

# Going Brilliantly Crazy

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## The Master

a film directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

Lancaster Dodd—the character played with such mesmerizing assurance by Philip Seymour Hoffman in Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master*—is not to be confused with L. Ron Hubbard. That much should be said at the outset, given that the Scientology connection has served as a convenient tag for what Anderson's new film is about. The notion was certainly intriguing, but anyone familiar with Anderson's work might have guessed that some kind of straightforward docudrama was not in the offing. Perhaps one day there will indeed be a biopic that grapples with the convoluted and much-contested details of Hubbard's scarcely credible career as spiritual entrepreneur—one might imagine a mode anywhere from satiric grotesque to Machiavellian analysis to impassioned polemic—but *The Master* is not that film, full though it is of hints in such directions.

It is something more interesting: a freestanding work of the imagination, a contemplative fiction. Anderson has taken whatever he needed from the early history of Scientology, drawing freely on its vocabulary, doctrines, and methods, and from much else besides, to create an intimate epic of irrational need, an inner history of cultish transactions reconfigured as a sorrowful and distinctively American poem. It is such a decisive accomplishment that it casts fresh light on Anderson's previous films—*Hard Eight* (1996), *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Magnolia* (1999), *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), and *There Will Be Blood* (2007)—a body of work whose coherence and astonishing ambition is clearer than ever.

"The pure products of America go crazy": William Carlos Williams's indelible line might serve as a motto not only for this film but for all of Anderson's work to date. The Cause—Dodd's quasi religion resembling Dianetics—is shown to be just such a pure product, the kind of destination that couldn't exist if enough people didn't desperately need to go there. When movies have attempted to show the inner life of cults and newfangled religions, they have generally sought to convey how strange they are. Anderson by contrast shows how strange they are not.

America has after all long since been the great breeding ground of self-help cults and apocalyptic sects and secret initiations, of home-brewed universal panaceas and fresh-minted pseudo-scientific jargon, of occult communal bondings and shunnings. In the perspective of *The Master*, these are not denials but extensions and variations of American life. When Freddie Quell, the traumatized veteran incarnated unforgettably by Joaquin Phoenix, throws in his lot with the Cause, it is not as if he is fleeing from normality into an eerie shadow world. Whether inside or outside the movement, the world as he finds it is equally chaotic and unrelenting.

This is where we live, and it is a country of deep loneliness—that same loneliness that permeates all of Anderson's films, and against which his characters

are forever forming themselves into protective families or parodies of families, a population of paternalistic strangers, adoptive sons, surrogate mothers, fake cousins. All his films, different as each has been, have found their way to the heart of a peculiarly American disconnectedness. The freedom to be left alone turns into desperate drift: a desperation measured, often, in hyperactivity and baroque elaboration, as if keeping frantically busy could stave off a lurking sense of emptiness. From the start his films seemed to need to prove themselves with every composition, every line of dialogue, every cut, every

San Fernando Valley in an era corresponding to the filmmaker's childhood—popping from the screen in an indescribable mixture of farce, melodrama, and all too real grotesquerie.

Anderson's ability to switch emotional registers kept the film from settling into predictable patterns of redemptive resolution. His great set pieces (a couple of long party scenes, the crazily protracted episode involving the failed rip-off of a coke dealer) had a lifelike sprawl and chopiness, and the performances he got out of then unfamiliar actors like John C. Reilly, Julianne Moore, Don Cheadle, and Philip

all enlisted in a graph of helpless human neediness. Unappeasable neediness, with its attendant compulsions and necessary delusions, was the pervasive condition in which *Magnolia* was steeped. No individual could be more than a link in that chain of dependencies.

It was and was clearly intended to be too much, breaking the frame of any possible plotline and finally breaking the frame of the real altogether with a downpour of frogs. But if this was expressionism, it was an expressionism that needed scarcely more for its effects than the actual materials of a culture beyond caricature—that, and the presence of actors from whom Anderson elicits performances of astonishing urgency and exactness. It is fair to say that even if you did not care at all about the story or the photography or the music in his films you could very happily watch them just to look at what the actors are doing from moment to moment: as when, in *Magnolia*, John C. Reilly, as the squarrest and politest cop ever, gradually edged around to imposing his authority on an uncooperative tenant, or Philip Baker Hall, as the terminally ill host of a TV quiz show, gave one last example of long-practiced, almost brain-dead glibness. But after *Magnolia* it was hard not to wonder where he was heading—perhaps into some stratospheric zone of New Age revelation?

