Inherent Vice: Thomas Pynchon's novel adapted for the screen

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Written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson; based on the novel by Thomas Pynchon

Paul Thomas Anderson's Inherent Vice is based on the 2009 novel of the same name by American writer Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon (born 1937) is the author of numerous novels, including V. (1963), The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), Gravity's Rainbow (1973), Vineland (1990) and Mason & Dixon (1997).

In his own eccentric, verbose, sometimes amusing and sometimes irritatingly self-conscious manner, Pynchon has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to come to terms with postwar American life. In any case, none of his works is without haunting, lyrical and disturbing moments.

The central figure in *Inherent Vice*, set in 1970, in southern California, is heavily dope-smoking private detective Larry "Doc" Sportello (Joaquin Phoenix). Shasta (Katherine Waterston), a former love, turns up and tells him that her current boyfriend, real estate developer Mickey Wolfmann, is in danger of being committed to an institution by his wife and her lover. Doc promises to look into it.

A convoluted story then unfolds—and the film only makes use of a portion of the novel's convolutions.

In brief then: Doc's inquiries into the Wolfmann situation lead him briefly to be a suspect in the murder of one of the multi-millionaire's bodyguards. The homicide detective in charge of the case, Bigfoot Bjornsen (Josh Brolin), a hippie-hating policeman, apparently has it in for Doc. Then Wolfmann himself disappears, as does Shasta.

Doc is also hired by Hope Harlingen (Jena Malone) to find out what has happened to her missing musician husband, Coy (Owen Wilson), who is supposed to be dead. Coy turns out to be an informant and an infiltrator into various anti-war and other oppositional movements.

From various sources, Doc learns of an apparently sinister operation known as the Golden Fang, which may be smuggling large quantities of drugs into the US, among other things. FBI agents become involved, who urge Doc, in passing, to work for them as a snitch.

Doc eventually locates Mickey (Eric Roberts) in an upscale mental institution, in the company of the same FBI agents. Various connections are hinted at between right-wing vigilantes, neo-Nazi bikers and cult members and government efforts to suppress black nationalist and left-wing organizations. Bigfoot has his own personal agenda in the midst of all this.

Another corpse turns up, that of Dr. Rudy Blatnoyd (Martin Short), one of the group of dentists behind Golden Fang, in whose company Doc was seen only hours before his death. Through his present girlfriend, Penny (Reese Witherspoon), an assistant district attorney, Doc gains access to sealed files that reveal one of the police department's dirty secrets. In the end, Doc attempts to make a deal with the Golden Fang outfit that will benefit Coy and reunite him with his family.

Doc and Shasta drive off, together again or otherwise …

This is Anderson's seventh feature film, following *Hard Eight* (1996), *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Magnolia* (1999), *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), *There Will Be Blood* (2007) and *The Master* (2012). One can point to compelling, truthful moments in each, especially *Magnolia*, but none of these works was a success, and *There Will Be Blood* in particular, Anderson's single greatest artistic and intellectual opportunity to date, ended up a disaster, cheaply substituting demagogy and scenery-chewing for coherent behavior.

The difficulties have a great deal to do with the decades in which Anderson (born 1970) matured and began making films, the 1980s and 1990s, dominated by political reaction and cultural regression. Like his slightly older contemporary Steven Soderbergh, Anderson is non-committal on all the great issues. He can vividly and convincingly reproduce any number of individual settings, vocations, milieus, etc., but he has been incapable to this point of reaching or communicating any important conclusions about American social life as a whole.

In a review of *The Master*, the WSWS commented: "'He's making it all up as he goes along,' says [religious guru Lancaster] 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."

Anderson's new film is a collection of set pieces, a few of which work gloriously, the majority of which seriously do not. The result is a work that stumbles along, tumbles, picks itself up, only to stagger and stumble again. There is no coherent social argument being made, and this runs up against the strengths, such as they are, of Pynchon's novel.

The latter focuses on the changes in American social life and atmosphere taking place in the early 1970s. Set in the aftermath of the Manson and Kent State murders, Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* depicts new and far nastier circumstances emerging.

Doc, Shasta, Wolfmann ("technically Jewish but [who] wants to be a Nazi"), Bigfoot (a cop moonlighting as a pitchman for a real estate mogul "after a busy day of civil-rights violations"), Coy ("A snitch?" "'Informant,' please. He works mostly for the Red Squad and the P-DIDdies." "Who?" "Public Disorder Intelligence Division") and the rest are all, in the words of one character, "rolling around on the floor of late capitalism."

