

HOPE LIES AT 24 FRAMES PER SECOND

The Master



A Hope Lies Monograph

CHAPTER 1

The Hope Lies Monograph



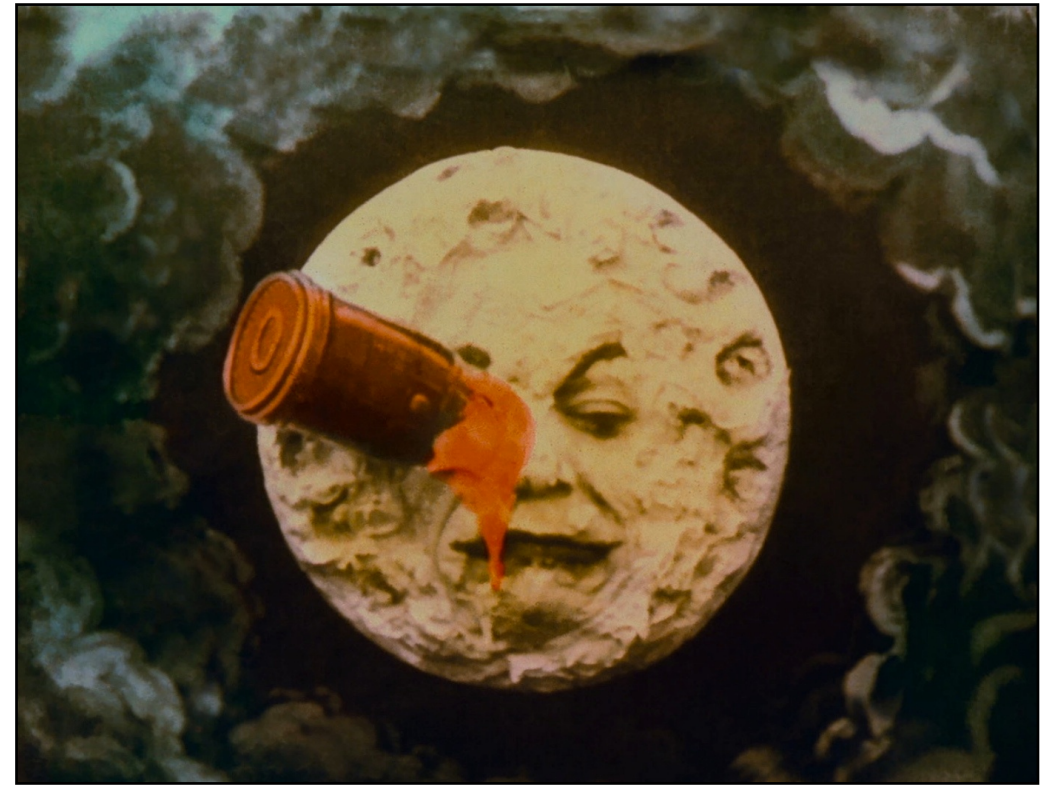
Welcome to this very special Hope Lies Monograph, in which we take a look at the latest film from American filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson. Our relationship with the work of PTA goes way back, with his *There Will Be Blood* topping the site's list of the greatest films of the decade 2000-2010. Included here are also in-depth examinations of Anderson's *Boogie Nights* and *Punch-Drunk Love*.

Hope Lies at 24 Frames Per Second is an independently run film website based in the UK. Over the course of the last two years Hope Lies has built itself up from simple blog to being one of the most respected film websites in the UK (and, we're told, the 12th most influential in Europe...).

Cinema fascinates us. Every facet, from the latest Aki Kaurismäki feature to the most over the top blockbuster that Hollywood has to offer, gives us something to mull over, debate or be passionate about. Our long held tagline on the website has been "*From A Bout de Souffle to Zabriskie Point, Hope Lies at 24 Frames Per Second attempts to cover every corner of the cinema spectrum*" and that stand remains as strong as ever: we have a passion for the cinema that knows no bounds, and we hope that these Monographs reflect that.

