's ideological bent is heavily determined by what Slavoj Žižek terms the "standard Hollywood censorship of the political dimension".¹ Anderson's screenplay stages an aestheticized resistance to fascism but simultaneously engages in profound depoliticization. The narrative privatizes structural violence, compressing the vast, administrative machinery of American racial capitalism into the cartoonish villainy of the Christmas Adventurers Club and the psychosexual hysteria of a single antagonist, Lockjaw.¹

The film's extreme "tonal volatility"—rapidly oscillating between the visceral horror of immigrant detention cages and the screwball farce of Bob forgetting a password—is the formal mechanism through which this ideology operates.¹ This aesthetic mastery converts historical trauma into *jouissance* (surplus-enjoyment) for the spectator.¹ Anderson's ideological bent, therefore, is not genuinely revolutionary; it is a manifestation of "centrist endurance".¹ The film permits the liberal establishment to consume the collapse of the American project as a thrilling spectacle, offering the emotional catharsis of resistance without demanding the terrifying, material refoundation of the state.¹ Critics such as Owen Gleiberman explicitly identified this dynamic, noting that the film's ultimate message leans toward survivalism rather than radical upheaval, rendering it "Not a 'Left-Wing' Movie".¹

Character Analysis: Ethnicity, Power, and the Economics of *Jouissance*

The characters in *One Battle After Another* function not merely as psychological entities, but as highly specific ideological placeholders within the film's psychoanalytic topography.¹ Their ethnic positioning, their proximity to state power, and their relationship to psychoanalytic *jouissance* reveal the film's underlying sociopolitical map.

Bob Ferguson / "Ghetto" Pat: The Subjective Destitution of the Left

Leonardo DiCaprio's portrayal of Bob Ferguson is an exploration of "subjective destitution" and the exhaustion of the white, male revolutionary subject.¹ Ethnically positioned within the normative center of whiteness, Bob's relationship to the state is defined entirely by evasion and obsolescence.¹ He has retreated from the macro-structural fight into the localized, defensive posture of a suburban sanctuary, prioritizing biological survival over political victory.¹

Psychoanalytically, Bob's *jouissance* is derived not from militant action, but from "stoned paranoia" and the masochistic comfort of his own ineffectiveness.¹ Anderson aggressively strips Bob of the standard Hollywood fantasy of masculine, tactical competence.¹ Bob forgets vital rendezvous codes, arrives too late for the climactic rescue, and fundamentally fails every operational objective the plot assigns him.¹ While his younger self ("Ghetto Pat") sought the thrill of detonating fireworks as distractions during raids, his older self seeks only the numbness of the couch.¹³ He severs the link between ideological purity and paternal authority.¹ His heroism is decentered; it consists entirely of his persistent, flailing presence and unconditional love.¹ Bob embodies the tragedy of a generation that survived its convictions but lost its war, his revolutionary drive having calcified into a "jaundiced post-60s hangover".¹

Colonel Steven J. Lockjaw: The Obscene Underside of the Law

Sean Penn's Colonel Lockjaw is the film's undisputed locus of fascist horror and Bob's "obscene mirror".¹ Positioned as an elite enforcer of white supremacy, Lockjaw's relationship to the state apparatus is one of absolute domination.¹ He executes the administrative violence of border control, the militarization of local police, and the elimination of political dissidents with bureaucratic efficiency.²



However, Lockjaw's character is a textbook manifestation of the Žižekian "obscene underside of Law".¹ The Law (the state apparatus) relies on an unacknowledged, transgressive enjoyment to sustain itself. Lockjaw's dedication to a white supremacist power structure coexists toxically with his lust for the Black revolutionary, Perfidia.¹ His racism is not merely a cognitive belief; it is a structure of surplus-enjoyment that intertwines desire, humiliation, and the urge to annihilate.¹ Lockjaw's intense need to capture Willa is driven by a hysterical panic over the "racial contamination" that threatens his validation from the "big Other" (the Christmas Adventurers Club).¹ Lockjaw demonstrates that authoritarianism is fundamentally a pathology of weakness, sustained by the very transgressions it publicly seeks to eradicate.¹

Character	Ideological Function	Ethnicity & State Positioning	Relationship to Jouissance (Enjoyment)	Trajectory of Power
Bob Ferguson	The Exhausted Left / Subjective Destitution	White. Evasion of the state; forced into hiding.	Derived from paranoia, chemical numbness, and passive paternal survival.	Moves from vanguard leadership to absolute obsolescence .

