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Matt Kingcroft

Concordia University, Montreal, mattkingcroft@gmail.com

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The Cinema of Paul Thomas Anderson: American Apocrypha

Abstract

This is a book review of Ethan Warren, *The Cinema of Paul Thomas Anderson: American Apocrypha* (Wallflower Press, 2023).

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Author Notes

Matt Kingcroft completed his MA in Film Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, where he researched film festivals, stardom, and the intersections of theology and classical film theory.

Warren, Ethan, *The Cinema of Paul Thomas Anderson: American Apocrypha* (Wallflower Press, 2023).

Magnolia, Paul Thomas Anderson's sprawling 1999 opus, begins not with the primary narrative, but rather a scattering of apocryphal stories, all connected through the concept of chance, or even, of seemingly divine will. These stories are interested in the sublime at work in daily life, in history—the strange coincidences that, as the narrator says, are “not just a matter of chance.” The incomprehensible mystery of people and the lives they live is a key narrative thread in Anderson's oeuvre, and it informs a large portion of Ethan Warren's recent book on Anderson, *The Cinema of Paul Thomas Anderson: American Apocrypha*, part of Wallflower Press's Directors' Cuts series.

The term *apocrypha* carries with it a bundle of connotations. As Eva Mroczek (2018) writes, it can refer literally to a set of “Jewish texts that circulated in Greek and ... were demoted from canonical status by Protestants, but remain biblical, albeit ‘deuterocanonical,’ for Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians” (383). Or, more commonly, to call something *apocryphal* is “to suggest it is suspicious or unworthy of belief, inferior to reliable, authentic works” (Mroczek 383). The word itself comes from the Greek term for “hidden,” which Mroczek points out does not suggest lies but rather mystery. Though he doesn't investigate them, Warren is clearly interested in all these meanings, pointing to inaccuracies in the factual truth of Anderson's work, doubting its political veracity, while still delving into the mystery and sublimity at play in Anderson's work.

This complexity is supported by how Warren structures his study, choosing not to organise things chronologically—either over Anderson's filmography, as many other Directors' Cuts books do, or chronologically within the narrative settings of the films, as Adam Nayman does in his book, *Paul Thomas Anderson: Masterworks* (2020)—and instead, opting for a thematic approach, the result of which is a book that jumps back and forth in time, fluidly moving across the director's

career and, in particular, his public persona. In his introduction, Warren attempts to lay the groundwork for a unifying argument, describing Anderson as “an apocryphal historian,” before then connecting Anderson to Werner Herzog, whose cosmic aims of *ecstatic truth* (xix-xxi) are helpful in looking at Anderson’s own approach to narrativizing, embellishing, and reordering history. In documenting the past, particularly Southern California’s own history, Anderson is less interested in what Herzog has called the “accountant’s truth” (Cronin 288)—that is, cold, verifiable fact—and more interested in something more mysterious or even spiritual, not simply in the religious sense, but certainly beyond materiality towards the sublime, filtering history as he does through a cinephile’s imagination. In doing so, Anderson creates texts apocryphal to both cinematic and historical canon.

After offering context to Anderson’s career and placing him firmly in the irony-and-affect “Indiewood” camp of the 1990s alongside directors like Quentin Tarantino, Spike Jonze, and Steven Soderbergh, Warren gives a brief breakdown of Anderson’s career as a whole, structuring it according to three phases which he calls *thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis*. Anderson’s first three films (*Hard Eight* [1996], *Boogie Nights* [1997], and *Magnolia*) make up his *thesis* period, during which Anderson, Warren argues, established a somewhat caustic persona and the clear shape of his own authorial “brand” (2), which include “hyper-verbose scripts and increasingly kinetic camera work, both of which represent an undisguised debt to other filmmakers” like Martin Scorsese and David Mamet (4). The second era includes his next three films (*Punch-Drunk Love* [2002], *There Will Be Blood* [2007], and *The Master* [2012]), and features work that is the *antithesis* to his first three in style and practice, focusing now on isolated protagonists, “emotional repression and oblique storytelling” (11). This is followed by a third era (*Inherent Vice* [2014], *Phantom Thread* [2017], and *Licorice Pizza* [2021]), which sees Anderson once again rewriting

his persona to offer a hybrid of the two previous phases, merging the cinephilia of his early work with a looser, somewhat more opaque framework. While Warren suggests these boundaries, particularly between the first and second phases, “are so overt as to be self-evident,” I would argue that the borders are less distinct than he opines. While *Punch-Drunk Love*, for example, marks a shift in narrative focus, the wild Scorsese-energy of *Magnolia* and *Boogie Nights* nevertheless remains, just as the distinction between his *antithesis* and *synthesis* films is not so clear or convincing when comparing *The Master* to later works like *Inherent Vice* or *Phantom Thread*. These categories are nevertheless helpful, though the lines drawn are not so clear-cut as Warren argues.