Technology also fascinates us, which is why we've decided to experiment a little with this Monograph that you hold in your hands. We are utterly convinced that the future of reading delivery is digital: it's convenient, it's good for the environment and ultimately it provides a very satisfying reader experience. We say this as fans of what publications like Film Comment, Cinema Scope and Empire Magazine have been doing with their digital alternatives to their traditional publications, and if we can replicate/mimic one iota of the great work being done by those institutions then we'll be happy. As with any experiment there will no doubt be issues at first, but we thank you in advance for helping us to resolve any that may crop up.

Our aim with the website has always been to remain as influence-free as possible, so we're looking to instill similar innovative meth-



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of delivery here too: we want to keep this free, but we don't want to be overly reliant on advertising (We appreciate just as much as anyone how mass advertising can ruin a clean user experience). Feel free to get in touch if you would like to be involved with that aspect of the Monographs.

This Monograph is designed to be read in landscape orientation. That's when it looks its best. If you'd like to read it sans film stills and whatnot then simply turn it to portrait scale.

Each Monograph, as the title suggests, takes a look at one film. There's no defining reason for why a film might be subjected to coverage, but it's probably a given that a timely theatrical release will lead to featuring. With that in mind we do have a mammoth special edition in the works in which we'll be taking a look at the complete oeuvre of a specific filmmaker to mark an anniversary, but more on that later.



MONOGRAPH

The Master



The Master (Anderson, 2012)



Joaquin Phoenix stepped out of the proverbial wilderness for this, his return to cinema.

Over the course of the past 15 years Paul Thomas Anderson has slowly carved out a reputation as one of America's greatest contemporary filmmakers. Merging the cinematically informed approach to filmmaking employed by the likes of Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino albeit with a more international leaning, Anderson has crafted a body of work that is contextually the equal of very few, with his *There Will Be Blood* named the Hope Lies

Film Of The Decade in 2010. *The Master* revolves around a pair of men that find themselves drawn together in a United States Of America damaged by the throes of the Second World War. Freddie Quell (Joaquin Phoenix) is a drifter, a former soldier turned lost soul, who, after chancing upon the boat of Lancaster Dodd (Philip Seymour Hoffman) the head of a religious/spiritual belief organisation called The Cause, becomes caught up with the group and

attempts to turn his life around. As with most of Anderson's work, a descriptive synopsis doesn't really work with *The Master*, with plot light in relation to the mood of the picture.

Much has been made in the speculative media as to the relationship between *The Master* and the Church of Scientology. Anderson's film is not so much a scathing attack on Scientology, as it is an examination of the great American trend for groups that flicker in to existence to cater for the hopes and dreams of a wanting people. While many deemed that by approaching subject as potentially controversial as Scientology to be a provocative move, ultimately the film makes for an exploration that isn't befitting of a snappy headline, and is far more complex a commentary. While the acts taking place on screen (the tests and exercises) are clearly heavily informed by Scientology from a literal perspective, Anderson proves surprisingly fleeting when passing judgment. He's not interested in telling the world what he thinks, and instead leaves it in a position for the audience to come to their own conclusions.

Somewhat paradoxically, Anderson's work has always carried an edge that verges on the ecclesiastical, be it in the rise and fall of the protagonists of *There Will Be Blood*, *Boogie Nights* or *Sydney*, or the unusual act and tales of destiny in *Magnolia*, and *The Master* follows in a similar vein. A cosmic opera of sorts, with the inevitability of tragedy always on the horizon, the film's central theological thesis revolves the volatile relationship between the films dual protagonists. There's an inevitability of the infinite between the pair, the two destined to be "sworn enemies" if not best friends. There's a tragic nature to this insistence (words which stem from the mouth of one of the pair) that stretches far beyond the picture in itself, with the relationship ground in the kind of mythology

that one would find in any and all manner of culture, from the biblical through to myths and legends, and even the comic-book (one couldn't help but recall the relationship between Batman and The Joker in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* as Hoffman's Dodd makes his ultimate declaration of observation to Quinn). That the penultimate image we see on-screen involves Quinn involved in an intimate embrace with a woman who bears a striking resemblance to Dodd makes for a striking and definitive detail.