Col. Lockjaw	The Obscene Law / Authoritarian Reaction	White. High-ranking enforcer of the state apparatus.	Derived from racial purification, sexual humiliation, and violent enforcement.	Ascends through state violence, ultimately annihilated by the elite he served.
Perfidia Beverly Hills	Aestheticized Rebellion / Ideological Betrayal	Black. Active rebellion followed by capitulation to the state.	Derived from libidinal radicalism, explosions, and sexual dominance over authority.	Projects uncompromising power, but surrenders to self-preservation.
Willa Ferguson	The Historical Inheritor / The Forced Choice	Biracial. Targeted for erasure by the state apparatus.	Derived from the realization of agency and the necessary execution of violence.	Moves from protected innocence to existential and tactical self-possession.



Perfidia Beverly Hills: Aestheticized Radicalism and Betrayal

Teyana Taylor's Perfidia is the film's "absent center" and its most politically volatile figure.¹ As a Black female revolutionary, she physically and ideologically opposes the white supremacist state.²⁴ Yet, the film presents a deeply cynical critique of her militancy.

Perfidia embodies an "aestheticized, libidinal radicalism".¹ Her revolution is less about material, structural restructuring and more about the *jouissance* of transgression.¹ She prioritizes sexual dominance over tactical discipline—exemplified by her weaponizing of her sexuality to humiliate Lockjaw, forcing an erection at gunpoint.¹ She openly admits to utilizing her sexuality as a tool for war, intertwining the thrill of bombings with carnal satisfaction.⁴



The film posits that when revolution is treated as an identity or an aesthetic rather than a material necessity, it inevitably fractures under the weight of self-preservation.¹ When cornered by the consequences of a fatal bank robbery, Perfidia capitulates, betraying her comrades to the state.¹ She represents the tragedy of ideological fantasy; she cannot sustain the material reality of the revolution she ignited, ultimately fleeing the consequences of both her political and maternal responsibilities.¹

Willa Ferguson: The Inheritor and the Forced Choice

Chase Infiniti's Willa is the narrative's site of generational transfer.¹ As a biracial child born from the toxic union of a Black militant and a white fascist enforcer, Willa physically embodies the historical contradictions her parents could not resolve.¹ She cannot opt out of the political dimension; her very existence is criminalized by white supremacy, making her a target for erasure.¹

Willa does not inherit a coherent political movement; she inherits the "ruins of causes," forced to navigate a landscape of danger utilizing the broken codes of the past.¹ Her psychoanalytic journey is one of "existential self-possession".¹ By the climax, she rejects the role of the rescued object, liberating herself by executing her pursuer.¹ Her *jouissance* shifts from the desire for normal, American teenage innocence to the grim acceptance of the necessity of violence.¹² She accepts the "forced choice" of engaging in the perpetual struggle, driving away to a protest and leaving her father's generation behind.¹

State Violence and Fascism: The "American Bulldog" and the Obscene Law

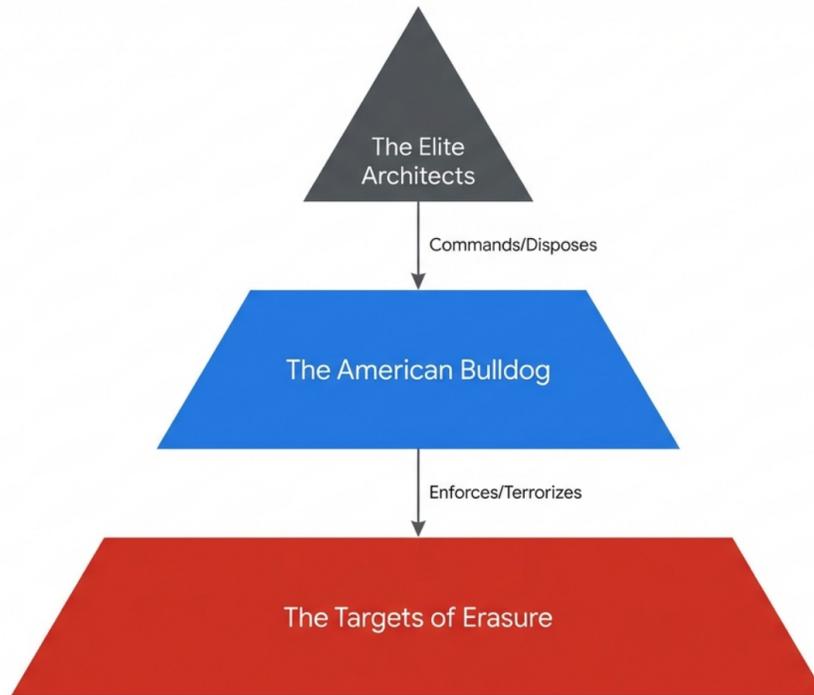
One Battle After Another operates as a chilling allegory for creeping, systemic fascism in America, yet its method of allegory reveals deep ideological compromises. The film explicitly stages the material reality of contemporary state violence through its harrowing depictions of border detention camps, ICE raids, and militarized police forces deployed against domestic populations.¹

