

# Histories of love and sexuality

## Punch-Drunk Love, directed by Paul Thomas Anderson; Auto Focus, directed by Paul Schrader

David Walsh  
6 November 2002

*Punch-Drunk Love*, written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson; *Auto Focus*, directed by Paul Schrader, screenplay by Michael Gerbosi, based on the book by Robert Graysmith

*Punch-Drunk Love* is the most recent effort by American writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson (*Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia*). Anderson, who is undeniably talented, has demonstrated the ability to depict certain social settings in an acute manner. However, he has not indicated up to this point any understanding of or interest in the larger processes at work in American society. The filmmaker tends to locate the source of difficulty in various forms of family dysfunction.

Anderson (born in 1970) shares that tendency with nearly every other director working in so-called “independent” film. Pinpointing family conflicts and pressures is the high point of the analysis made by this layer of artists. (This, under conditions of massive social polarization, unprecedented political crises and the threat of US-led wars around the globe!) *Magnolia* was a long, confused work, with some remarkable moments, but a disastrously inadequate conclusion.

Apparently the effort took its toll on Anderson. *Punch-Drunk Love* coproducer JoAnne Sellar comments, “After *Magnolia*, which was a huge, dark, challenging movie, I think Paul wanted to make something that was contained, uplifting and sweet.”

Leaving aside the issue of whether *Magnolia* is indeed the sort of film Sellar describes, let’s consider her remark for a moment. It is the type of comment one hears or reads all the time, whether in the commercial cinema or the so-called independent. After making a “dark” film, a director must do a “light” one, like alternating colors in a patchwork quilt. No one asks: why should he or she want to do that?

Sellar has obviously not thought out the implications of her remark, that doing a “challenging” work is merely a career choice, not the be-all and end-all of an artist’s existence. A film director, according to this thinking, selects a “challenging” work out of a box from which he or she might just as well choose something frothy and unsubstantial.

In *Magnolia* Anderson alluded to widespread unhappiness or worse, even if he explained it superficially. Has that generalized condition disappeared? Or is it rather that the filmmaker feels no particular responsibility to pursue his analyses through to the end? It is within this generally uncommitted and unserious atmosphere that one encounters so many disappointing works.

The new film is the story of a romance between a misfit, bathroom supplies wholesaler Barry Egan (Adam Sandler) and a divorced woman, Lena Leonard (Emily Watson). Egan has seven aggressive sisters, whose childhood teasing and taunting are presumably responsible for his inability to interact in a rational fashion with other human beings. A call to a telephone sex service, made before he falls for Lena, involves Barry in a variety of difficulties. In the end, the power of love gives him the strength to overcome all obstacles. It is disturbing that Anderson, who has a head

on his shoulders, insists on reinforcing such illusions.

*Punch-Drunk Love* is deliberately disconcerting, with unusual camera movements and cuts, an intrusive score. We are meant to experience the world the way in which Barry does, as threatening, surprising, alarming. (A boxer becomes “punch-drunk” when he has received too many blows to the head.) This is successful to a point, providing some striking and affecting moments—but only to a point. Ultimately the approach becomes irritating, because there is not enough motivating it. The character’s fragility and explosiveness cannot possibly be explained on the basis of too many assertive sisters. Anderson wants to have his cake and eat it too. He wants the suggestion of disorder and pain here without the responsibility of probing either.

The love relationship is largely unconvincing. There seems to be a tacit agreement among a certain segment of filmmakers that they are not obliged to demonstrate why two people should be drawn to one another (*Heaven*, *Dancer in the Dark*, *Ghost World*, everything recent by Woody Allen, etc.) The spectator is simply supposed to accept the given undying passion and everything that flows from it. Why should we? The inability to recount a *history of love* from its origins, to make sense of it, is in line with the general inability to work through any problem historically.

In the first few minutes of the film, as Barry stands outside his warehouse/office, a car overturns and careens along the street, a harmonium is mysteriously set down on the sidewalk and Lena comes into his life. Meant to be fresh and original, the opening simply strains.

The production notes explain: “To give his creative team a visual starting point before the onset of production, Anderson screened a mixed bag of films, ranging from Ernie Kovacs’ short films to *Help!* to Astaire & Rogers’ *Carefree*. ‘We watched a whole gamut and took a little bit of inspiration from each,’ says costume designer Mark Bridges. ‘It was all shaken together and then used by Paul very discriminately.’” It is not immediately apparent why this eclecticism should have been productive. Again, it is typical of a certain school of filmmaking (and art, in general).

The filmmaker apparently feels that he is breaking new ground all along the line. “According to Sellar, this ‘never been there, never done that’ philosophy shaped the entire production. ‘The challenge was to create something different by taking a more intuitive, uncharted approach than on our previous films. What Paul said to us, essentially, was, ‘I’m not sure where we’ll begin, but let’s *not* begin here, in this familiar place.’ Which meant that we all—Paul, the actors, the crew—were trying to relearn our jobs in some fundamental way.”

This is no doubt a sincere statement, but the artistic evidence is not there. There is too much mere quirkiness and too many things are done simply for effect. If an American filmmaker truly wanted to follow an “uncharted approach,” what would he do? He might set about examining reality more deeply and truthfully. Starting out to be original, without any genuinely original conceptions ... well, there is nothing new about that.

