Paul Thomas Anderson's *Phantom Thread*: Art for the artist's sake

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Written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

Phantom Thread is the eighth feature film by American writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson (*Boogie Nights, Magnolia, Punch-Drunk Love, There Will Be Blood, Inherent Vice*). Set in London in the 1950s, it concerns the relationship between a celebrated fashion designer, Reynolds Woodcock (Daniel Day-Lewis), and a young woman, Alma (Vicky Krieps), who when we first meet her is working as a waitress in a small restaurant in the countryside.

Woodcock and his unmarried sister, Cyril (Lesley Manville), who manages the business affairs, preside over a successful fashion house, patronized by wealthy women and even European royalty. Reynolds is an obsessive, demanding, idiosyncratic individual, with daily rituals and habits accumulated over years and years that he strongly insists upon.

Alma is also quite strong and independent. If you want to have a staring contest with me, she tells Woodcock early on, you will lose. We believe her. But he is older and has the more settled existence. So inevitably, perhaps, she enters into his house and business, apparently the latest in a series of women incorporated into the couturier's well-regulated life.

We briefly meet Alma's predecessor, Johanna (Camilla Rutherford), to whom, when she complains at breakfast about his lack of interest, Reynolds responds coldly, "I cannot begin my day with a confrontation. … I'm delivering the dress today…and I can't take up space with a confrontation. I simply don't have time for confrontations."

Here too there appears to be a well-established pattern: Reynolds grows tired of each of his companions after a while, the businesslike Cyril delivers the bad news ("Well, what do you want to do about Johanna? I mean, she's lovely, but the time has come. And she's getting fat sitting around waiting for you to fall in love with her again"), and he takes himself off to the country to avoid any unpleasantness.

Will it be different with Alma? Soon after she moves into the house, but with her own separate room, Reynolds finds her presence disruptive. The way she butters her toast irritates him greatly: "Please, don't move so much, Alma. … It's very distracting. … It's as if you just rode a horse across the room." And these distractions disturb his entire routine, including his work: "The interruption is staying right here with me."

All in all, Reynolds is rather a stifling, repressive man, who dreams of his "Mama" and sews "secrets, coins, words, little messages" into the lining of his garments. He is also a designer of beautiful clothes with an acute artistic sense. He would like to impose his sensibilities on Alma, but she resists in certain ways. ("Maybe one day you will change your taste, Alma." "Maybe not." "Maybe you have no taste." "Maybe I like my own taste." "Yeah, it's just enough to get you into trouble." "Perhaps I'm looking for trouble.")

Alma's entirely legitimate efforts to carve out space for herself and to have some say in the character and direction of their relationship lead inevitably to confrontations and even explosions. A surprise dinner she organizes for Woodcock goes terribly wrong. They quarrel bitterly. "What am I doing here?" she bitterly wonders out loud. "I'm standing around like an idiot waiting for you…to get rid of me." He says horrible, defensive things to her. "This is my house, isn't it? … Or did somebody drop me on foreign soil? … Who are you? Do you have a gun? You're here to kill me?"

In response, Alma expresses disgust for "All your rules and your walls and your doors and your people and your money and all these clothes and everything! This! This! This game! Everything here! … Nothing is normal or natural."

In the end, she takes drastic actions to render Reynolds "helpless...tender...open...with only me to help." Not once, but twice.

Anderson is a talented and conscientious filmmaker, also possessed of a genuine artistic-visual sense. *Phantom Thread* is one of his more integral works. There is a genuine complicity between the camera work, acting, music and design. As the reader will perhaps have already gathered, the dialogue—on which the director worked closely with Day-Lewis—is intelligent, sharp and often amusing.

The relationship between Reynolds and Alma is believable, at least until the final melodramatics. This may be a small thing, but it's a step forward for Anderson. One of the drawbacks to *Punch-Drunk Love*, for example, was that the love relationship was "largely unconvincing," as we argued in 2002. This "inability to recount a *history of love* from its origins, to make sense of it," was "in line with the general inability [of contemporary filmmaking] to work through any problem historically."

The early scenes of Reynolds's and Alma's meeting and their first date, are strikingly and even memorably done. At the end of their first evening together, at his place in the country, he says, "I'd like to take your measurements. Is that all right?," and proceeds to do just that, with the help of his sister.

Alma later encourages his one act of social rebellion, when he insists that a very wealthy woman, who passes out in one of his gowns at her own wedding, give the garment back. Alma tells him, "She doesn't deserve it. It's your work!," and he agrees.

All these moments, and others, are fine. Day-Lewis, Manville (known best for her work with Mike Leigh) and Krieps, a relative newcomer from Luxembourg, are obviously committed to the film and to making it as true and honest as possible.