Central to this allegory is the concept of the "American bulldog"—a metaphor for the authoritarian enforcer who executes the visceral, bloody labor required to maintain the hegemony of the elite.¹ Lockjaw operates precisely as this bulldog. He believes himself to be a master of the system, a decorated Colonel wielding absolute authority over life and death, even receiving the "Nathan Bedford Medal of Honor"—a biting historical reference to the Confederate general and early Ku Klux Klan leader.² However, the film reveals that he is merely a violent instrument protecting the interests of the true architects of power: the Christmas Adventurers Club.²⁰

The Christmas Adventurers function as a localized, satirical displacement of structural white supremacy.¹ Composed of wealthy, old-money elites, politicians, and business owners, they dictate policy from soundproofed

mansions.¹¹ The film utilizes this cult to demonstrate how the elite sanitize their power. They demand "purity," requiring the bulldog (Lockjaw) to erase any evidence of his interracial past to gain entry.⁷

The 'American Bulldog' Paradigm: Hierarchy of State Violence



The film delegates the execution of systemic violence to the 'bulldog' (Lockjaw). While the enforcer wields terror against the marginalized, he remains entirely disposable to the elite cabal the moment his actions threaten their sanitized hegemony.

Crucially, when Lockjaw's actions become too messy—when the bulldog becomes a public liability—the elites do not hesitate to euthanize him. They dispatch Tim Smith, a clean-cut assassin resembling a country club attendee, to assassinate Lockjaw, and when that fails, they ceremonially execute him via poison gas.¹



While this dynamic offers a thrilling narrative engine, it ultimately serves as an ideological evasion. By condensing the evils of the American system into a cartoonish cult (where members greet each other with "Hail, Saint Nick"), the film isolates villainy from the broader socioeconomic systems that necessitate it.¹ Structural causation is privatized.¹ The audience is encouraged to view fascism not as the banal, everyday operational logic of American real estate, tech, and finance, but as a deviant infiltration by a bizarre cabal.¹ As some critics noted, the film completely ignores class, money, wealth inequality, and corporate monopolies, focusing entirely on culture war ideologies.²⁶ This displacement allows liberal culture to disavow its own complicity in the normative structures of racial capitalism, enjoying the spectacle of anti-fascist violence without confronting the root economic causes of the decay.¹

The Ideology of Defeat: Citizen Apathy and Managed Disillusionment

One Battle After Another operates within an era defined by extreme polarization, political exhaustion, and what critical theory identifies as "citizen apathy".⁵ The film is celebrated for confronting these issues, yet its overarching political message is fundamentally one of "managed disillusionment"—a system-compatible negativity that encourages the subject to accept the impossibility of macro-structural change.¹



The film's protagonist, Bob, is the cinematic realization of this apathy. He has abandoned the utopian dreams of his youth, choosing instead to "keep his head down" and survive the late-capitalist landscape through avoidance and substance abuse.¹ The film does not condemn Bob for this retreat; rather, it elevates his exhausted, localized paternalism as the highest achievable moral good.¹ The narrative suggests that the vanguard revolution of the French 75 was ultimately a hubristic, performative failure that yielded only death and betrayal.¹ In contrast, the only truly effective resistance shown in the film is Sensei Sergio's underground network, which operates entirely outside the system to help specific individuals rather than attempting to overthrow the government.⁸



Consequently, the text highlights an apolitical bent. It asks how a subject can persist when the "big Other" of the revolutionary cause has dissolved, leaving only the immediate, biological imperative to protect one's family.¹ The political future is secured not by mass organization or unionization, but by individual moral stamina.¹ Willa driving off alone to a protest is a beautifully aestheticized image of resistance, but it remains an individualized, atomized action.¹ The film's conclusion provides closure based on a psychological lie—Bob giving Willa Perfidia's letter—indicating that survival under modern fascism requires the construction of an ideological fantasy to shield oneself from the traumatic Real of total systemic failure.¹

This pervasive apoliticism extends beyond the diegesis of the film into the real-world conduct of its creators. When accepting awards at the BAFTAs, Anderson explicitly declined to discuss contemporary politics, focusing entirely on the artistic merits of the film.⁵ This silence reflects a long-standing tradition of aesthetic autonomy in Hollywood, where creators attempt to isolate artistic value from political responsibility, contrasting sharply with the approach of actors like Wagner Moura, who insist that art cannot exist outside of the social systems shaped by power.⁵ By claiming neutrality, public figures like Anderson inadvertently participate in shaping norms of engagement that allow structural inequalities to persist without challenge, fostering the very citizen apathy the film depicts.⁵