The breadth of the performance lexicon is on full display here. In Philip Seymour Hoffman we have the showy, overt performances that one would ordinarily associate with the prestige picture, while in Phoenix we have an unsettling, raw turn. Without aiming to dwell too much on the celebrity nature of the business, one cannot help but feel as though Joaquin Phoenix's heavily publicised hiatus from the film industry acts as a necessary element of his performance here in *The Master*. His return is all the more effective as a result of his self-administered break from the screen. Phoenix slinks around the screen in an ill-fitting suit, informing his environment completely. The narrative flows from Quell's perspective, with Anderson presenting his state of mind in as affecting a manner as it is simplistic. The director is concerned with presenting Quell, as opposed to placing the audience within him, and hinting at rather than stating. In a similar use of technique over exposition, it's telling that we never once see Hoffman's Dodd alone.

Jonny Greenwood's score is an abrasive masterpiece of accompaniment, with Greenwood, Anderson's collaborator on the score for *There Will Be Blood*, combining lush Hollywood strings with his penchant for plucky, abstract breakdown. The diegetic sound is as equally off-kilter, with the destructive nature of the on-screen figures personified by a habitual shouting. A slow rising aggressiveness plays as an undercurrent to the whole film, with Joaquin Phoenix's performance is one built around bursts and snaps of violence, with his numerous breakdowns punctuating the piece. The poetics of this particular premise comes to a head with an incarceration sequence, which sees Quell joined in his destructiveness by Dodd. The two merge, with Quell adopting Dodd's own wiliness and Dodd taking hold of the physical, ala Quell. A sense of parallelism is recurrent too, with the same image bookending the film, and similarities within the act of interrogation drawn from multiple scenarios of such investigation. In his adoption of 70mm to hold his work Anderson not only widens the canvas considerably, but also makes a statement in a cinematic age defined by a dwindling reliance on celluloid.

To complement this traditional approach to filmmaking Anderson has recreated the 1950's setting of *The Master* to a T. His department store, with its lavish set design brings to mind King Vidor, and *The Crowd*, and while the events of the film take place in the 1950's temporally it could be anywhere of a post-war setting (there are obvious analogies to the time of now, although one must suspect that a defence of the affected is not Anderson's primary aim here). As Quell takes photographs (his post-war profession) Anderson pauses the film in keeping with the nature of the captured still, while an ambitious long-take charting the complete scope of the department store recalls the greatest shots of Anderson's career. It's

significant that *The Master* is not the work of Anderson's usual lens-man though, with the aesthetic engineer here Mihai Malai-mare Jr. (and not Robert Elswit), a Director Of Photography best known for his work with Francis Ford Coppola. This reassigning of the post of cinematographer is endemic of a shift across the board for Anderson with this picture. Leslie Jones and Peter McNulty cut the film, and while Jones worked on the edit of *Punch-Drunk Love*, the pair replace PTA's regular editor Dylan Tichenor, while the film is financially backed by Megan Ellison's Annapurna Pictures, an independent financier as opposed to a major, as per Anderson's previous films.



The Film Noir, with its approach seen as a reaction to the Second World War makes for one of the great influences on *The Master*. It's most in keeping with the kind of films that riff on the Noir without focusing on the subject matter that a Noir might usually focus upon, with Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* and its tale of an alco-

holistic driven to the edge being maintaining the visual identity of the movement without necessarily following the same kind of narrative the kind of film that *The Master* follows in the shadow of, while the work of Elia Kazan, and especially *A Face In The Crowd* with its sprawling examination of Americana from the perspective of a lone individual also comes to mind. Whilst from an earlier period than the Film Noir, similarities to Mervyn LeRoy's *I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang* are abound, and while the Anderson film is lacking in the Twilight Zone-esque finale of LeRoy's film, the basic message remains the same: the past will catch up with you, whether or not you are deserving of the consequences. Tonally Anderson blends Nicholas Ray with Apichatpong Weerasethakul, with the aforementioned underside of Americana being presented through an array of experimental techniques (the long shot, the abstract, the fisheye lens). Repetition and the perceived feeling of time folding in on itself guides the middle section of the film, ensuring a tone that is somewhat different from the rest of Anderson's body of work.

Which ultimately ties in to our own ultimate reading of the film.

The Master is a neat subversion of the prestige picture: it features not one, but two grandstanding, demanding performances seemingly designed to split votes. Hidden underneath the lavishness that one might expect of a *War Horse* or a Ron Howard film there is an aggressive and difficult work. Freddie Quell is to *Forrest Gump* what Barry Egan was to *Happy Gilmore*, a strict deconstruction of the prestige performance, with *The Master* ultimately playing as a profound form of anti-oscar bait.

