

## Film Review: Stunning Ambition Drives P.T. Anderson's 'The Master'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 20, 2012 - 10:53am

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CHICAGO – Paul Thomas Anderson's "The Master" screened publicly last week in Chicago for only the second time in the world. It was shown in glorious 70mm, the format in which the film was shot, but in which most people will never get the chance to see it. While much of the conversation surrounding the screening seemed to hinge around the technical specifications, the increasing dearth of actual film projectors in the city, or the aspects of the plot related to Scientology, those aren't the elements of the film that have been rolling around my head for the last four days. I haven't been thinking (much) about the future of digital film or how angry Scientologists are going to be at the film. I've been contemplating Anderson's incredibly ambitious themes of instinct vs. religion, animal vs. wrangler, and free will vs. destiny, while also simply marveling at the film's technical accomplishments. I've been also been wondering if its two amazing stars – Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman – have ever given better performances. And, while I've been sometimes critically stuck on a certain lack of narrative cohesion in "The Master", the recurring theme in my many thoughts and conversations about one of the most remarkable film-going events of my life has been this – Paul Thomas Anderson may be the most ambitious filmmaker working today.



Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Let's get this out of the way since it seems to be such a concern to some: "The Master" is as much about Scientology as "There Will Be Blood" is about oil. Clearly, it is an important element, but it is the background on which Anderson paints his story, not the entire story. I'm concerned that lesser journalists will pin "The Master" as "The Scientology Movie" when that's a remarkably reductive way to view the film. In fact, the core of the story – in which a young man finds himself in a particularly unique community where he finds both purpose and frustration - shares a lot in common with "Boogie Nights," and no one would reduce that film to a simple commentary on the entire porn industry. (Even the final moment of "The Master" could be a sibling of the last scene in "Boogie Nights.")



[Read Brian Tallerico's full review of "The Master" in our reviews section.](#) [16]

Similar to how "Blood" opens with a series of dialogue-free scenes to set tone and character, "The Master" starts with a young seaman named Freddie (Phoenix) and, through his actions alone, his worldview is made clear. He stares into the distance, chops a coconut with a machete, makes alcohol out of anything he can find, performs an uncomfortable act of sexuality on a woman made out of sand on the beach, and masturbates into the ocean. He is a creature of pure instinct. He drinks what he wants. He screws who he wants. He runs off to join World War II because that's what he wanted to do in that particular moment (most of the film takes place in 1950 after Freddie's return from action). After he leaves the military, he picks a fight with a client in the department store at which he works as a photographer simply because he's in the mood. Then, following a traumatic event in which one of his homemade batches of alcohol may have killed a man, Freddie runs and stows away on a boat filled with well-dressed party goers.

The next morning, Freddie learns that the man who owns the boat is a well-respected author named Lancaster Dodd (Hoffman), the man behind "The Cause." The true design of this quasi-cult isn't instantly clear, and Anderson very purposefully reveals it slowly over the course of the film (and so I wouldn't dare spoil it here), but the crux of it seems based on giving purpose to our most base instincts. On the boat, Freddy sees Dodd's followers listening to recordings about controlling our animal nature. Dodd also preaches that the issues that define our lives have defined past lives, even going as far as to put people under hypnosis to reach them, although he argues that he's actually bringing them out of the hypnosis of our real world. Dodd has his own insecurities but is ably assisted by a supportive wife (Amy Adams), son (Jesse Plemons), daughter (Ambyr Childers), and new son-in-law (Rami Malek).



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*"The Master" stars Philip Seymour Hoffman, Joaquin Phoenix, Amy Adams, Jesse Plemons, Ambyr Childers, Rami Malek, and Laura Dern. It was written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson. It opens in Chicago on September 21, 2012.*



The Master

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 25 2024 - 1:58pm):**

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