



Minimal Impact

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FILM REVIEW:

Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice*

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The cultural zeitgeist of 1969-70 U.S. was key in the transformation of the collective American attitude as we moved from the 1960s era of creative expression, drug experimentation and sexual freedom into a decade that seemed defined by the exact opposite ideologies—capitalism and the rise of neoliberalism. The multitude of watershed moments taking place in 1969, from the Nixon inauguration and Woodstock to the Manson family murders and the debut of Sesame Street, marked the end of the peace loving 1960s and shifted into a decade of stronger anti-war sentiments, deeper distrust of the establishment, as well as economic crisis and capitalist greed that the stage for a

massive stock market crash decades later.

Famous for his convoluted, postmodernist storylines, Thomas Pynchon published *Inherent Vice* in 2009, which was brought to the silver screen in 2014 by Paul Thomas Anderson,¹ also famous for densely complex narratives. The main focus in this review will be less on the novel-to-film adaptation, and more on a few ways in which the underlying notion of neoliberalist capitalism are interwoven and addressed throughout the film. The narrative of *Inherent Vice* follows stoner private eye, Larry “Doc” Sportello (played by Joaquin Phoenix), as he wanders through Los Angeles attempting to solve three separate (but related) missing person cases, while circumventing the bizarre world of an underground cult, corrupt LAPD cops, a mysterious drug cartel, multi-billion dollar real estate developments, the FBI, as well as an array of uniquely strange characters. The multiple, intertwining plot lines and numerous peripheral characters introduced throughout the film adds to the difficulty in understanding the narrative.

Anderson’s screen portrayal continues to evoke disparate emotional reactions from its audiences, as the film’s plot truly is difficult to follow. A slow-paced film that clocks in at almost two and a half hours serves to further disengage its audience. The original trailer, purportedly edited by Anderson himself, sells the audience on what seems to be a witty, quick-paced film better aligned with the Coen Brother’s 1998 hit, *The Big Lebowski*. However, *Inherent Vice* better parallels with Quentin Tarantino’s 2019 film, *Once Upon a Time in ... Hollywood*. At the center of both films are stellar performances

1. Paul Thomas Anderson (b. 1970) is an American filmmaker known for his rich visual style and complex narratives that often include recurring themes such as loneliness and dysfunction. Combined, his films have garnered a total of 25 Oscar nominations, which include highly acclaimed works such as *Boogie Nights* (1997), *There Will be Blood* (2007) and *The Master* (2012).

by its leads, as well as a convoluted and multifaceted storyline that meanders throughout its seemingly never-ending screen time. Both films also focus on one specific pivotal movement in American history, the Manson family murders. While Tarantino’s wraps his story from before/during the murders and completely re-writes a fictionalized version of history, Anderson’s interpretation is far more serious.

While fans of Anderson’s dazed adoption of Pynchon’s stoner-noir may argue that the film improves with repeat viewings (and it does), the fact remains that no matter how many times one views *Inherent Vice*, the plot remains a somewhat meandering mess of intertwining storylines that falls short of a full and satisfying resolution, with only one exception. It is easy to credit the film’s complexity to the idea that Doc is simply hallucinating throughout—but that simply is not the case. So how does one go about enjoying and understanding this groovy film? Much like Tarantino’s oft re-appropriated plotlines, closely following the multitude of references in *Inherent Vice* proves key in understanding the narrative. I spent over five hours on my second viewing of the film, simply in order to take notes and make direct connections to the large number of historical and pop cultural references. Strangely enough, watching the film with subtitles also proved to be quite effective in catching the specific slang and/or slurred dialogue used throughout. Ultimately, *Inherent Vice* is a difficult movie to sit through if the intent is for casual, pleasurable viewing; however, for academics and film enthusiasts who enjoy deconstructing a film, Anderson’s adaptation offers a challenge in successfully analyzing its complex, multilayered structure, via an in-depth analysis of its intricate nuances.

To begin, the film introduces three diverging, yet intertwining storylines, with

Doc at the center of each, as he is hired by three separate individuals to investigate different leads that tie back to the disappearance of ultrarich real estate developer, Mickey Wolfmann (Eric Roberts). Doc's cinematic counterpart is "Bigfoot" Bjornsen (Josh Brolin), a TV actor and cop with the militarized LAPD, keen on perpetrating civil rights violations. Guiding us through the story is narrator Sortilège (Joanna Newsom), who may very well be Doc's hallucinatory, but insightful alter ego. Roughly 10 minutes into the film, we are introduced to Wolfmann's neoliberalist agenda, as Bigfoot, acting as the commercial spokesperson for the new real estate development "Channel View Estates," proudly advises the viewers that purchasing a new home will include no hassle credit checks or down payments. This scene not only sets the tone for the rest of the film, but clearly foreshadows the future of bad loan writing. Of course, it is well documented that Los Angeles has had "a long and sad history of land use," which includes the displacement of disenfranchised, minority groups—a fact that Sortilège explains to the audience.

