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Title	The Cinema of Paul Thomas Anderson: American Apocrypha, by Ethan Warren
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Publication date	2024-07-02
Original Citation	Nair, N. (2024) 'The Cinema of Paul Thomas Anderson: American Apocrypha, by Ethan Warren', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 27, pp. 304–307. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.31
Type of publication	Article (not peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.27.31
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Download date	2026-11-06 16:21:13
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16084

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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 27, 2024, pp. 304–307
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.31

The Cinema of Paul Thomas Anderson: American Apocrypha, by Ethan Warren. Wallflower Press/Columbia University Press, 2023, 224 pp.

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When the actor Phillip Baker Hall was approached by a twenty-two-year-old Paul Thomas Anderson with the script for his first short film, *Cigarettes & Coffee* (1993), he claims to have wondered to himself, "Who was the first actor in the seventeenth century to see a Shakespeare script, and did he know what he was reading? I certainly knew what I had in my hand" (qtd. in Warren 3). As Anderson is known for having a deep self-certainty about exactly what he was capable of, and moreover, a keen self-awareness too of how he is placed as an auteur figure within the arena of post-New Hollywood cinema, it can be very hard to divorce his work from his personality. This popular imagination of Anderson and his oeuvre, which I in no way wish to suggest is inherently misleading or facetious, is extensively considered by film critic Ethan Warren through a critical reading of not just his films, but also the discourse surrounding Anderson as well. Through a theory of an American apocrypha in Anderson's work, Warren finds a fascinating way to not just think through Anderson's own dynamicity as a filmmaker, but also to provide us with an intellectual manoeuvre that makes the reader ask what an auteur even means within commercial Hollywood today, a question we must approach within the terms of commerce.

Apocrypha and the apocryphal come from the Greek word *apokrypha*, which is a term used to describe texts of unverified origin that tend to be outside of a canon but remain compelling and popular. The American apocrypha of Anderson's work thematically pertains to his anachronistic approach towards representing the past, such as in films like *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Magnolia* (1999), and *Phantom Thread* (2017), which in turn seemingly allows Warren too to employ anachronistic ways of reading both film theory and popular criticism to make sense of Anderson's approach.

Warren's text takes an interest in Anderson as an auteur figure, through its deftly woven readings of interviews, press releases, and public statements made by and about Anderson. What makes this method most productive is Warren's choice to use information, anecdotal or factual, to create a collage that underlies what would otherwise be an all too simply linear story, which often occurs in a chronological examination of a filmmaker's work. And yet, while taking a collage-like approach to building an image (or imagination) of what Anderson's motivations and context might be (such as his upbringing in the San Fernando Valley, his filmic influences, and cultural exposure), Warren proposes a dialectical model of categorising Anderson's oeuvre to compliment the collage.

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He suggests three films each for the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis of Anderson's works and explores the overlaps and contradictions between each to create interpretative entry points into Anderson's work, which we read as chapter sections. These chapter titles, which at first glance seem random with no direct link between each other ("On Influence", "On Screenwriting", and then, "On Alienation Effects" and "On Music Videos"), actually allow Warren to circumnavigate filmographic chronology, and study the three sets of films of the tripartite dialectical structure within each selected theme.

Chapter Two, "On Places and Spaces", looks at the ways in which the Valley is represented through Anderson's imagination, with an emphasis on imagination as the terrain from which a Herzogian "ecstatic truth" reveals itself (28). Taking a cue from predecessors like the works of David Lynch or Todd Haynes, films like *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) or *Magnolia*, for example, use absurdist, fantastical elements to build upon but necessarily go beyond the reality of a temporal-spatial point of inspiration. What Anderson does differently from his predecessors though, is that his apocryphal approach is motivated by pastiche and irony, which allows Warren's analysis to sit in conjunction with analyses of other directors and contemporaries of Anderson's, such as Charlie Kaufman and Richard Linklater. Still, Warren's analysis is careful not to reify the more fantastical existential-absurdist touches in Anderson's work and retains a closer interest in Anderson's relationship with history and the ways it can be played with, through pastiche. On *Boogie Nights*, for example, Warren writes that, "in constructing his porno pastiche of a-star-is-born archetype, Anderson changed so many specifics that his story wandered away from verisimilitude towards choices that would support his chosen theme of surrogate family", thus positing a commitment to letting "metaphor take precedence over realism" (29). And yet, despite the many ways in which Warren explores Anderson's light-handed use of irony and pastiche to powerful ends, his analysis does not go further than the mere acknowledgment of irony in its form, and does not seem to contextualise in any greater detail the use of apocryphal irony and pastiche in ways that have invited critique to Anderson himself. Still, Warren keeps his focus on what it means in the context of Anderson's sole trajectory and provides new potential for how we close-read the works of the auteurs of the post-New Hollywood era.

