

Stunning Ambition Drives P.T. Anderson's 'The Master'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 20, 2012 - 9:50am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

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.

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.")



The Master

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

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).



The Master

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The first key to the interaction between Freddie and Dodd comes in one of the most remarkable scenes of the last few years, a master class in acting between the two men as Freddie voluntarily undergoes Dodd's "processing." Dodd asks him a series of increasingly-probing and repetitive questions and Freddie answers them quickly, asked to not even blink as he does so. This extended scene is a mini-masterpiece, the kind of powerhouse scene that produced a gasp in this viewer when it finally ended. I felt like I was holding my breath with Freddie as I watched a man mentally manipulate another one. It's beautifully matched by another scene in a jail cell not long after between the two men that highlights the powerful emotion that Dodd is trying to suppress in the first scene. To say that Phoenix and Hoffman are at the top of their game in these scenes is a massive understatement. They're the kind of movie moments that not only win Oscars but will also show up in highlight reels of the history of film in future generations.

So, what is "The Master" about? The film has less of a narrative arc than anything P.T. Anderson has made before and that's going to polarize audiences. I'll admit that I wanted a third powerhouse scene in the final act to tie it all together, and I wanted to be thinking about character instead of trying to dissect theme as the film headed toward its final moment. There are a few too many times where I caught myself trying to dissect what "Anderson was trying to say" rather than just experiencing the film (although that could be corrected in future viewings without the hype and expectation of this event). In the end, "The Master" is more metaphor than historical drama and that's already turned off some audiences. This could very easily be the "Tree of Life" of 2012, a film that frustrates and annoys as many as it enraptures.



The Master

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

What can't be denied are the film's stunning technical accomplishments. Mihai Milaimare Jr.'s ("Youth Without Youth") cinematography is gasp-inducing, especially in 70mm, but certainly in whatever form most people will see the film in as well. Whether it's the striking blue of the boat wake that Anderson often refers to or the sequence of Dodd going to the podium to introduce his new book, Anderson and his cinematographer once again have created a visual masterpiece. Anderson's staging is often breathtaking - whether it's a simple unbroken shot of a woman showing off a fur in a department store or whom he chooses to shoot during the soon-to-be-legendary processing scene. His direction is award-worthy. Again. And Jonny Greenwood's score is fantastic. It has an off-putting, eccentric rhythm in the first half that mirrors Freddie's rattled brain which slowly transforms into something nearly traditional as Freddie stabilizes his own neuroses. I'm not sure it's quite the accomplishment of his amazing "Blood" score, but it's close.

And then we get to the performances. Phoenix may throw some people off at first as he plays Freddie in such a primal way that it's discomfiting. He's nearly hunched over with a sneer on his face that seems to be more pronounced based on the amount of moonshine in his system. He is a character who makes people around him uncomfortable, except for Lancaster, which is one of the reasons he's drawn to this power figure. It is easily the best performance of the year and I don't think there will be a better one in the next four months. And then there's Hoffman, who I expect to join Phoenix in side-by-side Oscar winner pictures early next year. When one considers that this could be the best performance of this Oscar winner's career, it's really saying something, but I believe it is just that remarkable. Hoffman finds the balance of confidence, which allows a man like Dodd to build his following, and insecurity that forces his son to say "he makes it up as he goes along."

To this viewer, that's the theme of "The Master" – we are all making it up as we go along. Whether it is a troubled man who wants to make booze out of paint thinner or a wealthy author who wants to make a community out of his own insecurity – the idea isn't that Freddie and Lancaster are that different but that they are the same animal just choosing different forms of expression. Who does the title refer to? Is it the master of religion or are we all our own masters? Viewers will find different themes and have different responses. I'm looking forward to a second viewing to fine tune my own. "The Master" is that kind of film, one that works its way into your brain and forces you to consider its themes for days, weeks, or months after you see it until you simply have to see it again.

"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.



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [17]
Content Director
HollywoodChicago.com
brian@hollywoodchicago.com [16]

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