

One Battle After Another: Paul Thomas Anderson's drama of rebellion and repression

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One Battle After Another, directed by filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson, is a political drama set in contemporary American conditions. In the most chilling and moving scenes, Anderson and his colleagues represent with great accuracy the drive to police-state rule currently under way. The brutality and fascistic character of the anti-immigrant hysteria and ICE raids in particular receives convincing expression in the film. That the actual shooting took place in 2024 only indicates the continuity between the reactionary policies of the Obama, first Trump and Biden administrations and the present disaster.

Whatever the weaknesses and confused or poorly developed elements in *One Battle After Another*, Anderson deserves full credit, first of all, for making an appalled and outspoken film. The work was loosely inspired by Thomas Pynchon's 1990 novel, *Vineland*.

The general framework is this: 16 years earlier, "Ghetto" Pat Calhoun (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Perfidia Beverly Hills (Teyana Taylor) were members of a left-wing terrorist group, French 75, which freed detained immigrants and carried out other actions, including bombings. Perfidia came to the attention of martinet-army officer Steven Lockjaw (Sean Penn), who developed a fascination for the militant black woman. Arrested in an attempted bank robbery, Perfidia became an informant handled by Lockjaw. After she gave birth to a daughter, Perfidia escaped witness protection, abandoned Pat, now Bob Ferguson, and headed off for foreign places unknown.

In the present, Bob, still hiding from the authorities and by now a hapless "drug and alcohol lover," in his own words, and daughter Willa (Chase Infiniti) live in deliberate seclusion in a redwood forest. In his legitimate paranoia, Bob forbids Willa from even owning a cellphone ("the only high school girl in America" not to have one, someone remarks), although she breaks that commandment, with harmful results.

Out of the blue, the fanatical Lockjaw and his military unit come after Bob, Willa and the rest of this leftover revolutionary underground. The colonel, it turns out, has personal as well as political reasons. To become a member of an exclusive white supremacist outfit, the Christmas Adventurers Club, he must ascertain whether Willa is his biological daughter, and see to her elimination if she is. (The Club members are disturbingly informed of "an unconfirmed report that Colonel Steven J. Lockjaw is the father of a mixed-race child.")

Bob takes it on the lam, with the help of martial arts instructor Sergio St. Carlos (Benicio del Toro), who runs an underground railroad for undocumented immigrants. Willa meanwhile is picked up from a high school dance by one of Perfidia and Bob's old comrades, Deandra (Regina Hall), and driven to a convent in the hills housing an unusual collection of sisters. There she learns of her mother's treachery, which Bob has previously concealed ("Was she a rat?" "Yeah, she was." "My dad told me she was a hero"). Lockjaw is then able to seize Willa and forcibly conduct a DNA test.

A chase through the hills eventually takes place, with Willa pursued by

a homicidal member of the Christmas Adventurers, the blandly named Tim Smith (John Hoogenakker).

Again, the sequences of heavily armed military or paramilitary thugs breaking into houses and shops, abducting individuals, arresting, interrogating and abusing them with impunity—all of this rings true. This is not science fiction or "dystopia." It is occurring in the US at present, in Chicago, Los Angeles and dozens of other locations, organized by the fascistic Trump administration and unopposed by the Democratic Party.

The performance of James Raterman as Danvers, one of the interrogators, strikes one as particularly authentic, and so it should. Raterman had decades of experience as a Homeland Security Investigations Special Agent, a Special Agent for the Secret Service and an Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation Special Agent. The aim of the questioning in each case is to intimidate and terrorize those unfortunate enough to fall into the clutches of this gang of "state-backed goons" (as one reviewer accurately describes them).

Anti-immigrant chauvinism and racism prevail unquestioningly in the military and among the members of the ruling elite we encounter in *One Battle After Another*. Lockjaw informs his troops that the fictional northern California town where Bob and Willa are holed up "is a sanctuary city full of thousands of wets and stinkies."

At a secret gathering at an exclusive hotel, one of the vigilante Adventurers, Virgil Throckmorton (Tony Goldwyn) observes to Lockjaw, who can only concur:

Each and every day is hand-to-hand combat in the spread of uncontrolled migration, isn't it? ... Well, you want to save the planet, you start with immigration.

