

# Mostly a love affair with money and fame

Joanne Laurier  
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*The Devil Wears Prada*, directed by David Frankel, screenplay by Aline Brosh McKenna, based on the novel by Lauren Weisberger

Author Lauren Weisberger—a former assistant to Anna Wintour, the notorious editor-in-chief of *Vogue* magazine—introduces her roman à clef, *The Devil Wears Prada*, with a comment from Henry David Thoreau, in *Walden* (1854): “Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.”

Perhaps tellingly, Weisberger, however, provides only a portion of Thoreau’s comment. The entire observation reads: “I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes. If there is not a new man, how can the new clothes be made to fit? If you have any enterprise before you, try it in your old clothes. All men want, not something to do with, but something to do, or rather something to be.”

For both Weisberger’s novel and the David Frankel film based on it, Thoreau’s warning would not be at all inappropriate. These banal and conformist works could hardly be less concerned with “new wearers of clothes,” i.e., transformed and enlightened human beings. Unfortunately, so few writers or filmmakers today want something significant “to do” or “to be.”

Frankel’s *The Devil Wears Prada* hardly qualifies as an exposé of the narcissism, corruption and outright absurdity of the current fashion industry or its celebrities. What may have been intended as a lampoon of the superficial obsessions of the “fashionistas” turns into something quite different, as the film essentially ends up fawning over the industry’s upper crust.

Unhappily, *The Devil Wears Prada* is preoccupied with the same self-indulgent social layer depicted in the television series, “Sex in the City,” numerous episodes of which were directed by Frankel (the son of the *New York Times*’s former executive editor, Max Frankel) in 2001 and 2003. Both the television series and the new film represent a departure from the director’s 1995 film, *Miami Rhapsody*. Although not a breathtaking work, the earlier film has a sweet, compassionate and humorous touch.

In *Prada*, Andrea “Andy” Sachs (Anne Hathaway), a recent graduate of Northwestern University’s journalism school, lands a job at *Runway* magazine. Although uninterested in the fashion business, she labors under the illusion that a girl-Friday apprenticeship with the industry guru, the titular devil and infamous editor-in-chief, Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep), apparently a stand-in for Wintour of *Vogue*, will open doors for her in the world of serious journalism. Her dream job would be to write for the *New Yorker* magazine, apparently the pinnacle of American literary intellectualism.

The first five minutes of the film, in which Miranda’s terrified

minions prepare for her unexpected arrival, provide most of the work’s entertainment. Andy is there, almost accidentally, for a job interview. The editor is a great devourer of assistants, normally model types who are “one stomach flu away” from reaching their goal weight. Fed up with airheads, Miranda decides to take a chance on the smart, “fat” and fashion-challenged Andy. (The latter’s size 6 is considered to be the industry’s “new size 14.”)

With Miranda requiring near-death servitude for the job that “a million girls would kill for,” Andy inevitably comes into conflict with her boy-friend Nate (Adrian Grenier) and other intimates. It is more than just Miranda’s outlandish demands that are changing Andy. She sells her soul, she’s told, “the first time [she put] on that pair of Jimmy Choos”—designer shoes that cost hundreds and hundreds of dollars.

When Andy fulfills one particularly impossible demand of Miranda’s, she is rewarded by being allowed to accompany her boss on a trip to Paris during couture week, at the expense of her co-worker, Emily (Emily Blunt), who has been looking forward to the excursion for months.

While Andy is separating from her “real” friends, she is courted in Paris by the journalist Christian (Simon Baker), whose Machiavellian propensities are obvious from the first moment we see him. She is also mentored by the savvy Nigel (Stanley Tucci), who believes that the industry is a beacon of artistry and elegance, a view apparently lent credence by the filmmakers. Arguing for the designers, Nigel says: “What they did is greater than art, because you live your life in it.”

With Nigel’s help, Andy slinks into Chanel, Valentino, Donna Karan, Galliano and Prada, becoming indistinguishable from the rest of the “clackers”—*Runway* women whose stiletto heels can be heard in the hallways of the magazine’s offices. Eventually Andy gets tired of expressing herself exclusively through fashion, not to mention taking Miranda’s abuse, and returns to her original career ambitions.

It is difficult to recall a single authentic, heart-felt moment in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Almost nothing convinces. Even the shots of New York, and especially Paris, are extraordinarily clichéd and trite. The relationships feel false. Nothing suggests that Andy and Nate are actually involved emotionally, indeed that they have spent more than five minutes in each other’s company. The circle of friends is entirely contrived. No real intimacy exists between any of the characters, except perhaps at the level of abuse and command—that element feels real.

