

God Only Knows: Family in the Films of Paul Thomas Anderson

An Honors Thesis by Jordan Rossio

My Thesis

- In his six film career, director Paul Thomas Anderson has made films which deal with the theme of family. All of Anderson's films feature characters who are lonely or from broken home lives. These characters often come together to form surrogate families. These surrogate families give the characters the companionship and positive human connections that they desperately need. This is especially true of his first three, heavily personal films.

My Motivation

- When I came to Western Michigan University as a freshman, I was astounded by the amount of text and books related to the study of cinema in Waldo Library.
- There were countless scholarly works on many of the major directors, yet I could not find any major works or essays written about Anderson, who is my personal favorite filmmaker.
- I chose to do my thesis on Anderson because I feel that he has a unique and interesting voice that deserves to be academically studied just as much as some of the greats of filmmaking.

My approach

- I chose to look at the first three films directed by Anderson:
 - Hard Eight
 - Boogie Nights
 - Magnolia
- These three films were intensely personal for Anderson
- There is a quote by Anderson where he says that the first three films “reflected his life in small and intimate ways”, followed by there “is a lot of my dad in these movies”

My research approach

- Since Anderson is a relatively new director there is not a lot of major academic writing on him (compared to Hitchcock or even one of Anderson's contemporaries Quentin Tarantino)
- That is why I used interviews and personal comments by Anderson himself
- These come mostly from newspaper and magazine interviews
- One of the most useful tools for my research was the P.T. Anderson fan site Cigarettes and Redvines, which featured transcripts and links to a bounty of interviews and profiles on Anderson
- I also feel that another good source for information comes from the DVD copies of the films. There are great making of documentaries and especially commentaries by Anderson himself which provide unique and scene specific information on the ideas behind the film and the film's production.

What I found

- Each of the three Anderson films deal with these surrogate families being created.
- In *Hard Eight*, this involves the main character Sydney and the father/child relationships he develops with John and Clementine
- In *Boogie Nights*, the surrogate family is created through this group of individuals working in the pornographic industry.
- In *Magnolia*, the sprawling cast features multiple broken individuals and strained parent/child relationships. These are contrasted with burgeoning surrogate relationships either romantic or parent/child.

The Films and Anderson's Own Life

- Anderson's first three works are intimate and personal and they have some elements that reflect his own life.
- The broken relationship between Eddie Adams (soon to be Dirk Diggler) and his mother reflect the cold and distant relationship Anderson had with his own mother though, thankfully, it was not as brutal and dramatic as depicted in the film
- Anderson's father, Ernie Anderson, died during the writing of Magnolia, so Anderson transplanted some of the emotions into the story of the dying Earl Partridge
- Hard Eight is based on a short film Anderson directed called Cigarettes and Coffee; this film was inspired by diner conversations Anderson would have with his father
- Boogie Nights and Magnolia are set in the San Fernando Valley, an area Anderson was intimately familiar with having grown up there.

Character Relationships

- Surrogate Relationships:
 - Boogie Nights:
 - Jack (Burt Reynolds) and Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) (nee Eddie Adams)
 - Amber Waves (Julianne Moore) and Dirk Diggler
 - Hard Eight:
 - Sydney (Philip Baker Hall) and John (John C. Reilly)
 - Sydney and Clementine (Gwyneth Paltrow)
 - Magnolia:
 - Earl Partridge (Jason Robards) and Phil Parma (Philip Seymour Hoffman), the nurse charged to care for him
- Strained Relationships:
 - Dirk Diggler and his Mother
 - Amber Waves (nee Maggie) and her biological son
 - Jimmy Gatorn (Philip Baker Hall) and his daughter Claudia(Meloria Walters)
 - Earl Partridge and Frank Mackey (Tom Cruise), his estranged son

Character Relationships

- Romantic Couplings
- There are characters in Anderson's film who are alone and in need of some kind of companionship
- This can take the form of a loving romantic relationship
- The most notable one from his early work is Claudia Gator and the budding romance with police officer Jim Kurring (John C. Reilly). There is also the romance between Clementine and John from Hard Eight

Conclusion

- Anderson's first three films were intensely personal endeavors and they often reflect aspects of his personal life. All three films feature characters who come from broken biological family relationships and they form these surrogate relationships which help to heal their wounds and ease their loneliness.

Significance

- Paul Thomas Anderson is one of the most important filmmakers working today and I see this project as the start of a scholarly interest in the man and his work.
- There are so many different ways of looking at the films of Paul Thomas Anderson that I would love to pursue in further studies.

Further Research

- This topic lends itself well to further research.
- I would love to look in depth at Anderson most recent films “Punch Drunk Love”, “There Will Be Blood” and “The Master” and see how they fit into my thesis.
- Anderson is currently at work on a film adaptation of Thomas Pynchon’s “Inherent Vice” and I can’t wait to see how the theme appears in that film.