Privatization, deregulation and gentrification are on the horizon, combined with the growth of the police and intelligence apparatus. Conspiracy (by government and corporation) has always figured largely in Pynchon's work, appropriately enough for a novelist living and writing in the second half of the 20th century in America. The sense of a vast plot to suppress freer instincts and activities pervades *Inherent Vice*: "Was it possible, that at every gathering—concert, peace rally, love-in, be-in, and freak- in, here, up north, back East, wherever—those dark crews had been busy all along, reclaiming the music, the resistance to power, the sexual desire from epic to everyday, all they could sweep up, for the ancient forces of greed and fear?"

In the novel, the Los Angeles police have their own "private army of vigilantes" for settling scores and their own hired enforcers (and even assassins) who specialize in "politicals--black and Chicano activists, antiwar protesters, campus bombers, and assorted other pinko fucks."

In one of the novel's final scenes, Doc meets with one of the wealthiest of the criminals, Crocker Fenway (Martin Donovan), at a posh club. At one point, Fenway tells Doc bluntly: "We've been in place forever. Look around. Real estate, water rights, oil, cheap labor—all of that's ours, it's always been ours. And you, at the end of the day what are you? One more unit in this swarm of transients …"

Doc responds, "But see, every time one of you gets greedy like that, the bad-karma level gets jacked up one more little two-hundred-dollar notch. After a while that starts to add up. For years now under everybody's nose there's been all this class hatred, slowly building. Where do you think that's headed?"

Later, Doc asks: "And you don't ever worry … that someday they'll all turn into a savage mob screamin around outside the gates of PV [Palos Verdes in Los Angeles], maybe even looking to get in?" Shrugging, Fenway replies: "Then we do what has to be done to keep them out. We've been laid siege to by far worse, and we're still here. Aren't we."

Toward the novel's end, musing about the term "inherent vice," Doc wonders, "Is that like original sin?" His friend and lawyer answers, "It's what you can't avoid." A "big disaster" looms for America.

Pynchon's novel also has many weak points. It is too long, unnecessarily and tediously complicated, with far too many, often cartoonish characters (and annoying names), who become difficult to distinguish, much less care about, at a certain point. One wants the book to end well before it actually does. And the glibness and cynicism do little to conceal a deep pessimism and even despair about the American situation.

Anderson deserves this much credit, in the interest of making a two-hour film, he has done away with a good many of the subplots and myriad characters.

Unhappily, in the process, he has also watered down and rounded off the socially satirical and vitriolic elements. Some of the above-mentioned scenes or comments take place in the film, but their impact is weakened because the film's heart clearly does not lie there.

Anderson told the *Toronto Star*: "There was so much in the book and so many directions you could have gone. Whenever we had meetings about it—asking ourselves, 'What are we really doing, what's the centre of it?'—it would just be the love story, Doc and Shasta. You have all these zany antics and craziness and silliness going on, but the vessel in the centre of it, first and foremost, is Doc's yearning and ache for Shasta."

Anderson's self-questioning, "What are we really doing, what's the centre of it?," is significant, as is his answer, which, unfortunately, speaks to the gravitational pull of the cultural problems of the day. The novel does not end with the reunion of Doc and Shasta; there's hardly a mention of her in the final several chapters. The book concludes with Doc driving in a heavy fog, driving aimlessly around Los Angeles, hoping "For the fog to burn away, and for something else this time, somehow, to be there instead."

The filmmaker's banal concentration on the "love story" goes hand in hand with the decision to give *Inherent Vice* as a whole a drug-induced feeling, as though the camera and the pacing were under the influence. Again, the novel has its weaknesses, but it is not sleepy and hazy.

Certain sequences stand out. The scene in which Doc visits Wolfmann's wife and boy-friend in their lavish house is remarkable, almost every detail jumps out at the viewer. Brolin is generally wonderful, brutal yet comical, as the cop, Bjornsen, and his scenes almost always exert interest. When he shouts in Japanese at the short-order cook for pancakes … an entire social world threatens to come into focus. But such moments are dissipated, worked against, drained of strength, by too many flabby and pointless sequences, which do little more than show off. Katherine Waterston is memorable as Shasta, but Anderson tries too hard in her scenes, and to what effect exactly? Another troubled and troubling femme fatale… Is that really what we have a shortage of?