Throckmorton goes on:

Now, our aim, and your aim, is the same. To find dangerous lunatics, haters, and punk trash, and stop them. Now, we report to ourselves with a freedom to be creative... and cut through layers of bureaucracy. We live by the Golden Rule... in a network of like-minded men and women... dedicated to making the world safe and pure.

In opposition to the official and semi-official savagery, del Toro's serene and even seraphic Sergio St. Carlos tells Bob, "I got a little Latino Harriet Tubman situation going on at my place," and, indeed, dozens of mostly women and children are hiding in and around his home. The film movingly makes no bones about siding with the persecuted immigrants and those assisting them.

Nor, to its credit, does *One Battle After Another* have a sympathizing with the remnants of the French 75 group. It doesn't moralize about their past actions, in a film dominated by scenes of crushing government-military ferocity and repression.

The critical response to the film has generally been largely friendly, even enthusiastic, with various voices expressing pleasure that *finally* someone has said *what is*. The *Hollywood Reporter* critic, for example, comments "it is certainly a refreshing jolt to see a big picture like this analyze the squalid motivations of the people currently dispatching the National Guard to major cities and empowering ICE to spread far and wide in its cruel project." Michelle Goldberg in the *New York Times* notes that *One Battle After Another* "was made in the America that existed before Donald Trump's return. Watching it, I kept wondering if such a forthrightly antifascist film could be produced in Hollywood today."

Veteran critic Owen Gleiberman headlines his review in *Variety*, "'One Battle After Another,' With Its Thriller Vision of Authoritarianism, Is the Rare Movie That Could Rule the Cultural Conversation." He adds that the film "is a wildly entertaining, awesomely unpredictable screwball political thriller that on some level forces you to confront...*the fate of our fucking country*. It gets you to ask: What's happening to America? Where is this all going?"

A perusal of the reviews offers scores of comments along those lines: Anderson's film is "clear-eyed and immediate and urgent," it is "a story of two generations of revolutionaries running a desperate defence against intrusive, deadly, utterly corrupt government forces," "in the face of the authoritarianism, cruelty, and terror defining our bleak Trump 2.0 era, this is the kind of hopeful film America desperately needs" and the film is "a blistering political thriller that accurately captures the paranoia and dread of our modern hellscape."

The palpable sense of relief is telling. Trump and his fascist gang are openly attempting a military-police coup and no "prominent Democrats," as we wrote recently, "have called for the mobilization of opposition to Trump's efforts ... In fact, they enable Trump's dictatorship." The principal media outlets are equally silent or openly accommodating. As was the case in the Jimmy Kimmel affair, it has taken something outside the official political sphere, in this case a fiction film, to provide an outlet for *a portion* of the outrage against the fascists in the White House, Homeland Security and the Pentagon to find expression.

One Battle After Another is being promoted as a masterpiece in various quarters, including the *Times*. It is not that, despite its numerous virtues. DiCaprio and del Toro are certainly endearing. (In the case of the former, the new film is a reminder that he can act and that he must have certain decent social impulses, in the face of a good deal of negative press). When one or both of them are present, the film takes on greater life and humanity.

On the other hand, the early scenes of "revolutionary" activity are among the film's weakest, forced and unconvincing. Whatever Anderson and company had in mind, Perfidia-Teyana Taylor is unappealing from the outset, even before her traitorous behavior. Sean Penn's Lockjaw is a misguided, preposterous caricature, with little connection to real life.

One Battle After Another is limited in its social and historical outlook, in so far as it presents one. Why do the authorities all of a sudden launch a time-consuming and expensive offensive against this small group of radicals? Simply because of Col. Lockjaw's private agenda? That seems thin. Why the anti-immigrant mania and cruelty? Because a small group of white supremacists dominate America? Again, inadequate to say the least. The film doesn't embrace identity politics and race-as-the-answer-to-all-questions, but it rubs up against such notions, in part because, evasively, the filmmakers don't have the energy or understanding to locate the roots of the current circumstances firmly in the intense crisis of American capitalism.

After all, what about the activities of the French 75? Were they heroic, foolhardy, counter-productive? The lack of moralizing, all to the good, doesn't make up for the absence of concrete, convincing analysis. The film is too long, meanders, grows tedious at points, because Anderson is not sure where he or it is going.