That possibility always seems to lurk. Prophetic figures loom up: there was the founder of the Church of the Third Revelation in *There Will Be Blood*, and now the world-healing message of Lancaster Dodd in *The Master*. Something about the inescapable tactile presence of everything in Anderson's movies seems to elicit such responses. They are grounded in the most oppressively solid and specific of materials—whether the nightmarish hotel and warehouse interiors of the grotesque and sometimes terrifying comedy *Punch-Drunk Love* or the monumental oil-drilling apparatus of the ultimately claustrophobic epic *There Will Be Blood*—only for all that sense of solidity to melt (in Marx's phrase) into air.

The milieu on which Anderson focuses—the porn film business, the early oil industry, and now the rise of a modern religious franchise—can all be seen as attempts to reconfigure the real, to bring it into line with the claims of the most extravagant desire, and it is that attempt that magnifies to the utmost the sense that the world we think we know is not merely implausible but fundamentally unbelievable. When Lancaster Dodd, addressing a roomful of potential converts, suggests that "perhaps what we think we know of this world is false information," he could, for that one moment at least, be speaking for Anderson.

These are milieus where irrationality, supplemented where necessary by blunt force, trumps any conceivable logical objection. Logicians are in any case on the sidelines in *The Master*. The psychiatrists who try to unravel the navy veteran Freddie Quell's personality difficulties are no more effective than the skeptic who tries to



Philip Seymour Hoffman in Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master*

music cue. The aggressiveness of style was a declaration of ambition; intending to astonish, the filmmaker made himself so visible that he was one of the characters, another creature of compulsive energy looking for a way to manifest itself.

Often the energy found an outlet in violence, not action-movie fun-fair violence, nor the systematic, "rational" violence of police and criminals, but the violence of pointless, often self-destructive, explosive outbursts—Adam Sandler destroying windows and bathrooms in fits of rage in *Punch-Drunk Love* or Paul Dano making an unprovoked assault on his father in *There Will Be Blood*—the outlet of a blind frustration that can't wait another second. It made for a curious counterpart to the obvious and extraordinary care taken over visible and audible detail, a care that bespoke a profound devotion to the medium itself. The medium, more than the medium's history: Anderson does not lard his films with sly references or affectionate homages to old movies, and pitches his films a bit beyond the comfort zone where one can be reassured that, after all, it's just a movie.

The insistence on a sense of discomfort was not apparent at the outset. When I saw Anderson's *Boogie Nights* for the first time (having missed his already masterful debut, *Hard Eight*, the year before) it seemed like the work of a drive-in Balzac, an exuberantly entertaining multicharacter analysis of a whole social swath—the unmistakable late-1970s brew of disco, porn, and cocaine as experienced in the

Seymour Hoffman kept things from sliding into caricature or easy pathos.

Anderson's voracious appetite for small details, textures, gestures, verbal styles, the distinguishing marks of every period and neighborhood and clique, made him look like some kind of realist, an impressionist describer of the most fleeting varieties of social interaction, a history painter for a culture where epochs are measured in decades. It was hard to know what to expect from such a filmmaker, and *Magnolia* came as something of a surprise. It looked at first like an only slightly exaggerated cross-section of the present moment, tracking the random intersections of disparate lives and seemingly intending to pour into the mix everything he knew of that world (it was again the San Fernando Valley). He stirred up woolly subcurrents of shame, resentment, guilty desire, estrangement, embarrassment, and every variety of self-torment in an open-ended narrative drawing in drug addiction, cancer, child molestation, commercialized misogyny, and the exploitation of quiz kids, all set to a mournful strain of indie rock balladry and converging on the moment when each character, in isolation, started singing along with the same song.

At that point Anderson began to seem less history painter than expressionist allegorist, describing a permanent present that was also a permanent crisis, with emblematic characters who might have stepped out of a play by Strindberg or Georg Kaiser: the Dying Father, the Angry Son, the Guilty Wife, the Genius Child, roles sometimes embodied by more than one character, and

engage Lancaster Dodd in debate at a Park Avenue reception. (The latter gets an offscreen beating, administered by Freddie, for his troubles.) In this world, there is no one in a position to object, no one to intervene. *The Master*, like Anderson's earlier films but even more deliberately, kicks away any possibility of a stable mooring, a safe observation point that would enable one to put things in a more reassuring perspective.