*Auto Focus* is an odd film directed by Paul Schrader (*Blue Collar*, *American Gigolo*, *Affliction*), about the life and times of Bob Crane, best known as the star of a successful television comedy series, *Hogan's Heroes* (1965-71). The film chronicles the course of Crane's personal obsession: using the recently-introduced video recording equipment, with an American-style efficiency, he filmed himself and others engaged in sexual activities. The actor was murdered in an Arizona motel room in 1978.

"During the murder inquiry," the production notes observe, "it became clear that Crane was a man of unusual habits, to say the least. The room was filled with photographic and video equipment, which documented the countless women that Crane had slept with during his travels. Crane kept elaborate notebooks of the photos and also edited the videos, juxtaposing his home pornography with footage from sitcoms. As the police began interviewing women, some were aware that they were being filmed, but some were not."

Crane (born 1928) demonstrated musical talent as a teenager, had ambitions of being a jazz drummer and had a brief stint with the Connecticut Symphony Orchestra, from which he was fired for being "unserious." He married his high school sweetheart in 1949, with whom he had three children. Crane began in radio in his native Connecticut and his success led to an offer to host a morning program for a Los Angeles station in 1956. He became known as "The King of the Los Angeles Airwaves." After various efforts in television, he landed *Hogan's Heroes*, a comedy set in a World War II prisoner of war camp, in 1965.

The film suggests that Crane (played by Greg Kinnear) was the embodiment of middle class Catholic conservatism (and, more or less, a sexual innocent) at the time celebrity status descended upon him. (The film's costume designer observes that he "wore alpaca sweaters, knit shirts, khaki pants and then slowly swung over into polyester pants, nylon print shirts and wide loafers.") Whether matters could have been quite so cut and dried, it seems fairly evident that a number of factors combined to propel Crane on a particularly obsessive course: his newfound fame, a good deal of money, dissatisfaction with his marriage and an encounter with John Carpenter (Willem Dafoe in Schrader's film), then a sales representative for Sony, who provided him with the video equipment. (Carpenter was eventually indicted for Crane's murder, but acquitted for lack of evidence.)

Schrader is mercifully light with his touch here. At his weakest, the writer-director can be extraordinarily schematic and heavy-handed (*Taxi Driver* [script], *Hardcore*, *Affliction*). The film emphasizes several aspects of Crane's evolution. It suggests that he was a narcissistic lightweight, concerned primarily with "likeability," whose meeting with Carpenter was terribly unfortunate. Schrader suggests that the film is something of "a *folie à deux*, a story about the enabling power of certain friendships that allow you to do things that you wouldn't do on your own."

Schrader told an interviewer at the Toronto film festival that Crane was the perfect example of "a middle-aged, middle-class, disconnected soul" who becomes overwhelmed by his self-absorbed impulses.

He told another interviewer, "I think his sin, if anything, was a kind of blithe selfishness. Not understanding how his actions affected others. In that celebrity Los Angeles way, just cruising along thinking of himself. When you can hurt people and they'll come back for more, when you can tell jokes that aren't funny and people will laugh, when you can be vulgar and people will think you're cute, it starts to distort your idea of who you are."

These are legitimate, if not earthshaking, insights. The film hints at the bottomless hypocrisy of American popular culture and media. Crane's career after *Hogan's Heroes*, such as it was, consisted of appearances in bland, innocuous "family entertainment": Disney films (*Superdad* and *Gus*), television specials (*Make Mine Red*, *White and Blue* and *Herbie Day at Disneyland*), appearances on the *Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew*

*Mysteries* and *Love Boat*) and his own short-lived *Bob Crane Show* (1975). He was also featured in magazines that portrayed him as the "all-American dad and husband."

Crane, according to Schrader, was clueless about his cluelessness. This would extend, one assumes, to his sexual identity. Certainly the film does more than hint at a homoerotic element in the Crane-Carpenter connection, including a scene in which they masturbate to their own home videos. (Crane's rejection of Carpenter and his decision to turn over a new leaf, mostly for the sake of his failing career, is posited as the reason for his friend's ultimately murderous rage.) It seems reasonable to suggest that Crane and Carpenter were indulging in a kind of carnal relationship through the medium of the hundreds of nameless, faceless women.

But then everything in Crane's life was somehow at second-hand. He aspired to be a second Jack Lemmon; his hit program was a comic refashioning of *Stalag 17* and *The Great Escape*. He succeeded with women primarily thanks to his television persona (and no doubt his free spending). As a performer Crane exuded a rather off-hand charm, as if he were once removed from his own character. The film suggests that he was more excited by the photographic and video images of sexuality than the act itself.

Much more could have been done with this story. Schrader insists for some reason that certain things about Crane had to remain a "mystery," thus the decision to exclude any information about his childhood and upbringing. The comment is itself mysterious. There will never be a shortage of unexplained or inexplicable details in the treatment of any phenomenon, why not illuminate a life and time to the greatest extent one can? Working class life in Waterbury, Connecticut; the attraction to jazz; Crane's social and financial ascent; the world of radio and television; American culture and life in the 1950s and 1960s—so much more could have been made of all this.

After all, to argue that the sexual obsession was simply the result of a natural appetite that went unchecked explains nothing. Since the result was a rather joyless, apparently frustrated existence, something else was clearly involved. Crane neither smoked nor drank; his sexual activities seemed to serve as a kind of anesthetic. Or, one might speculate, that he endlessly indulged himself as a kind of refuge, a way of not thinking about the troubling questions in his life. An intellectual and moral "lightweight" Crane may have been, but the intensity and persistence of his mania makes one curious as to what those troubling issues were.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**