Various impulses are at work. Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007) was fatally damaged because, in the approving words of one critic, it turned its back on Upton Sinclair's "socialist polemic" in *Oil!* (the book on which that film was loosely based). "The book's central examination—capitalist corruption and the inspiring undercurrent of labor fighting for its rights—is not Andersonian. Sinclair's oilman is indicative of America's class conflict, while the selfish Plainview [in *There Will Be Blood*] is an anti-social perversion against familial bonds." (AV Club) As a result, in fact, the drama went sharply off the rails, accompanied by the ever more frenetic performing of Daniel Day-Lewis, "in inverse proportion," we suggested at the time, "to the emotional and social authenticity of the drama."

One Battle After Another is a better film, less murky (although it has that element), angrier. The realities of American capitalism have made a definite impression over the past decade. It suffers still from eclecticism, Anderson's too "loose-limbed" and improvisational approach, and the director's being pulled in different intellectual-ideological directions, some of them healthy and insightful, some of them not so.

Lazily, the film bends toward its conclusion in the direction, a recurring Anderson concern, of a family drama, the reunion of father and daughter, the passing of the "protest" torch from one generation to another...

In any event, *One Battle After Another*, which has achieved initial success at the box office (earning \$68 million worldwide so far, "exceeding industry expectations") has sufficient sting to have outraged right-wing critics. One such, offering the "Right Take on Entertainment," laments the fact that the film supposedly

glorifies violence in the name of social justice, specifically defying immigration laws. The radical group in question blows up buildings, shoots security guards and justifies violence from start to finish. No one on screen regrets their actions or has a change of heart.

On the Fox News website, David Marcus denounces *One Battle After Another* as "an ill-timed apologia for left-wing violence. Watching this anti-America flick is like cheering for 'lovable' Nazis!" The reprehensible Armond White in the far-right *National Review* deplores "the Benicio Del Toro subplot that exalts the harboring of illegal aliens" and claims that

Anderson intentionally provokes the blood-lust of his woke confreres ... by celebrating the insipid, heretical, and violent activities of the liberal past and present. Anderson's title ... daydreams a culture of never-ending political obstruction and pandemonium. It is the year's most irresponsible movie.

This type of frenzied, vicious commentary should be worn as a badge of honor.

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Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, which finds resonance and "echoes" in the film, really requires separate treatment. (Anderson previously based his 2014 film, *Inherent Vice*, more directly on the Pynchon novel of the same title.) The book has some of the same general parameters as the film, the

fate of a group of ex-radicals, not terrorists but a left-wing film collective, stuck unhappily in 1984 under Ronald Reagan.

Pynchon—best known for *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*—is one of the most “brilliant” writers in America, a characterization, complete with inverted commas, intended as a double-edged sword. As we suggested in 2015,

In his own eccentric, verbose, sometimes amusing and sometimes irritatingly self-conscious manner, Pynchon has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to come to terms with postwar American life. In any case, none of his works is without haunting, lyrical and disturbing moments.

We also asserted that conspiracy “(by government and corporation) has always figured largely in Pynchon’s work, appropriately enough for a novelist living and writing in the second half of the 20th century in America.” This is clearly the case in *Vineland* as well. Intriguingly, the anti-radical offensive in the novel has “some connection with Reagan’s so-called readiness exercise, code-named REX 84,” the secret plan, as the WSWS has characterized it, “to suspend the US Constitution, declare martial law, establish a ‘parallel government’ of US military and intelligence operatives, and round up potential opponents of a US war with Nicaragua.”

The novel attempts, in its absurdist, outsized, extravagant manner, to subject the ‘60s radicals to criticism, including, according to their nemesis, a federal prosecutor, their “deep … need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family … [T]hese kid rebels, being halfway there already, would be easy to turn and cheap to develop.”

Pynchon does not spell out what the radicals of the time should have thought or done, but in a suggestive passage, *Vineland* refers to one of the student leftists, Rex, who

had become obsessed with the fate of the Bolshevik Leninist Group of Vietnam, a section of the Fourth International that up till 1953 had trained in France and sent to Vietnam some 500 Trotskyist cadres, none of whom, being to the left of Ho Chi Minh, were ever heard from again. What remained of the group was a handful of exiles in Paris, with whom Rex, in paranoid secretiveness, had begun to correspond, having come to believe that the BLGVN had stood for the only authentic Vietnamese revolution so far but had been sold out by all parties, including the Fourth International.

To repeat, Pynchon’s *Vineland* deserves its own discussion.



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