After offering this overview of Anderson’s feature work, Warren’s thematic analyses begin. First, he looks at Anderson’s ecstatic approach to place, one governed less by actual geography or history, and more by the story and subjectivity Anderson aims to explore. Warren points to how the geographical landscape of Anderson’s films reflects the characters’ state of mind, which is then further emphasized through extensive close-ups. Places, then, become subjective spaces, for both Anderson and his characters, which at times yields surreal, claustrophobic, and unsettling settings for his films. However, Anderson’s limited lens also offers a somewhat suspect representation of race, Warren notes: for example, citing Adam Nayman and Hsuan L. Hsu, he points out how Anderson’s Southern California, where the director has set at least six of his films, is markedly white, with “the few nonwhite characters of note ... afforded little shading of character” (31). Nevertheless, this ecstatic focus on place and space is where Warren gets the brunt of his argument on Anderson as an apocryphal historian, placing him in the same artistic realm as William Faulkner and David Lynch, offering a more mythic than factual approach to the past.

Warren then spends his next chapter exploring Anderson's influences, which, in his thesis films, he wears proudly if, as Warren argues, shallowly—less up his sleeve than on it—before then complicating these influences in his later work. Cited influences include Robert Altman, Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese, Jacques Tati, David Mamet, Robert Downey Sr., John Huston, Alfred Hitchcock, and, perhaps most of all, Jonathan Demme.

In his fourth chapter, Warren suggests that, all in all, Anderson's "career emerges as a century-spanning study of alienated characters fumbling toward some interrelation that might soothe their own unsettledness" (59-60). As Warren argues, however, this study is fraught with contradictions. Beginning his chapter with some biographical context, Warren offers a psychoanalytic—despite his desire to not "perpetuate a cycle of armchair psychological profiling" (60)—look at Anderson's depiction of domestic life. Warren writes, "More than anything, his films concern the fraught and tenuous *idea* of family, and the emotional fallout that can result for want of traditional domestic stability" (61). Anderson reconfigures traditional families and castigates patriarchs throughout his work, but his radicality ultimately, Warren argues, still "hews to a patriarchal standard" (64), with the "regenerated American family as a source of apparent hope" (67). In Anderson's cinematic universe, Warren suggests, the key to happiness, or perhaps the key to living with the wounds of the past, is to subvert social norms, but to do so within a relatively traditional structure—such as family, marriage, etc. While Warren does not seem to recognize this, I argue that Anderson's work here features a palpable sense of postsecular longing, grappling with the issues of the neoliberal modern west and finding help within the necessarily reconfigured traditional structures that preceded it. This is not Warren's argument, though it fits well with his apocryphal framework, as Anderson allows past and present, traditional and subversive, to happily coexist.

Warren then focuses on Anderson's screenwriting, which, while not a theme, is certainly a key aspect of Anderson's draw throughout his career. Warren charts Anderson's writing style across the three phases, with the filmmaker's thesis films marked by "overt expression" and rigidly following the written script, before his antithesis films become more opaque and "covert" (82). Finally, his synthesis films "adopt a more complex intermingling of overt and covert expression" (82). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this, though, is how Anderson began to cut whole scenes that involved the overt expression of his earlier films, scenes that might include exposition that would fill in blanks on characters' backstory or even their complex inner lives, instead "leaving the significance of these facts to resonate as implication" (87).

In his next chapter, Warren focuses on gender within Anderson's films, and argues that "his filmography as a whole suggests that only through complicating Western mores of gender performance—not just melding but effectively balancing qualities of traditional masculinity and femininity—can one unify the often chaotic and contradictory urges of conventional gender performance" (96). Warren points to several male dyads in Anderson's work, relationships between two men representing "half of an embodied rhetorical argument" (97) on "feminized and masculinized manhood" (117), but whose performance of classical gender roles is complicated, neutralized, or reconfigured into something else entirely.

In his seventh chapter, Warren discusses Anderson's use of alienation effects, which, while he connects it to Bertolt Brecht, he notes are not truly Brechtian as they largely attempt to avoid political engagement. Instead, Anderson's alienation effects act as a means of both distance and connection, with the cocaine camerawork of *Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia*, and *Punch-Drunk Love* mirroring the anxiety of those film's characters, to the seeming incoherence of *Inherent Vice* reflecting the strange experiences of its protagonist. Warren, via Chris McEwen, highlights how

“Anderson privileges feeling over plot” (127), and in doing so, engages in both provocation and evocation: he writes, “The effect is provocative, distancing the viewer from the unbroken dream state that so many films aspire to. But it’s evocative, too, inviting the viewer to linger in that dream state rather than let it recede immediately” (131).

