

Howl

Directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman

Performances by James Franco, Jon Hamm, David Strathairn, Mary-Louise Parker, Jeff Daniels, Alessandro Nivola, and Treat Williams

Oscilloscope Pictures, 2010

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Howl is the best feature film, thus far, focusing on a Beat Generation author, which is not saying very much, especially since the film is predominantly sustained by the extraordinary performance of James Franco, as Allen Ginsberg, in a method acting *tour de force*. While Franco deftly captured the essence of Ginsberg's countenance, cadence, and demeanor, the other actors portraying Beats (Aaron Tveit as Peter Orlovsky, Jon Prescott as Neal Cassady, Todd Rotondi as Jack Kerouac, and Andrew Rogers as Lawrence Ferlinghetti) do not seem to have even tried to physically emulate the characters they were portraying, never mind get into their skins.

Yet the fault is not entirely theirs—the script simply frustrates any potential dynamism. The 6 Gallery reenactment in the film, which does not even mention the other remarkable poets (Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, and Philip Lamantia) who read alongside Ginsberg, makes what was arguably the most famous and certainly one of the most electrifying readings in literary history appear as a polite gathering of a small number of effete spectators. Award-winning documentary directors Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman were handpicked by the Allen Ginsberg Trust to create a film for *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) 50th anniversary celebration, and their praiseworthy effort, despite its faults, with its use of dialogue taken directly from the courtroom transcripts of the epochal “Howl” obscenity trial in 1957 and a discarded *Time* magazine interview Ginsberg gave after the trial, has the slight aura of a faux documentary. Unfortunately this leaves the audience wishing the other characters had been more fully fleshed out or left out entirely. Mary-Louise Parker, Jeff Daniels, Alessandro Nivola, and Treat Williams give amusing performances as witnesses during the contentious trial, and Jon Hamm and David Strathairn, as the lawyers, give adequate, though predictable, portrayals. But the film fails to create any visceral tension for the courtroom drama that unfolds. The poetic license the directors take, such as using the iconic, Janus-like photograph of Ginsberg and Orlovsky taken by Harold Chapman at Place St. Germain-des-Prés in Paris and placing it in San Francisco (though filmed in New York) and having Ginsberg read all four parts of “Howl” at the 6 Gallery, when actually he had only written a draft of the first part by time of the reading, are more often than not effective. But the film desperately needs more character development and backstory to enliven the genesis and the unleashing of the poem, and its aftermath, to have a lasting impression on audience members unfamiliar with the story.

The only aspect of the film that comes close to matching Franco's energy, though many critics have seen it as a distraction to Ginsberg's verse, is Eric Drooker's animation, inspired by his work with Ginsberg in *Illuminated Poems* (1996) and presently available in *Howl: A Graphic Novel* (2010). Steven Watson, author of *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944-1960* (1995), in his review of the film for *Artforum*, writes, “The problem is not so much Drooker's kinetic images—which are inventive, allusive, and often brilliant—but seeing them simultaneously competing with Ginsberg's words in real time.” I hear Watson's

point, but I do not necessarily see it. I suspect the problem might be generational. The gamer kids who liked Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) will not be fazed (if any of them bother to see *Howl* on their own, or are forced to for class, like some of the notebook-wielding students in my audience) and many of the older folks will agree with Watson, feeling the energy of the language suffers from the onslaught of the images. But ultimately this is Franco's film, and though many actors have tried to capture Ginsberg on the silver screen, most notably Michael Zelniker (*Naked Lunch* 1991), John Turturro (*The Source* 1999), and Ron Livingston (*Beat* 2000), none of them comes close to Franco's interpretation in *Howl*.