This is accomplished right from the start in an astonishing series of scenes sketching Freddie Quell's history from his discharge from the navy at the end of World War II—his careening flight through circumstances beyond his control—up to the moment when, by stealing aboard a yacht in California, he enters by happenstance the sphere of Lancaster Dodd and the Cause. All the rest of the film is a meticulous and sometimes agonizing parsing of the consequences of that encounter.

Freddie is an inarticulate isolato of Melvillean proportions, an inchoate chunk of jagged impulse and unfailingly awkward affect whose most purposeful activity is concocting moonshine—expertly and at any opportunity—out of any substances at hand, toxic or otherwise. Freddie is the inadaptable individual who defies labels and therapies, the son of an alcoholic father and a psychotic mother, veteran of unspecified wartime experiences that have brought him to the attention of army psychiatrists. He's a mass of tics and sexual compulsions who improvises his life from second to second. As played by Joaquin Phoenix—"played" seems too light a word—he inhabits his body as if it were ill-fitting armor he'd been saddled with. The intelligence that beams from his eyes seems absolutely disconnected from every aspect of his being and his life. He looks as if he'd been broken apart and put back together wrong. Even his face has a life of its own, his mouth twisting at odd angles to register arcane conflicts and resistances.

Freddie barely endures the world; he knocks its props aside trying to fumble for what he needs. To see him dressed up for work as a department store photographer—his short-lived postwar profession—is to see a suit wrapped around a turbulence only momentarily containing itself. For reasons barely comprehensible he assaults a customer in the department store. We see him next harvesting crops. When a coworker collapses from drinking Freddie's home brew, he flees across an open field.

These scenes last only a few minutes, but Frank Norris or Theodore Dreiser would have found matter for hundreds of pages of exposition in them. The processing of soldiers after the war, scenes in the psycho ward with their tests and helpful pep talks, the differing realities of upscale department stores and migrant workers' camps: we are given them almost wordlessly, in what seems like no time.

The density of Anderson's workmanship allows for maximum compression. *The Master* is shot in 65 millimeter, not

the usual 35 millimeter—the first fictional film in the process since Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* in 1996, and conceivably the last—and the film stock's saturated colors and fine details give each shot the depth and solidity of an actual and often hauntingly beautiful world. The briefest shots—and Freddie's early history is related in such shots—seem fully inhabited, fully realized.

The department store sequence by itself conjures with extraordinary fidelity the texture and coloration of postwar magazine photography out of the pages of *Life* and *Vogue*, with all the elusive desires it promised to fulfill. Within that episode, a few quick samples of the garishly unreal lighting for Freddie's photographic portraits in the store provide a panorama of the 1950s American family at its most guilelessly grotesque: not so much a judgment on the American family as a measure

of fulfillment of a confrontation that gives the film its center—a center for a film about, precisely, decenteredness and drift. The multiple story lines of earlier Anderson films are absent here; instead we have the dyad in which Freddie Quell and Lancaster Dodd circle around each other in a slow dance of attraction and repulsion. The simplification of structure yields an operatic power, with all superfluous details elided and the drama grounded in these two figures.

From the moment Freddie is brought in to meet the Master, the film settles in to contemplate every nuance of their intersection. The conception of character here is not narrowly pointed but capacious. Personalities are treated as landscapes, or forms of brooding music: harboring all sorts of odd crevices and fissures, and capable of no end of abrupt unforeseen mutations. Joaquin

Phoenix as Freddie and Philip Seymour Hoffman as Lancaster Dodd are two incompatible worlds uneasily orbiting around each other. Freddie submits to Dodd's "processing," confessing to secret sins and longings, while Dodd enthusiastically laps up Freddie's home brew. Eventually Freddie will do Dodd's enforcing for him, while Dodd pretends to reprimand him for it. Neither can begin to explain what is going on.

Philip Seymour Hoffman's Dodd is an astonishing piece of work. I have seen many attempts to portray charismatic cultish leaders on film, but have rarely until now seen a convincing representation of such a leader's ability to control the atmosphere around him. Dodd has a deceptive lightness, a bounce, that is downright endearing. At the outset Hoffman seems to be channeling Charles Foster Kane at his most glibly charming, a tack that feels totally right: What better model of mercurial seductiveness could there be, for a man of Dodd's era and Dodd's ambitions, than the young Orson Welles? It's as if he had appropriated that personal manner just as he might appropriate a catchphrase or a method.

