

Paul Thomas Anderson's *Licorice Pizza*: The doubts and questions the filmmaker should not “swat away”

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16 February 2022

Written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

Licorice Pizza is the latest film written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, previously responsible for eight features, including *Magnolia* (1999), *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *The Master* (2012), *Inherent Vice* (2014), and *Phantom Thread* (2017).

Anderson, one of the most prominent American independent filmmakers with a quarter-century of filmmaking behind him, is clearly gifted artistically and sensitive to many of the complexities of life. His films generally stand out for their intelligence, visual clarity and dramatic craftsmanship.

To this point, however, while Anderson has proven a creator of individually arresting (occasionally indelible) moments and sequences, he has, along with other members of his filmmaking generation, proven unable to successfully represent his society and his times in a significant manner. The stagnant political and cultural climate of the past several decades is largely responsible for this shortcoming.

Anderson's new work, again, has appealing elements, in particular its depiction of the chaotic, confused fumblings of suburban middle class youth. In the end, the slightness of its concerns and narrowness of its scope catch up with and weaken *Licorice Pizza*.

In southern California's San Fernando Valley in 1973, pudgy 15-year-old actor Gary Valentine (Cooper Hoffman, the son of the late actor and Anderson collaborator Philip Seymour Hoffman) prepares for his high school picture day when he notices Alana Kane (played by the pop singer Alana Haim, whose parents and sisters also feature in the movie). There is an instant chemistry between them, although the older Alana is self-conscious about the 10-year gap in their

ages.

Pushing his way into her life, the spirited, incessantly chatty Gary asks, “So, Alana, what are your plans? What does your future look like?” The film is structured as a series of vignettes. Alana chaperones a trip to New York, where Gary, along with a host of other child actors, appears on a talk show with the cantankerous Lucy Doolittle (Christine Ebersole), the star of a movie in which Gary appears—one that resembles the Lucille Ball movie, *Yours, Mine and Ours* (1968). At one point, the more sophisticated teen star Lance (Skyler Gisondo) steals Alana away from Gary. At a firmly Jewish Kane family dinner, Lance declares himself an atheist, observing, “I can't believe there's a god with all the suffering in the world.” He refers to Vietnam.

Gary and Alana eventually launch a waterbed business, whose principal and most distinctive customer is the crazed, drug-fueled Jon Peters (Bradley Cooper), the real-life movie producer boyfriend of Barbra Streisand. During a brief period when Gary and Alana are estranged, he starts a pin-ball café and she auditions for a film starring the boozy Jack Holden (Sean Penn), based on Hollywood actor William Holden. Eventually volunteering for the Los Angeles mayoral candidate Joel Wachs (Benny Safdie), Alana becomes disillusioned when the politician asks her to help cover up a gay relationship. (Wachs was a 30-year city councilman in Los Angeles who wasn't open about his sexuality until 1999.)

The 1973-74 oil embargo, which generated endless lines at the gas pump and social convulsions, is briefly referred to in *Licorice Pizza*, while Richard Nixon's pre-impeachment television speech flashes by in the

movie. These major events serve Anderson primarily as ornamentation, mere “local color,” which speaks to the film’s general orientation and weakness. It makes no serious attempt to shed light on a critical turning point in American political life.

In *Licorice Pizza*, the pleasures are real. Its soundtrack benefits from songs by Nina Simone, Sonny & Cher, The Doors, Paul McCartney, David Bowie, Donovan, Blood, Sweat & Tears and Taj Mahal. Anderson has a knack for directing actors, and Hoffman as Gary is captivating, while Haim as Alana largely holds her own against the protagonist’s effervescent energy.

Yes, the pleasures are real, but not long-lasting! The new film’s consciously disjointed narrative fails to congeal in an important way. One could almost repeat, word for word, what the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in 2015 about *Inherent Vice*: “Anderson’s new film is a collection of set pieces, a few of which work gloriously, the majority of which seriously do not. The result is a work that stumbles along, tumbles, picks itself up, only to stagger and stumble again.”

That the critics are generally rapturous about *Licorice Pizza* should be enough to arouse suspicion. One reviewer, for example, asserts that Anderson’s film is “thrilling” and “sharply detailed, dramatically exhilarating, satirically incisive.” Another calls *Licorice Pizza* “a complex film that comes so close to greatness.” A third writes that the film is “a radiant coming-of-age romance, that fills your heart with electricity and actively propels you straight into another dimension.” And a fourth: “With *Licorice Pizza*, Anderson mines the space between fiction and reality to unearth an ineffable authenticity, one that’s more concerned with lived experience than literal truth.” We did not apparently see the same film as these other critics.

The exaggerated claims are being made about an amiable film that seems almost deliberately unchallenging. Of course, when Anderson makes use of David Bowie’s song, “Life on Mars,” in the film’s soundtrack, with its first line, “*It’s a god-awful small affair*,” he is being somewhat disingenuous. He likely believes that through this “goddamn small affair” he’s making important sense of reality, when, unfortunately, *Licorice Pizza* actually *is* a small affair.

The WSWS review of *Inherent Vice* argued that

“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.”

What led him to create *Licorice Pizza*? The writer-director told *Variety* that the film was inspired by various experiences. “A very long time ago,” he explained, outside a middle school, he had seen a teenager flirting with a girl who was taking pictures. Then, he had a friend, “a child actor who got involved in the waterbed business.” One time this friend “appeared in the movie *Yours, Mine and Ours* with Lucille Ball, and he was on his way to New York for a publicity tour and needed a chaperone. He ended up hiring a burlesque dancer who lived in his neighborhood to take him.” This weak foundation helps explain a weak film. Because everyday, even “trivial” events can become the basis of enduring art if they catch at the big social questions and collisions of the day in some fashion, does not mean that *every* trivial event can be turned into such art.

In the same *Variety* interview, the filmmaker mused out loud, “Do I wish I had more range?” Answering his own question, “Yes, I do,” he went on. “I was writing another story. I was deep into it and I was distracted by the pull of this one, and of course there’s a moment where you go, ‘Are you really going to make another film in Los Angeles in the ’70s again? Don’t you think you’ve done that?’ Then you ignore that voice, and you swat it away like a fly.”

In our view, Anderson should listen to this “voice” and stop swatting away those inner doubts and questions. The talented director’s stubborn social evasiveness is damagingly holding him back.



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