

Phantom thread: manipulating audiences expectations



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Many have called writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson's 2017 film *Phantom Thread* a return to form after two misfires. Not only is *Phantom Thread* a glorious return to form for Anderson, it will go down in film history as a classic. What makes *Phantom Thread* so brilliant is not only Anderson's meticulous attention to detail, his taught interesting direction and script, the performances of Day-Lewis, Kreips, and Lesley Manville's Cyril, and Anderson's subtle yet brilliant cinematography, but how Anderson and his actors flip their audience's expectations on their heads.

Phantom Thread reunites the reclusive Daniel Day-Lewis after working together in 2007's *There Will be Blood*. Set against the glamorous world of 1950's postwar England, Day-Lewis stars as Reynolds Woodcock, an eccentric, world-renowned seamstress tasked with crafting the most elegant dresses for the wealthiest and most powerful women of the world. When he goes to breakfast one morning, he meets a beautiful waitress named Alma Elson (played the charming Vicky Kreips). Initially, she is timid and very bashful. But something about her piques Woodcock's interest in her, and she becomes his muse. They begin to spend a tremendous amount of time together and the two begin to fall in love. As their relationship progresses, though, it becomes toxic for both parties – figuratively and literally – with the help of toxic mushrooms.

At the start of the film, Reynolds is portrayed as a cold man with a temper and a penchant to work too much and too hard. Some have inferred that Reynolds is perhaps a gay man. Nevertheless, we would never expect him to be in a relationship, much less happy. At work, he is unforgiving and demanding. At home, he is obstinate and a bit unruly. He is a good and

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supremely intelligent, albeit damaged man capable of creating stunning work by demanding perfection and not putting up with bologna.

When we first meet Alma, Reynolds is the aggressor: he orders a large breakfast from the restaurant she works at and playfully banters with Alma, eventually asking her out on a date. He comes on strong to her, as is usually the case in male-female relationships. It is immediately clear that he is fond of her and sees her as a potential mate. Here, Anderson sets up the relationship as normal. In no way is it abnormal – yet. At first, he extensively courts her. They have fun together. For dates, they typically stay in and make dresses or go out on walks or things like that. It is by no means a great relationship, but it certainly isn't a bad one either. Nevertheless, the audience expects them to fall in love, have some kids, and live happily ever after with a few minor hitches along the way.

But when he loses interest, she takes the reins as the aggressor. She coaxes him to spend more time with her; as he grows farther apart and Cyril warns him to stay away from her, she inserts herself more and more into his life. She doesn't think that he cares for her anymore; that he doesn't love her any longer. After several traditional romantic gesture leaves Reynolds unenthused, unimpressed, unhappy, and wanting to end their relationship, Alma tries something new. One morning, she poisons Reynold's tea with the wild, toxic mushrooms she had been told about by a housekeeper earlier in the film. He drinks the tea and falls gravely ill, destroying a very important dress for a very important person after collapsing from the poison. Alma, wanting to be loved and appreciated by someone, spends day and night with him, supporting him and nursing him back to health. Keep in mind that as <https://assignbuster.com/phantom-thread-manipulating-audiences-expectations/>

the audience we know something that Reynolds does not: she has poisoned him. We don't necessarily expect Reynolds to find out that that Alma did it, but after she does it again we expect him to start to suspect her and eventually break things off. Again, the situation turns out the direct opposite of how the audience would expect it to. Since Alma initially showed no signs of being abnormal and abusive, we would not expect this to happen at all (ignoring the foreshadowing early in the film when Alma and another woman to pick mushrooms and they discuss them together).

After he has recovered and they resume their relationship, Alma notices Reynolds slipping away again. So she makes him a poisoned omelette. As he is about to eat it, though, she tells him what she has done. Reynolds, wanting to be loved and cared for just like Alma, doesn't care and eats the omelette, effectively poisoning himself. We don't expect this to happen, but it makes sense in context of the story (for the reasons mentioned above) and as a dramatic device to build tension. The film ends at odds with the start of the film. After Reynolds is not an unhappy malcontent. He is - quite quizzically, considering the circumstances - profoundly happy with his life, his wife, and his child. At first glance, he has transformed for the better; however, once viewers realize that he has been put into a toxic, dangerous relationship, it's clear that Reynolds is a victim of abuse, which is also at odds with his earlier characterization because the audience would not expect him to allow such abuse.

That is the brilliance of Phantom Thread. And although the film did not do well financially, it deservedly received high marks from critics and audiences alike. Even if it isn't remembered as classic, it should be remembered as an <https://assignbuster.com/phantom-thread-manipulating-audiences-expectations/>

innovative and exceptionally interesting film at a time in which most films were neither innovative nor interesting. With Phantom Thread, Anderson sets an event up by playing with the expectations of the audience but makes their payoff at odds with said expectations. If that isn't unique, what is?