When I heard that Franco was slated to portray Ginsberg, it was, as Yogi Berra would say, *déjà vu* all over again. I was haunted by the unnerving experience, many years ago, of hearing that Val Kilmer would play Jim Morrison in Oliver Stone's *The Doors* (1991). What deviant and dreadful shamanic beast would have to be conjured to transform Iceman from *Top Gun* into the Lizard King? And though many people would agree with Ray Manzarek that Stone's movie was an egregious misrepresentation of *The Doors*' story, Kilmer's performance, like Franco's in this new film, was breathtaking. In retrospect, I should not have had as much trepidation about Franco. Though some filmgoers will only or mainly recognize him as Harry Osborn from Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy, he had proven his artistic range in 2008 playing the likeable stoner Saul Silver in *Pineapple Express* (for which he received a Golden Globe nomination) and the love interest of Harvey Milk (masterfully played by Sean Penn) in *Milk*, directed by Gus Van Sant (an executive producer of *Howl*). With a proclivity to play gay men with panache, Franco's sexuality has been questioned in the press, though he claims to be straight. Actually his attraction to Ginsberg came out of a high-school admiration for Beat writers. He says, "I've always wanted to do a movie about the Beats . . ." (Denizet-Lewis 56). Franco is also the only actor to have portrayed James Dean and managed to have a career afterward—no easy feat. For his performance in the 2001 television movie about Dean, Franco was nominated for an Emmy and won a Golden Globe, and it is now not too far of a stretch to think that an Oscar nomination will be within the reach of this multi-talented actor in the near future.

Howl was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, and directors Epstein and Friedman, extremely gifted documentarians, are no strangers to awards themselves. Epstein won an Oscar for *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), with Friedman as an animator; their film *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1989) also won an Oscar; and *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), which they directed, examining how homosexuality has been represented and misrepresented in Hollywood from the inception of the industry, garnered them their first nomination for the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance. *Howl* is their most ambitious project yet, creating a film focusing simply on a poem and its controversial trial. Try selling that to Hollywood—or try selling popcorn with that premise—even with a beautiful lead actor.

Obviously Franco is much better looking than Ginsberg ever was, but we should remember that Ginsberg was no stranger to the attention of adoring women. Edie Kerouac-Parker writes of the Ginsberg she knew ten years before the 6 Gallery reading: "Many of the girls were attracted to Allen for his little boy qualities" (125). It is exactly those little boy qualities that Franco was able to project in his roles as Dean and Ginsberg, despite these characters' obvious physical differences. In the September issue of *Vanity Fair*, Franco wrote an article explaining his preparation for portraying Ginsberg as if he were writing to himself. In addition to studying the

physical mannerisms of Ginsberg in Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* and a 1965 interview shot at City Lights, Franco writes, "If you are going to play the young Ginsberg, you will want to meld a variety of [the early and later] readings. If you are completely faithful to the early ones, your performance could be flat. Use the early readings as a model for the scenes where Ginsberg is just starting out. Use the later ones to provide a sense of Ginsberg's evolution" (222, 227). Franco also suggested to himself that he keep the psychological toll of having a mentally unstable mother and two friends (Lucien Carr and William Burroughs) who had killed two other of Ginsberg's close friends (David Kammerer and Joan Burroughs) close to the surface of his interpretation of the poem "Howl" (227). In the same issue of *Vanity Fair*, critic Bruce Handy says of Franco's work, "[h]appily, he is superb, relaxing into the role while not neglecting to wield his movie-star charisma as a witty, vulnerable, and charmingly blabby Ginsberg" (186). Nearly all critics of the film have singled out Franco's performance as surprisingly engrossing.

The film might not influence Franco's career in any tangible way, but it is certainly pushing him forward. It is interesting to note that the September 2010 issue of *Esquire*, featuring Franco on its cover, only deigned to give a single sentence to the "art-house sure thing *Howl*" (Chiarella 126), which is a sign of how the film will be neglected by the general public. Beat enthusiasts might take it for granted that the "Howl" trial is part of our shared cultural history, but, when Franco appeared on the September 23, 2010 *Late Show*, David Letterman admitted his ignorance about the legal difficulties Ferlinghetti faced when trying to publish Ginsberg's most famous book.

Franco, who began as an English major at UCLA before being drawn into acting, seems to have a good grasp on literary history. Scribner is publishing his short story collection, *Palo Alto*, scheduled for release on October 19, 2010, and he is currently a graduate student at Yale, according to *Vanity Fair*, working on a doctorate in English. Perhaps he will surprise us again with some insightful Beat criticism. I would be remiss to rule out this possibility entirely.

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