Dodd has the knack of sucking up everyone's energy and playing it back as if it were his gift to them, all the while visibly delighting in the process, surprising himself with his own capacity to enchant and control. He is mischievous, buoyed up by the powers of improvisation that enable him, for example (in a scene that may be a visualization of the dynamics that lie just under the surface), to persuade a roomful of women of all ages to strip for him, in an atmosphere of singalong merriment. Dodd's delight, of course, has as its mirror image his behind-the-scenes aspect of sexual misery and paranoid mistrust, kept in check by his wife Peggy (the Master's secret master, wonderfully realized by Amy Adams) and occasionally—increasingly, one can assume—finding expression in unscheduled explosions of rage.

The internal structures and activities of the Cause are given to us in

luminous fragments, out of the corner of the eye. There is no back story to explain where Dodd came from or how all this got started. The shorthand is quite sufficient, the actors packing whole histories of lostness and drift and subservience into the tersest exchanges, or sometimes just by the way they stand or sit doing nothing while receiving instruction. We never see the acolytes talking to each other, and we are made to sense the utter lack of mutual love, the simmering meanness among them.

Dodd's church is a desert of the heart, and it is entirely appropriate that we should end in the Arizona desert for the gathering where he will reconfirm his authority. Laura Dern, as the follower who welcomes Dodd and company into her Philadelphia home, conveys with frightening precision a well-schooled charm that one can easily imagine cracking into a thousand pieces, whether we are watching her rapturously expounding Dodd's technique of time travel under his approving gaze, or being belatedly exposed to the Master's wrathful face when she ventures an inappropriate question about a passage in his newest book.

When his public face is securely in place, Dodd is never not entertaining. Freddie Quell by contrast is never entertaining; he has no public face. The closest he comes to having one is in the role of the inexpressive cult member handing out leaflets on the street to passersby who quicken their step as they approach him. In Freddie, Dodd sees the perfect guinea pig whom he can transmute into the perfect loyalist; but from the start there is more than that. At their lowest ebb, when both have been thrown in adjoining cells of a Philadelphia jail after Dodd is arrested for fraud and Freddie assaults a policeman in his defense, Freddie demolishes the toilet and smashes his head against the bunk while Dodd watches him impassively, finally haranguing him: "I'm the only one that likes you!" At bottom there is a kind of doomed schoolyard craving for a friendship—a fusion, really—of which both are equally incapable. Dodd needs to absorb everything into himself; Freddie is the unassimilable being who resists being absorbed by anyone or anything.

Dodd is another of those figures of controlling intelligence and elusive motivation (Philip Baker Hall in *Hard Eight*, Burt Reynolds in *Boogie Nights*, Daniel Day-Lewis in *There Will Be Blood*) who haunt Anderson's films, and who enact the drama of the attempted dominion (perhaps protective, perhaps manipulative) of the bright over the not so bright. That Dodd finally elicits sympathy does not make him any less monstrous. He comes close to giving a tragic dignity to the con man who can con everyone—even himself—but not the one he most wants to con. Freddie may be the most faithful of foot soldiers, prompt to beat up anyone who challenges Dodd's authority, but he has a stubborn core of truthfulness that makes him immune to the ultimate loyalty of actually believing. He may not prefer the solitariness to which his rejection of the Cause condemns him, but it is what he has inherited: the uncomfortable freedom to go out into the world with no resources, no plan, and no master. □



Paul Thomas Anderson and Joaquin Phoenix during the filming of *The Master*

The Weinstein Company

of how distant Freddie is from any such domestic life. Such photographic shorthand has always been a mark of Anderson's films, but here it is more seamlessly integrated than ever before, making not for flash effects but an abundance of expressiveness in all the corners, more meanings than one even has time to take in.

The expressiveness is compounded almost continuously by Johnny Greenwood's score with its mix of dissonant tonalities and period music, the two sometimes overlapping as when Greenwood's harsh astringencies are superimposed over Noro Morales's recording of "Sweet Sue": it is an almost literalist way of indicating the distance between the music in Freddie's head and the welcoming sound of Lancaster Dodd's shipboard party. Music is an overwhelming presence in all of Anderson's films, from the disc-saturated soundtrack of *Boogie Nights* to the abrasive tones of Jon Brion's score for *There Will Be Blood*—never anything like background music, more like a through-composed parallel track of sustained urgency, participating in the drama rather than commenting on it, not least when (toward the end of *The Master*) the orchestra abruptly shuts itself off to allow Philip Seymour Hoffman, the Master himself, to sing an a cappella rendition of "On a Slow Boat to China" in which the film's accumulated emotional weight finds a bizarre outlet.

That everything should come down to one man singing an old standard to another man across a desktop is a