Breaks in the film’s essential monotony are provided by Streep and Tucci, performers able to create something out of very little. Also, Emily Blunt, as Miranda’s other punching bag, brings

personality to the table. She stands out from Hathaway, who functions primarily as a collection of nervous gestures and grimaces. As a rule, none of the characters take on a life of his or her own.

There is a connection between these artistic failings and the film's uncritical outlook toward the fashion industry and contemporary life as a whole. That the movie wants to have its cake and eat it too is apparent from its production notes. The filmmakers find Miranda, the endearing, eccentric monster, fascinating. Defending her on feminist grounds ("Men are rarely criticized" when "they put their work first"), Frankel and company go on to extol her virtues: "Miranda has made hard sacrifices to make it to the top and stay there. Love her or hate her ... no one can deny she is the primary architect of a formidable industry."

When Miranda cynically proclaims near the film's end: "Everyone wants this, everyone wants to be us," one feels fairly certain that the film's creators have bought into this notion. There is no shortage of breathless bragging in the production notes about what a coup it was to have designer Valentino appear in the film and how magical it was to have obtained Chanel's 2006 couture collection and product from a range of world-class designers. This aspect is rather unpleasant, all in all.

Moreover, screenwriter McKenna informs us that "[t]he movie doesn't have a judgment about the fashion world." She is quick to add, nonetheless, that "[w]e take the fashion seriously as a business and show it realistically." After all, "Fashion Fabulousness," the production notes inform, "takes work and having a place at the cutting edge of trends requires not only vision but great ambition."

The film's glimpse of 'Fashion Fabulousness' shows models who starve themselves for the privilege of wearing fine-labeled clothes and accessories from *Runway's* stuffed warehouse. That goes hand-in-hand with the exclusive parties whose aim is to dazzle with outer-wear and name-dropping—what the film seriously presents as "vision." That the parties and their participants appear almost inexpressibly boring and empty doesn't seem to dawn on the filmmakers. Why, in fact, should anyone want "to be them"? Films of another era, even in Hollywood, were not so slavish and uncritical.

No doubt, genuinely talented individuals design clothes. Moreover, in a rationally organized society, the utility and beauty of what human beings wear on their bodies would be a legitimate concern. However, to accept the presently-existing fashion industry uncritically—oriented as it is to the rich and the super-rich, overwhelmingly self-involved, swarming with charlatans and con artists—to take this as a beacon of anything except primarily profit-hunger and self-promotion is a terrible mistake.

This is an industry that thrives on manipulating and encouraging false dreams not for the sake of grace and elegance, as the film would have it, but instead offers, at its best, a questionable aesthetic that deadens more than it nurtures; an industry that is a legitimate subject for satirical assault. Not up to the task, *The Devil Wears Prada* is either overawed by this world, cowed by it, on some level part of it or, more likely, a combination of all three.

To the extent that the film renders any negative verdict on the "fashionistas," it is very mild and timid indeed. The fate of Emily,

who nearly destroys her health from over-work and under-eating, offers the film's principal cautionary tale. Andy's boyfriend Nate presumably provides a healthier alternative: he is also pursuing a career, in the gourmet-food business, but without quite the excess or obsession. He objects not to *what* Andy is doing (he likes the clothes and sexy lingerie she brings home), but the monomania with which she does it.

Rebuking Andy for having become a *Runway* Girl, Nate qualifies his criticism by reminding her that he doesn't speak from any lofty moral height—"I'm not exactly in the Peace Corps," he tells her. How revealing! That joining the "Peace Corps" should be the filmmakers' notion of the ultimate in self-sacrifice and radical idealism...

The critics have generally admired *The Devil Wears Prada*. David Denby, in the aforementioned *New Yorker*, wrote an especially appreciative piece. It seems to exemplify the shift in the American liberal intelligentsia toward a love affair with money, fame and corporate power, a shift the film itself underscores.

Denby comments: "It's slightly hypocritical of the movie to warn us against the seductive allure of the very goods that it is, in fact, seducing us with, but, for the audience, glamour has sensuous rewards that elude moral judgment. This movie delivers an inordinate amount of pleasure, and, in the end, even Miranda escapes our censure." He goes on to claim that in one scene, Streep "evokes John Singer Sargent's most famous subject, the scandalous Madame X. Miranda may still be a bitch, but she represents a distinct improvement: the haut-bourgeois ladies of the eighteen-eighties whom Sargent painted have been succeeded by professional women who look great and also run things."

*The Devil Wears Prada*, asserts Denby, "will create worldly wisdom in the younger part of the audience, but in one way it departs from worldliness. It presents the heroine's career options as a simple choice between power and honor... someday I'd like to see a film suggesting that you can be the boss without giving up your intellectual ideals, and that the alternative—rejecting power—has its corruptions, too."

Denby underestimates Frankel's film; it largely fulfills his criteria, with the inevitably unconvincing and inartistic results.



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