The dual-leads also fall in to line with the earlier theory centering on the protagonists as cultural beacons in keeping with the ages. In the mainstream cinema of 2012 there is no greater cultural signifier than the superhero movie, and Anderson's film actually riffs on those films too.

Bear with us on this one.

In Phoenix's *Quell* we have a figure defined by a great physical strength (he is animalistic and violent, and pushes his body to its limits, answering urges without questioning himself or the world that contains him), while Hoffman's Dodd is one "blessed" with the ability of a great mental strength (or, at the very least, the ability to create the illusion thereof). The film's great MacGuffin is one centered around an expected redemption for Quell, which, while never actually forthcoming, is anticipated of any picture that presents a tale told in this mold.

As with all of his pictures Anderson seeks answers in the cinema. While not exactly the moving image, Quell's immediate salvation is sought in the captured image as a photographer, while he and a fellow member of *The Cause* hawk their wares outside of the cinema. The titular character (who is almost always referred to as 'Master') has grand ambitions that are seemingly inspired by, and in turn reflect the scale and scope of the Silver Screen (is it not impossible to see his quest to the desert for his unpublished work and not think of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*?). His clever Oz-esque evasiveness is a mask not unlike the one that might elsewhere be referred to as that all-important "movie magic", with his confident exterior a neat and concise analogy for the American picture itself.

MONOGRAPH

Punch-Drunk Love



Punch-Drunk Love (Anderson, 2002)



Adam Sandler and Paul Thomas Anderson may seem like a curious combination, but as with any Anderson picture the premise alone makes not the movie.

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Boogie Nights



Boogie Nights (Anderson, 1997)



Boogie Nights features one of the all-time great ensemble casts.

It's been interesting to see Paul Thomas Anderson's stock rise considerably over the last 14 years or so, not least because our cinematic paths have intertwined considerably. Anderson's sophomore effort, the breezy and utter joy that is *Boogie Nights*, saw theatrical release in the UK in January 1998, just weeks after I turned 15 years of age and was deemed "old enough" by my liberal minded father to accompany him to more testing cinematic mat-

ter. While not much of a cinephile himself, in the days prior to wall-to-wall film-on-television services my father would make the effort to see films on the big screen (an activity which has all but passed now). Never one to do anything alone, he would take me along. I remember the screening of *Boogie Nights* in particular, as it was the first time I'd made it in to an 18 rated movie. *Boogie Nights* was first brought to my attention thanks to a Total

Film magazine cover piece, which saw Heather Graham feature and contained an enlightening interview with Paul Thomas Anderson (all these years on I still remember in great detail Anderson's remarks concerning relatively throw-away bits like moments from the scripts of the in-film "movies" and the origins of the songs sung by Wahlberg's 'Dirk Diggler'). Only recently introduced to the concept of "The Filmmaker", and openly fascinated by such a figure, I examined the piece time and time again, before the neighbourhood cinema (with a relaxed approach to identification) picked up the film, and lo' my opportunity to actually see the film had arrived.

There might be a case for Boogie Nights being the most appropriate first "adult" film of all, given the naivety of the film's protagonist, Eddie 'Dirk Diggler' Adams, the 17-year old porn-prodigy at the centre of Anderson's sprawling tale. The film traces Eddie's odyssey, as he goes from bright eyed potential megastar to burnt-out junkie, and back again, across a period that straddles the 1970's and 1980's. It's equally appropriate that paternal influence brought me to Paul Thomas Anderson's second feature, given that the role of the father might just be the film's core theme. Adams' own father is only seen twice, in the film's opening minutes, with his first appearance near silent while the second is wholly dialogue free, and he remains unnamed. Instead, Jack Horner, the porn director who "discovers" Adams' talent acts as the patrilineal figure in every real sense.

Theoretically Boogie Nights should be an odd film to sit through with your father. Especially at 15 years of age. And yet, the wit with which the film is held together makes for a surprisingly lax affair. One might say that that is a perfect analogy for Anderson's

entire body of work: material which might provoke a certain reaction *in theory*, yet is completely redefined in its execution (That Punch-Drunk Love can be summed up as "A 90-minute Adam Sandler Rom-com" sums up this idea perfectly).