Chapter Five, "On Screenwriting", is where Warren's collage of interpretations of Anderson's visual world, as elaborated on in prior chapters such as the one discussed above and "On Domesticity", becomes the sturdy foundation for what seems to me to be his most critically mapped-out chapter in the book, and also one where his foundational tripartite dialectical model of reading fully shines through. Through reading dialogue, plot, and character development, Warren convincingly argues for how Anderson's thesis films rely on overt expression on part of the characters and their motivations, while the anti-thesis relies on covert expression where the audience is subject to characters saying one thing and doing the other. Thus, the synthesis section of Anderson's oeuvre is an intermingling of both, where "characters are largely explicit in expressing their needs, yet struggle to perceive the intricacies of both their external circumstances and their unconscious motivations; [...] speaking clearly can often lead them tragically afield of full understanding" (82). What follows from this then is a revitalising counterargument to the earlier claims of Anderson's focus on metaphor, where the ways in which open communication (as apparent in the disorienting tone of direct dialogue in *Punch-Drunk Love*) can obfuscate the truth—the central theme of *Inherent Vice* (2014).

The two chapters titled "On Alienation Effects" and "On History" drive home Warren's consistent handling of Anderson's work from the standpoint of a cinephile. In the former, we are presented with an acknowledgement of the rather easy declaration by film critics of

Anderson's Brechtian moments, which Warren effectively questions to show that Anderson's work is still essentially rather too apolitical to be truly Brechtian. Instead, he proposes a more suitable substitute for reading the alienating formal effects in his film as visual attempts at "provocation", which allows him to then expand on both the potential and limits of the same (122). In a similar vein, his chapter on history in Anderson's work, discusses the permissive attitude towards Anderson's films' anachronisms because he is the kind of filmmaker who makes "cinephiliac works" or "movie movies", terms which again Warren borrows from his vast repository of commentary and film criticism on Anderson's work (171).

Warren's text recalls other unique ways in which contemporary criticism has not shied away from acknowledging and investing in writers' cinephilia in its approach and method in order to contextualise auteurs in industry and culture. The text brings to mind other evocative and engaging explorations such as Derek Hills's study of Charlie Kaufman among "Hollywood's merry band of pranksters, fabulists and dreamers" (2008) or Warren Buckland's assessment of Hollywood blockbuster poetics in the work of Steven Spielberg (2006). Furthermore, the freedom to structure an inquiry into a filmmaker using this tripartite collage form means that one is not just shown Warren's reading of Anderson's films, but also what Anderson's films are exploring in the context of Anderson's own cinephilia. Simply, to enquire about Anderson, Warren accepts, is to also pay heed to Anderson's own inquiry into, say, Robert Altman or Robert Downey Sr., both of whom Anderson has repeatedly cited as major influences (46-48).

While Anderson has an oeuvre to produce, one which has given him to the tenacity to seize the opportunity to let his auteur-ity take charge, Warren's text places an emphasis on the periphery of Anderson and his work, the consequence of his choices, and chooses to analyse discourse about Anderson and conduct close readings of Anderson's films. In doing so, Warren posits a way of looking at how the contemporary logic of production, distribution, and consumption influence whoever it is we deem the auteur of the day. It is within this question that Anderson's peculiar apocrypha shines through in Warren's analysis. A playful approach, like that of letting affection speak for itself in such a reading of Anderson, does justice to the affectionate asynchronous play that Anderson himself undertakes in his own work.

That said, there are a few things that Warren takes for granted, and perhaps needs to take for granted, to structure an auteur of the American apocrypha. As noted earlier, where Anderson's apocryphal mode relates specifically to the anachronistic approach to history through the use of pastiche and irony, even, Warren does not seem to take a stance on whether this anachronism may be ahistorical in a way that is detrimental to a reading of Anderson. Certainly, Warren does explore the various criticisms of Anderson's easy racism and sexism, however, he does so only to further explicate Anderson's apocrypha without necessarily engaging with the criticisms. This feels like a shortcoming, especially as the introduction to his book is absolutely lucid about contextualising readings of post-New Hollywood auteur figures within the context of prior work done in film theory by Claire Perkins (2019), James MacDowell (2018), and Kim Wilkins (2019), who do indeed touch upon the cis-het-white-male hegemon of post-New Sincerity American cinema.

In a podcast about this book, Warren confesses that his first viewing of an Anderson film was actually not remarkable and didn't leave much of an impression on him, and that it took a committed return to his work to see it as something worth delving further into (Bleasdale 3:07). In a way, one can see how Anderson's films are made for people who may not like his style of filmmaking so much at first, for the nature of apocryphal play may necessitate a nonchalant approach to developing a consistent sense of style, rhythm, or genre. Anderson seems to get away

with a lot, and in Warren's recognition of that, we are compelled to consider that it is in a filmmaker's drive to always try and escape, within which we as film scholars may also find some liberation in the way we do analysis too. In this regard, given how brilliantly colourful and engaging Warren's text is, one remains grateful that he gave Anderson another shot.

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Suggested Citation

Nair, Nivedita. "*The Cinema of Paul Thomas Anderson: American Apocrypha*, by Ethan Warren." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 27, 2024, pp. 304–307. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.27.31

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