Critics and audiences have responded to Anderson's latest film in part because of what it is not: children's fare, violent bombast, superhero and comic book nonsense. *Phantom Thread* stands out to that degree.

In the end, however, the film is an elegant, careful work that does not leave a strong enough impression. Why is that so?

One of the principal difficulties is that *Phantom Thread* never develops a sufficiently critical attitude toward its own goings-on. Despite Alma's occasionally pointed comments and even temper tantrums, Anderson and his film accommodate themselves far too much to the suffocating atmosphere. They remain within the claustrophobic bounds even while identifying them. Anderson wants to have his cake and eat it too. The director allows himself misguidedly to be mesmerized by what is stylish and pleasing to the eye, secondary elements. One has to disagree sharply with this.

Woodcock is gifted, but his life and attitudes and his exquisite, tedious "good taste" are dreadful and oppressive in the end. As Brecht once noted, "There are times when you have to decide between being human and having good taste." His ways are not "normal or natural." But Alma does not make war on them. Unfortunately, she learns to navigate her way, albeit spectacularly, among them. This seems to be *Phantom Thread*'s advice as well. The ending is horrible and evasive, in that sense, and demoralizing, a bad compromise, a worship of the accomplished fact. Why should anyone agree to live under these conditions, with this "happy ending"?

The problems in *Phantom Thread* are larger than Anderson himself—to repeat, one of the more intriguing figures in American movies. Born in 1970, he suffers from some of the same general problems as the rest of his generation, coming to artistic maturity as they did during years dominated by political reaction and cultural regression. A few years ago, in a review of his *Inherent Vice* (2014), we wrote that like "his slightly older contemporary Steven Soderbergh, Anderson is non-committal on all the great issues. He can vividly and convincingly reproduce any number of individual settings, vocations, milieus, etc., but he has been incapable to this point of reaching or communicating any important conclusions about American social life as a whole."

The disjointedness and narrowness remain, even though *Phantom Thread* does not exhibit the same hysteria that fatally damaged *There Will Be Blood* (2007), Anderson's golden and seriously missed opportunity to say something about the origins of modern American capitalism.

Moreover, in this society, fashion design is one of those art forms inevitably oriented toward those able to buy elaborately and expensively created garments, the very rich. This choice sets Anderson in a direction whose implications he may not have thoroughly thought through. *Phantom Thread* is a work concerned with the artist and those around him, but not about the other half of the equation, frankly, the more important half, the audience for art works. A novelist, a filmmaker is under some obligation, generally speaking, to consider those who will read or watch his or her work. Woodcock is making dresses for an exclusive clientele, many of them return customers, thoroughly under his thumb as far as fashion and taste go. This only increases the claustrophobic, self-referential character of things. Art for the artist's sake? It's not so interesting.

Emotional life and psychology are connected to history and society, otherwise they would never undergo any changes. *Phantom Thread* is set in London in the 1950s, but it says next to nothing about the general character of British society at the time, including its overall mood. Anderson's work is not fed by an interest in that kind of understanding or insight. This would not have to take the form of direct or overt commentary. Certain circumstances may block that path to the artist. But no important work is without the presence of powerful currents indicating the "hic et nunc," the here and now, of a given society or epoch. Something important about his or her day must have *consciously* entered into the artist's thinking at some point, whatever trace it leaves.

Anderson made clear his attitude toward social life and history in a recent interview. Speaking of Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981), about American journalists John Reed and Louise Bryant and the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, he observed, "I was thinking about how great a film that is, but how deeply confusing and uninteresting all the facts about the Russian Revolution are. You know? I'm not smart enough for it. It's over my head. But, boy, … when he finds her and they hug and they kiss and, you know, you're like, tears streaming down, cue the music, cue the two-shot where they find each other and hug, and I'm a goner. You know?' "

Of course, Anderson is more than "smart enough," but for objective social and ideological reasons, his generation has been steered away from such problems and events. They have been made to believe that the Russian Revolution and all the complex issues bound up with it—i.e., the great struggles and traumas of the twentieth century—are "not for them," so to speak, and that art is about something else entirely. The debilitating results of that process are plain to see, including in *Phantom Thread* .

It is not pleasing to be "vindicated" in this particular manner, because of the high artistic cost entailed, but this is how we began a review of *There Will Be Blood* in 2008, "Histrionic, fatally confused and socially evasive, Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* is all the worse for its touching upon important subjects, oil and religion in American life. Putting the best interpretation on it, Anderson is simply way in over his head, with ultimately disastrous artistic consequences."

This remains a problem.