The Oscars as a Ritual of Institutional Self-Absolution

The coronation of *One Battle After Another* as Best Picture by the Academy

Awards is not a coincidence, nor is it a testament to the industry's radicalism. It is a psychoanalytic ritual of institutional legitimation.¹ Hollywood functions as a depoliticization machine, and the Oscars are the mechanism through which the "big Other" of liberal culture reassures itself that it can still conceptually master the violence of history.¹



By celebrating a film that acknowledges the terror of the present—white supremacy, ICE raids, state violence—but processes that terror through the safe, prestigious framework of a father-daughter melodrama, the Academy practices "prestige-safe critique".¹ The industry allows itself to know that the world is ugly, but rewards narratives that translate systemic crisis into private trauma.¹ This dynamic was made grotesquely material by the fact that on the very weekend Warner Bros. Discovery studios won a record number of Oscars for this film, the corporation was being acquired by Paramount Skydance in a monopolistic \$111 billion mega-merger.¹ The system celebrates its own critique to prove its ethical vitality, thereby immunizing itself against the demand for actual, material restructuring.¹ The Oscar validated the safe enjoyment of social breakdown at an aesthetic distance.

The Bechdel Test: Gendered Resistance and Structural Limitations

Within the context of this ideological and psychoanalytic analysis, evaluating the film against the metric of the Bechdel test provides a revealing look at the limits of representation in Hollywood prestige cinema.

Created by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in 1985, the test serves as a foundational, albeit low-bar, metric for female representation, requiring that a film feature at least two named female characters who engage in a conversation about something other than a man.⁴

One Battle After Another strictly **passes** the Bechdel test.⁴ The film features a robust network of named female characters, including the revolutionary leader Perfidia, her daughter Willa, and the former French 75 operative Deandra.⁴ Throughout the narrative, these women are actively engaged in the logistics of survival and resistance. For example, during the high school extraction sequence, Deandra rescues Willa, and they must navigate the paranoid machinery of safe houses and passwords.¹ Furthermore, Willa interacts with a convent of revolutionary nuns who provide shelter and reveal truths about her mother's past.² The interactions within this "surviving social network of resistance" focus on political liberation, tactical evasion, and generational inheritance, entirely independent of the male figures pursuing them.¹

However, applying critical theory reveals the inherent limitations of the Bechdel test as a standalone metric for progressive representation. While the film quantitatively passes the test, the structural architecture of the narrative remains overwhelmingly male-centric.⁴ As cultural critics have noted, the film undoes much of its progressive work by allocating the vast majority of its screen time and psychological depth to the two white male leads, Bob and Lockjaw.⁴

Perfidia, despite being the "key driving force" of the revolution and the moral center of the film, is frequently sidelined, her psychological motivations treated as an "afterthought" by the script.⁴ She is subjected to a hyper-sexualized gaze, leading to intense online discourse regarding whether her portrayal subverts or merely reinforces the racist "Jezebel" trope, which historically hypersexualizes Black women.⁴ Furthermore, the film's attempt at broader LGBTQ+ inclusion falters; Willa's non-binary friend Boba is played by a cisgender white male actor, and their sole narrative function is to betray Willa to the authorities.⁴

The film's passing of the Bechdel test, therefore, functions similarly to its critique of fascism: it provides the aesthetic surface of radical, gendered resistance while maintaining a deeply traditional, patriarchal structural hierarchy beneath. It is another form of managed representation, ensuring the film feels progressive without fundamentally decentering the exhausted, white male protagonist.

Conclusion

Paul Thomas Anderson's *One Battle After Another* is a cinematic triumph of tonal engineering and aesthetic mastery. Yet, when subjected to a Žižekian analysis, it reveals itself as a profound symptom of the contemporary American liberal-center's ideological paralysis.¹ The film effectively names the creeping horrors of the 2020s—racial capitalism, the "American bulldog" of state violence, and the collapse of political utopianism.¹

However, by routing these massive structural antagonisms through the localized villainy of a secret club and the intimate pathos of a father-daughter pursuit, the film engages in a sophisticated depoliticization.¹ It offers its audience the *jouissance* of anti-fascist resistance while ultimately advocating for a posture of managed disillusionment.¹ Bob's retreat to the couch and Willa's individualized protest signify an acceptance of permanent crisis, replacing the demand for systemic revolution with the mere hope for biological endurance.¹

The film's coronation at the Academy Awards—while simultaneously passing superficial metrics of progressivism like the Bechdel test—demonstrates the Hollywood machine's ultimate power: the ability to metabolize the dread of its own societal collapse into a beautifully packaged, ethically reassuring prestige object.¹ The film does not ignite a revolution; it provides the comfortable, aesthetically flawless funeral dirge for one.