The key to Anderson's success comes down to one very simple reason: he's an old-fashioned cinéaste. The movies inform *his* movies. He understands how cinema works, with each of his pictures making this clear, either through mastery of technique or in his ability to subvert conventions or formula to suit his needs. Boogie Nights is at its heart a film about about storytelling, with Horner's dream to make a movie with enough substance to maintain an audience beyond the proverbial bang. That the film is set at the tail-end of the 1970's means that it correlates nicely with the rise of the blockbuster, which in itself makes for an apt companion to pornography (structurally they work on a similar principal, one of build up, climax, build up, climax, repeat for 90 mins). The creative figures in Horner's on-screen crew attempt to maintain an artistry in their work ("Each film has a distinctive look"), in spite of the subject matter. Anderson also places figures usually preoccupied with the behind-the-scenes area of the movies in front of the camera. Filmmaker Robert Downey Sr. and magician Ricky Jay both make appearances in the film, in important roles.

The film itself is shot with a stylistic emphasis. Shifts in film (and, importantly video) stocks occur throughout the picture, with the subject matter informing the stylistic coda. The audience is quite literally taken inside of the camera at one point, as the lens glances away from the sex scene, again, echoing the naivety (not) on show. There's a real emphasis on cameras throughout: when the gang initially comes together a camera is present, as they are at the awards

show, the marriage etc. The anatomy of the camera is explored thoroughly, in close-up and slow motion. As the 1970's become the 1980's there is a very defined shift in tone. This is displayed by a number of very literal tokens. While there are several, none is as influential, nor more narratively affecting than the arrival of cocaine, one of the cinema's great *deus ex machina*'s, on the scene.

While the film's inspiration comes from all manner of sources, from Robert Altman, *The Friends Of Eddie Coyle* and the aforementioned Robert Downey Sr. amongst others, the most frequent comparisons with *Boogie Nights* are generally made towards the work of Martin Scorsese, and specifically *Goodfellas*. While seemingly projected as such in some quarters, this is my no mean a bad thing. The long shots in Anderson's film are awe-inspiring, the opening San Fernando Valley shot and the swimming pool scene the equal of Scorsese's *Layla* or *Copa*, while the 'The Long Way Down (One Last Thing)' sequence is a constructed very much in the key of the numerous table scenes that punctuate *Goodfellas*. Aesthetics and form aside, both films deal with subcultures deemed socially negative, and do so in a manner which doesn't overly glorify such fare in to the area of romanticism.

While it's Mark Wahlberg* and Burt Reynolds that were the subject of many of the plaudits levelled at *Boogie Nights* upon theatrical release, much of the film's great success lies in a phenomenal supporting cast. With the likes of Luis Guzmán, Don Cheadle, Thomas Jane and Heather Graham filling out the secondary roles, and a powerhouse turn from Julianne Moore, it's not difficult to see why this ensemble is considered so highly. Robert Ridgely's Colonel James, all haute-tan and tinted lens and one of the great monsters of the mainstream cinema channels Cary Grant's Roger Thornhill,

forty years on from *North By Northwest*, while the one-time PTA repertoire of Melora Walters, John C. Reilly and Philip Baker Hall all serve as a reminder of how downright satisfying that troupe were at their height.



With every viewing one finds themselves questioning whether there has ever been a more assured sophomore effort than *Boogie Nights* (While *Hard Eight* is by no means a bad movie, the leap from that to this is majorly significant). It moves along at a breathtaking pace and contains some truly remarkable moments, that would ordinarily hint at a filmmaker a great deal more experienced (The Colonel's confession is one of the most well crafted scenes in the American cinema of the 1990's). Be it as a veiled commentary on the rise of the blockbuster, or straight drama about one of the more curious asides of the American film industry, *Boogie Nights* had a profound and invaluable effect on the impressionable 15-year old me, and continues to inspire almost just as many years on.

*Rather fantastically, and in a neat turn of events, Joaquin Phoenix, Anderson's star for *The Master* was initially in the running for the role of Adams/Diggler.

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Credits

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