

Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master*: The limits of making it up as you go along

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25 February 2013

Written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

Writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson's latest movie *The Master* is set in post-World War II America and centers on the relationship between a psychologically damaged US Navy veteran and the guru of a quasi-religious movement.

The film, which has been nominated for and captured numerous international awards, is Anderson's sixth feature film. His best known works are *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Magnolia* (1999) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Freddie Quell (Joaquin Phoenix), a former naval officer, suffers from acute alcoholism and what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder. He attempts to adjust to civilian life in California, trying his hand at photography, then farm work. His volatile temperament, however, fueled by homemade alcohol, causes him to injure clients and coworkers. Freddie's bootleg hooch is made from anything readily available, be it torpedo fuel or paint thinner.

Fleeing from a possible charge of attempted murder, Freddie stows away on a boat bound for New York City. The vessel is carrying the charismatic leader of "The Cause," Lancaster Dodd (Philip Seymour Hoffman), and his acolytes. Dodd and his latest wife Peggy (Amy Adams), who is pregnant, are hosting his daughter's wedding on a voyage underwritten by one of the movement's wealthy patrons.

Dodd, a self-described author, sea captain, physicist and philosopher, adopts the unstable Freddie as his "guinea pig and protégé." The master claims that through his methods humanity can overcome its base animal instincts and achieve a state of perfection. Chief among those methods is something called "Processing," intense and personal psychological questioning, which also involves getting in touch with supposed past lives.

Having no family and feeling emotionally ravaged, Freddie is attracted to the community and its father figure, Dodd. He eventually becomes the group's enforcer, beating up those who express skepticism inside and outside the group. Freddie's violence toward non-believers is not fully condoned—nor forcefully condemned—by Dodd, himself prone to tantrums. Presumably speaking metaphorically, Peggy tells her husband in one scene that "we will never dominate our environment unless we attack." She uses sexual wiles to extract a promise

from Dodd that he will quit drinking Freddie's concoctions.

The remainder of the movie records Dodd's efforts to rescue Freddie, with and without the latter's cooperation, as he builds his at-times beleaguered sect. *The Master* is a confused, meandering piece. Some of its problems are masked by an outstanding performance by Hoffman, eerie, effective cinematography and a soundtrack that includes Ella Fitzgerald singing "Get Thee Behind Me Satan." Adams is also fine, but Phoenix as Freddie follows too closely in the footsteps of Daniel Day-Lewis, who chewed up the scenery in *There Will Be Blood*.

Like all of Anderson's films, *The Master* has its insightful and alluring moments. The strongest tend to be the most historically concrete, with images that convey intense and confused feelings about life after the cataclysmic darkness of war. Anderson specializes in mining the emotional content of a given scene, and generally chooses actors who are up to his demands.

It is to the filmmaker's credit that, implicitly at least, he takes on the official account of the war and postwar years, which portrays the conflict as a crusade for democracy fought by "The Greatest Generation." World War II was a brutal, imperialist conflict, which left tens of millions dead and tens of millions more psychologically and morally shattered, like the film's central figure. Unfortunately, despite promising beginnings and imagery, *The Master* doesn't seriously develop this theme, or any others.

In the end, the depth and truth of dramatized emotion is a function of the depth and truth of the artistic ideas at work. In Anderson's film, clear, rational notions are in short supply and therefore, on too many occasions, its emotionalism passes over into the strained and artificial.

The writer-director readily acknowledges that his movie was inspired by the life and career of Scientology founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911-1986). However, far from being an exposé of that organization—as this reviewer had hoped to see—the movie exhibits a certain attraction to its bizarre philosophy and practices.

Symptomatic of his desire not to ruffle any feathers, Anderson arranged a special screening of the film for actor Tom Cruise, an outspoken Scientologist, who worked with

Anderson on *Magnolia*. (The Cruise character in that film is a scathing portrayal of a self-help huckster, à la Tony Robbins.) “[The showing] was done out of respect more than fear [of offending],” the writer-director told the *Guardian*. He also stated that the movie took some of its ideas from Hubbard’s 1950 book, *Dianetics*, whose themes he views as “f---ing beautiful,” adding that the “idea of recalling past lives is so hopeful, so optimistic, and it’s something I would love to go along with.”