In perhaps the chapter most relevant to this particular publication, Warren explores Anderson’s examination of faith, belief, forgiveness, and religion. Warren looks at some of the theological readings of Anderson’s work, emphasizing the apocalyptic imagery of *Magnolia* and the cult leaders found in that film—as well as in *The Master* and *There Will Be Blood*—the ghostliness of *Phantom Thread*, and more. Several recurring themes come up, including the intersections of capitalism and American religion, as well as how the past—whether found in the traumas of war or the abuse performed by parents and other authority figures—is always biting at our heels. Religion for Anderson, as characterized by Warren, often appears “a crutch for those who cannot accept the pain of reality” (144). However, it can have positive effects, with both *The Master*’s Freddie Quell and *Magnolia*’s Jim Kurring deriving the same benefit from their respective relationships to religion: “an increased understanding of [their] choices and [their] motivation in life” (147). A crutch, after all, can still help one heal. Much with all the preceding themes, Anderson appears, then, to show a plurality of perspectives on a theme, showing both the positive journey of faith adherents, as well as the deeply negative effects of those who abuse religious power.

Warren’s final two chapters look at Anderson’s music videos and his perspective on history, respectively. Anderson has made videos sporadically throughout his filmmaking career, including early work with Fiona Apple, before then becoming more prolific in the last ten years making videos for Radiohead, Thom Yorke, and, in his most abundant relationship, Haim. Warren

points to how the music video format, with its emphasis on “feeling rather than strict cause and effect” (157) is particularly well-suited to Anderson’s aesthetics, which emphasize not only affect but also the body in motion.

It is in Warren’s final chapter that we see the key aspect of his argument on Anderson’s apocryphal tendencies. Looking at Anderson’s relationship to history, Warren points to how Anderson “pares away social context” in *There Will Be Blood*’s adaptation of Upton Sinclair’s socialist novel, *Oil!*, altering its historical, social concerns to fit “his preferred, more mythic” form of storytelling (165-166). Warren writes, “an ambivalent approach to historical fact is a uniting thread in Anderson’s period pictures, which are far less concerned with corroborated details than with boldface themes” (168). Warren argues that in setting his stories in the past, Anderson gets to have his cake and eat it too, offering a “cynical commentary on Americanism,” while also giving audiences “the option to distance themselves and avoid uncomfortable self-reflection” (171-172), which is a questionable claim on Warren’s part—does something with a historical setting negate its relationship to the present? Nevertheless, Warren is correct that Anderson’s focus is lost on political events as much as their fallout, or the impact they might have on individuals and communities. Warren agrees with Wesley Morris’s analysis that Anderson is interested in “‘postlapsarian’ concerns,” which is to say he is interested in the loss of innocence brought on by movements in history, and how to live well in that loss. Colonialism, war, immigration, cultural shift, the development of mass communication, modernity’s disenchantment with religion—each of these themes bubble at the edge of Anderson’s films, and each of them are having profound effects on his characters’ lives and decisions.

Warren’s book is comprehensively detailed in both its analysis and its overview of Andersonian scholarship. His choice to cover Anderson’s career thematically allows an enormous

amount of coverage, with each chapter concisely reviewing not only scholarship, but a surplus of critical reviews, interviews, and historical context for both Anderson and the Indiewood scene during which his career started. Warren's analysis of the films themselves is sharp too, including his assessment of Anderson's approach to place and structure as a reflection of a character's subjectivities, and his close, comparative readings of both film and shooting script.

The book's comprehensiveness, however, is both an advantage and a limitation. The amount of emphasis placed on interviews, for example, sometimes takes away from the analyses of the films themselves, and Warren's interrogation of Anderson's public persona is often riddled with value judgments. Furthermore, Warren's thematic approach, while capturing many of Anderson's key themes, can sometimes yield chapters—such as the chapter on faith and belief—that feel somewhat limited, as some of these topics could be whole books unto themselves. Indeed, if anything, Warren's book suggests that there is more to be written on the sublime and Anderson's postsecular tendencies, beyond the theological work already done by folks such as David Congdon (2012), who is featured in Warren's book, and who argues for *Magnolia* to be considered “a contemporary cinematic take on the genre of “Pauline apocalyptic” (Congdon 405). As a thematic survey, though, Warren's work thrives, offering points of departure for researchers and enthusiasts looking for a way—or nine—into Anderson's work.

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