The film portrays an ongoing battle between the establishment and its counter-culture, with an obvious example being the contentious/humorous relationship between Doc and Bigfoot. Scattered throughout the film are numerous references to the Manson family and the notion of hippie cults, with Anderson sharing a brief and stunning visual tableau of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, with the ex-junkie sax player and hippie police informant, Coy Harlingen, (Owen Wilson) as the central Jesus-figure.

In understanding the historical context of America in 1970, we cannot ignore the Kent State shootings nor Nixon's reaction to the tragedy. While this event is not directly portrayed in the film, the anti-Nixon sentiment is. Taking some liberties with

historical footage as a way of tying it in with the fictional plotline, Anderson utilizes footage of Nixon discussing the "destructive activists of our universities" as a means of placing blame for police brutality on the liberal agenda of academia and downplaying the deeply engrained anti-war sentiment of the time. Nixon's speech is interrupted by a would-be disgruntled UCLA drop out student, Rick Doppel, which is actually Coy. Coy's doppelgänger name demonstrates the duality of his character(s), as well as the strife-ridden cultural rhetoric the film attempts to highlight.

Two of the film's most significant movements arrive about 90 minutes in, when we are finally given additional information about its most mysterious entity, Golden Fang Enterprises. Similar to billion-dollar, multi-national corporations, Golden Fang is a powerful force taking on many shapes from a boat trafficking heroin from Indochina to a tax shelter syndicate of wealthy dentists. Understanding that most stimulants like heroin have devastating consequences on oral health, selling teeth-destroying drugs and then subsequently offering dental services to repair them, is a deeply drawn criticism of the neoliberal ideology that began to take hold in the 1970s. Sortilège addresses this dilemma, by pointing out that during Ronald Reagan's time as California governor (1967-75), he shut down most state-run mental health facilities, thereby shifting that responsibility onto the private sector. In the film, the privatized asylum is visually portrayed as a ultramodern Zen-like center named, Chryskylodon, run by a Golden Fang-associated cult. This demonstrates the capitalist vice inherent throughout the film's underlying plotline: Golden Fang gets people high and then gets them sober, or what Sortilège refers to as *vertical integration*, which she describes "as long as American life was

something to be escape from, the cartel could always be sure of a bottomless pool of new customers.” Manufacturing a bleak reality as a way to manipulate the vulnerable, in turn causing a crisis where one did not naturally exist, are just a couple of ideas that *Inherent Vice* addresses in its 140 minutes of screen time—ultimately the complex and nuanced level of individual/class struggle are beautifully captured in the film, but one must pay close attention to its intricate narrative in order to catch it.

Before *Inherent Vice*² meanders off for its final 40 minutes, we are met with the most significant moment in the film—when Doc finally encounters and confronts Wofmann, in a barely two-minute long scene. Throughout the film, we, along with Doc, are led to believe that Wolfmann was captured and either kidnapped or killed. However, it is revealed that he was placed at Chryskylodon as he had a crisis of consciousness. Having experimented with LSD and peyote, Wolfmann realized he should have been providing housing for free all along, rather than making a profit. Consequently, he was placed in rehab to rid himself of his “bad hippie dream,” as giving away his fortune would be good for society, but certainly not for his stakeholders. The scene closes with Wolfmann seemingly acknowledging he has no choice in the matter, while reluctantly obliging the system he himself helped build. The film concludes with Doc and Shasta driving away, but their destination is a mystery. The scene’s mood is slightly somber, but simultaneously serene. The audience, along with the protagonists, are left with a sense of ambivalence of what the future holds, but there is an implied understanding that living a peaceful, carefree beachside life is something that has now become part of the sacred and unreachable past of a bygone era. While the film’s ending is purposely ambiguous, both

2. I would like to thank AJO for reminding me of this groovy, but oft forgotten film.

visually and story wise, it nevertheless makes a clear a statement of the cultural transition that would occur from the peace-loving 1960s into the neo-liberalist 1970s.