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# Inherent Vice (15)

TUES 31 MAY, 19:15 - FILM CLUB

Dir Paul Thomas Anderson/2014 HK/148 mins/ English / Joaquin Phoenix, Josh Brolin, Owen Wilson

Like a match made in high-minded artistic heaven, filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson (*The Master*, *There Will Be Blood*) takes on a novel from elusive author Thomas Pynchon and turns its noir detective tale into a hilariously subversive deconstruction of '60s-era culture (and counter-culture). While the film will have very limited appeal for casual moviegoers, *Inherent Vice* is great genre entertainment for intellectual and/or cinephile types.

Sticking closely (but not entirely) to Pynchon's 2009 novel of the same name, Anderson follows the writer's lead, stripping his usual poetic landscape art visual style down into a very basic, grainy and grungy visual palette (created by Oscar-winning *There Will Be Blood* cinematographer, Robert Elswit). Along with the dirty world Doc travels in, we get interplay between the button-down, drab-colored formality of American culture in that era (cops, lawyers), versus the more naturalistic, psychedelic and (at times) sexualized aesthetic of the counter-culture movement (dopers, hippies).

With some smart mis-en-scene composition, Anderson creates a whole subtext about the warring sides of American culture in the '60s-70s transition ("Hippies" vs. "Squares"), without letting those deeper cultural or historic concerns distract from the main narrative at hand. That's not to say that Anderson has crafted an "easy" film – far from it, actually. The real trick of *Inherent Vice* (in both Anderson's directorial style and script work) is how convoluted and foggy the narrative becomes, even though it is ostensibly one scene of conversation following another.

Like our addled protagonist, we are left fumbling to recall which important names go with which faces; baffled by certain terms that are repeated in contradictory accounts ("The Golden Fang"); and are left generally wondering whether Doc – or the other dopers he meets – is truly analyzing real concepts and clues, or getting lost in some hallucination about what's going on. In short: after 148 minutes of watching people talk, you may walk out of the theater with little idea about how this mystery got solved, or what it was all about in the first place. It's a hard feat, but Anderson manages to create the sensation of being dazed and confused without any of the visual gimmicks often used to create psychedelic sensation.

The cast is a solid collection of actors, led entirely by a wildly and woolen Joaquin Phoenix. Reuniting once again after their deep (and many would say obtuse) character study, *The Master*, Anderson and Phoenix strike a more playful rapport in



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this film. The acclaimed actor brings spontaneity and freedom to Doc, giving the character off-beat ticks and mannerisms wrapped in a stoner's stare, with a general disposition that's more authentic and enjoyable than the stoner/burnout/hippie caricatures most actors try to create.

Doc is cool and fun and oddly wise and insightful in his befuddlement – the latter quality showing through in his interactions with Josh Brolin's tightly-wound and rigid lawman, "Bigfoot," which Brolin plays with square-jawed bravado. Together, Phoenix and Brolin are perfect foils that help to really define and expose the finer details of one another's characters, while on the surface, their 'dirty hippie vs square cop' verbal sparring provides some of the film's best comedy.

The supporting cast is made up of an eclectic blend of stars and character actors. That includes Reese Witherspoon subverting her own straight-laced cutesy persona as a closeted hippie; Katherine Waterston (Michael Clayton) doing a spot-on (and alluring) stoner femme fatale as Shasta; Jena Malone playing a hilariously buttoned-down ex-doper mom; Treme's Hong Chau subverting old Hollywood "Oriental" stereotypes as a plucky informant; Benicio del Toro winking to his iconic Fear and Loathing role as Doc's maritime lawyer/advisor, Sauncho Smilax; and singer Joanna Newsom (Portlandia) as the film's narrator/Doc's internal monologue, Sortilège.

Even the film's bit parts attract impressive veterans like Michael K. Williams (Boardwalk Empire, The Wire), Maya Rudolph (SNL), Serena Scott Thomas (James Bond), Sam Jaeger (Parenthood), former MMA fighter Keith Jardine (John Wick), Martin Short and Eric Roberts – while also bringing in newer talent like Timothy Simons (Veep) and Sasha Pieterse (Pretty Little Liars, Heroes). As far as ensembles go, everyone in the cast provides Phoenix with a suitable (often zany) character to play off of.

In the end, Inherent Vice is the type of movie tailored to be enjoyed only by a very specific few, who have a very intellectual sense of what cinematic "fun" is. While not as heavy (cinematically or intellectually) as PTA's past two films (The Master and There Will Be Blood), it will nonetheless be a challenging journey for those who aren't hip to the intent behind the foggy, drowsy, meandering pace (and long run time) of 'Pynchon by way of Anderson.'

For those in on the joke, Inherent Vice will be a pleasurable prospect of repeated viewing and scene dissection, as you try (like Doc) to keep the cobwebs out, and see this case for the mess of era, society and spiritual angst it truly is.

### **Kofi Outlaw, Screen Rant**

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