Further, the movie’s production notes indicate that “Anderson became intrigued by the birth of a new kind of patchwork American family that arose out of the upheaval of World War II: those of alternative spiritual factions and newly established religions. From Eastern asceticism to Dianetics, the early 1950s became a time when many began to build grass roots communities devoted to realizing grand visions of human potential.” Similarly, *Boogie Nights* portrays porn industry workers banding together to form a makeshift family.

Anderson explains that his “father came out of World War II and was restless his whole life. It’s been said that any time is a good time for a spiritual movement or religion to begin, but a particularly fertile time is right after a war. After so much death and destruction, people are asking ‘how come?’ and ‘where do the dead go?’: two very important questions.”

These two “very important questions” express something about *The Master*’s divided soul: the first is legitimate and demands concrete answers, the second is mystical nonsense.

It is entirely proper for Anderson to express sympathy for those beset by restlessness and unhappiness in the wake of the war’s mass violence and suggest why some were attracted to various cults and “masters.” It is irresponsibly and muddleheadedly crossing a line, however, to express sympathy for the movements or religions some of them misguidedly joined and to assert that those offered in any way, shape or form a viable solution.

“He’s making it all up as he goes along,” says Dodd’s son at one point about his father. One feels something similar about Anderson. Without a coherent conception of American social life or history, like many of even the more interesting filmmakers at present, he is largely taking shots in the dark. Once again, intuition proves not enough to go on.

Quite concretely, contrary to Anderson’s vague musing out loud, the vast majority of veterans returning from the Second World War were not drawn to various forms of ideological quackery to eradicate the painful memories and experiences. They did not *en masse* seek out witchdoctors like Hubbard to cure illnesses of the mind and body.

American workers, like their counterparts in many countries, were in an extremely combative mood at the end of World War II, having made enormous sacrifices in that conflict and determined not to return to the conditions of the Depression. The first half of 1946, for example, witnessed one of the greatest waves of strike activity in US history, in the auto,

chemical, meatpacking, steel, mining and other industries, with some 3 million workers involved. There were also numerous local general strikes. Many veterans, of course, were involved in these conflicts.

That the working class found itself blocked politically by the trade union apparatus with the assistance of the Stalinized Communist Party, both of which were tied to the Democratic Party, had serious and long-lasting repercussions, but it did not drive the majority of the former combatants into crackpot religions. In the view of producer JoAnne Sellar, however, the postwar period was a time when “you have all these lost souls looking for answers, and the way that led to the formation of these new spiritual groups, Dianetics among them.”

Hubbard’s movement, which combined bits of psychoanalysis, American quick-fix pragmatism and out-and-out mysticism, was undoubtedly a product of the postwar years, and there were certainly enough “lost souls” around to sustain it, but the response of *The Master*’s Freddie Quell, a human wreck, was not the norm.

No artist is limited, of course, to treating the “norm.” But no matter how unusual or exotic the particular case, there needs to be something in its treatment that speaks to the more general experience. In reality, one of the difficulties here may be that Anderson has made a film more in line with *present-day disorientation*, including in Hollywood (where there are no doubt far more converts to Scientology and similar cults than there were in the early 1950s), than with the anxieties of the postwar years.

In any event, a number of remarkable films dealt with the post-World War II period and the fate of veterans in a realistic and compelling fashion. *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), about three veterans who return home to their small town and find it difficult to adjust, comes to mind, along with a number of others: *Till the End of Time* (1946), *Crossfire* (1947), *Act of Violence* (1948), *The Men* (1950), *The Deep Blue Sea* (1955, also recently remade) and *Some Came Running* (1958).

In the 1947 British crime drama *I Became a Criminal*, a decorated ex-RAF flyer joins a break-in gang. More recently, *Citizen Gangster*, (2011, originally entitled *Edwin Boyd*) tells the story of a world war veteran and Toronto bus driver who is forced into a life of crime in order to feed his family.

Anderson has sensitive antennae, but they are attuned at the moment to confused social layers and his haphazard approach does little to clear up the confusion.



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