

## Beyond Being Trippy, ‘Inherent Vice’ is a Difficult Trip

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 9, 2015 - 10:18am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Interpreting the ambling and sonic prose of author Thomas Pynchon has eluded filmmakers until now. Director Paul Thomas Anderson takes a whack at “Inherent Vice,” and although much of the film has his usual eminent vision, as a whole it makes for difficult sledding.

This is a “far out” story of a post-1960s burn out, who fashions himself as a private investigator. When he gets caught in a web of intrigue which involves his old girlfriend, it is the voices outside and in his head tell him to keep going. It’s definitely fun to live in the post-1960s world (it’s set in 1970) and there are some nice jabs along the way, but this is also the ‘70s as interpreted through a director and actor who at best were little kids back then. Hell, even I was a little kid. It’s parallel universe time, and why not? That is what the movies do best, and there are parts of this film that are absolutely groovy, but as a whole may leave you scratching the old head trip.

Larry “Doc” Sportello (Joaquin Phoenix) is a private investigator, but does most of his investigations inside his own soul through copious pot use. An old galpal name Shasta (Katherine Waterston) ambles back into his life, launching a mystery as to what she has been doing – having an affair with a Los Angeles real estate mogul named Wolfmann (Eric Roberts) and suddenly disappearing with him after connecting with Doc.



Joaquin Phoenix as Doc in 'Inherent Vice'

*Photo credit: Warner Bros.*

As Doc starts to unravel the clues to her whereabouts, he gets a beating for his nosiness from “Bigfoot” Bjornsen (Josh Brolin), the local police detective who purports to be Doc’s “inside” man. The key to this whole scenario could lie with D.A. Penny (Reese Witherspoon), Jade (Hong Chau), wacky dentist Dr. Blatnoyd (Martin Short), dead or alive rocker Coy Harlingen (Owen Wilson), Doc’s attorney Smilax (Benecio Del Toro) or Doc’s “friend” Sortilége (Joanna Newsom).

Ah yes, Doc’s friend Sortilége. her earth goddess presence in the film also narrates the Thomas Pynchon prose that may or may not advance the story. She floats above the action, and appears in key moments. Her distinct voice gives the film it’s flavor, and she is one of the highlights of the story, especially when she chooses to appear. Joanna Newsom is ripe for the role.

There are a lot of characters associated with this case, and they all have their specific agendas, usually and prolifically shared with Doc, who like the director and the story, sometimes has a hard time focusing. This altitude can float back down through the audience, and maybe a little herbal energy of choice could clear up some things, although it doesn’t seem to help Doc. Joaquin Phoenix does his best “Dude” impression, but it’s a bit one note.

The supporting cast is fun, and the quintessential California girl – both mysterious and exposed – might have been found in the resplendent Katherine Waterson as Shasta. Martin Short stays right on the edge of wackiness with his cruel and obsessive dentist, and reminds us that many of his old comedy characters were cruel as well. Josh Brolin, pushing typecasting as the straight-arrow Los Angeles detective, does Joe Friday one better by his final scene, hilarious and symbolic of the the whole enchilada.





Shasta (Katherine Waterston) Uses a Landline with Doc in 'Inherent Vice'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Paul Thomas Anderson is an “auteur,” creating his distinct mark in the cinema world, but “Inherent Vice” is softly missing something, as opposed to his earlier vague efforts like “Magnolia,” “The Master” and “There Will be Blood,” which all seemed to work better. It’s the connection, and this one is much more difficult to wind your way into. Not impossible, and it has all the earmarks of a future cult midnight movie, but caveat emptor to the all the young dudes and dudines.

Our world is so different from the early 1970s, as different as someone from the horse-and-buggy era must have felt about landing on the moon back then. In a rapidly changing technological age, maybe the solutions to our situation lies in a mumbling private investigator who looks like John Lennon in 1975. If only we could understand him, but maybe we should try.

*“Inherent Vice” opens everywhere on January 9th. Featuring Joaquin Phoenix, Joanna Newsom, Katherine Waterston, Josh Brolin, Eric Roberts, Maya Rudolph, Hong Chau, Martin Short, Reese Witherspoon and Owen Wilson. Written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson. Rated “R”*



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**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 19 2024 - 7:09pm):**

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