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Thomas Anderson's *Phantom Thread*

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Spinning Bodies into Gold

Thread, Labor, and Choice in Karen Russell's "Reeling for the Empire" and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Phantom Thread*

In the Grimms' tale of "Rumpelstiltskin," a miller boasts to the King of his daughter's talents at spinning straw into gold, and the King orders her to do so on pain of death. Of course, she cannot spin gold from straw, and so, instead, a small man named after his tale promises to spin it for her if she will exchange first her necklace, then her ring, and finally her firstborn child. The image of gold spun from straw is vibrant and enduring, one of growth, success, and beauty, suggesting that something wonderful can be made from very little. As Clare Hunter notes in *Threads of Life*, "spinning thread and weaving cloth" suggest "the bringing of something into existence where nothing had been before" (206); not unlike fairy-tale tellers, then, who turn thoughts into magical stories. But the tale also suggests that there is effort behind the ease, for the straw is not magically turned to gold by the flick of a wrist, it is made through the act of spinning, and it takes time. Rumpelstiltskin must spin all night to meet the King's demand, and this labor plays into the wealth of fairy and folktales that centralize the production of fabric and garments through both magical and material means, and of course, the wearing of them. Yet, the image of the golden thread Rumpelstiltskin produces can eclipse not just his *role* in producing it but also the various and complex commercial exchanges embedded in a narrative that centralizes the idea of "spinning in exchange for human life" (Tatar 132).

Karen Russell's short story "Reeling for the Empire" (2013)—from Russell's collection *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, 2013—and Peter Thomas Anderson's feature film *Phantom Thread* (2017) are not "Rumpelstiltskin"

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retellings; Russell's is the tale of a young woman who is magically and permanently transformed into a silkworm, while Anderson charts the relationship between Reynolds, a meticulous fashion designer, and his disruptive fit model, Alma. Yet, one fantastic, the other realistic with a touch of the absurd, these texts share with "Rumpelstiltskin" an interest in those questions of choice, ownership, and labor in the context of clothing and thread production. I use the tale of "Rumpelstiltskin" here, then, as a framing device to illuminate one of the ways in which thread, production, and bodies have been historically bound in the European fairy-tale tradition, but I argue that it is through contemporary depictions of labor in the context of thread or garment production that *Phantom Thread* and "Reeling for the Empire" are poised to highlight the oft-hidden and murky exchanges embedded in advanced capitalist systems of the present. It is in these systems that women—despite their long history as spinners of yarns both literal and metaphorical—so often become trapped; "caught in the spinning machine of the global economy" (Braidotti 7).

While situated in different contexts, these contemporary texts have clear fairy-tale and folktale influences, many of which also highlight the centrality of exchange and choice within labor contracts. Russell's story engages with the vast history of human-nonhuman metamorphosis in global folklore, fairy tale, and myth, from swan maidens to shapeshifters. But she also draws on the history of Asian folklore about silkworms and silk weaving, such as the Chinese story of "The Girl with the Silkworm Head or the Silkworm Goddess" (Willhelm) or the Korean folktale "The Silkworm" (Insu Fenkl), as well as the emphasis on spinning, spinning wheels, and bargains-for-human-life that occur in European narratives such as "Rapunzel," "The Three Spinners," "Sleeping Beauty," and of course, "Rumpelstiltskin." Anderson's fairy-tale influences draw from old tales of beast-like men. A contemporary Bluebeard, Reynolds lives in a vast house into which he brings Alma (plucked from seeming obscurity in her job as a waitress) to be his fit model; however, as a couture designer, instead of dead wives in the basement he has banished muses. His and Alma's relationship centers on his difficult and demanding temperament in a "Beauty and the Beast"-like story, in which Alma learns how to tame the beastly side of his nature and finds a way to force his "transformation." As James Bell suggests: "*Phantom Thread* is a claustrophobic chamber drama about the high-wire balance between giving and taking, conceding and resisting in relationships" (21), but "Reeling for the Empire" too is concerned with the lines of consent within exchange.

There is, of course, a rich history of commercial exchange within fairy and folktale; from a boy's sale of his only cow for magic beans, to the first-born children traded for a glut of rapunzel, characters must often grapple with what things and people are worth to them. But as "Rumpelstiltskin"

highlights, these exchanges have a particular resonance when the exchange involves someone with limited choices. Though Rumpelstiltskin works to produce the golden thread for the miller's daughter, he maintains power due to her desperation to live, and the fact that she needs his cooperation more than he needs hers. His final pact comes with what Tatar describes as "harsh terms: labor in exchange for 'something living'" (131); in this case, her firstborn child. In both "Reeling for the Empire" and *Phantom Thread* the exchanges are similarly embedded with the dynamics of power and need. The former involves the trading of human life when the women are transformed into silkworms and lose their human forms and the latter involves a contract that relies on romantic affection as well as work between two people with vastly different socioeconomic positions. Though Rumpelstiltskin is the worker in his tale, the power imbalance is gendered as the girl was initially traded to the King without her consent, and though she does not work, she is the only character in danger of losing her life. In "Reeling for the Empire" many of the women in the factory have been exchanged in a similar way, sold into this employment by their families, but in both contemporary texts the women are positioned as workers and the men as employers in order to comment on the potential for gendered imbalance within capitalist systems. As Zipes argues: "an analysis of fairy tales and the impact of feminism cannot be incisive and accomplish much today ... without a critique of global capitalism" (*Relentless Progress* 126), and the contemporary fairy-tale texts I examine can therefore be seen as a medium through which the interconnectivity of capitalism and patriarchy can be made visible.

Both texts also engage with the history of sewing, spinning, the production of garments (magical and traditional), and dress-wearing, and the relationship of these practices to the body. From the spindle that pricks a finger, to a magical dress that turns a life of toil to one of luxury, to a horsehide cloak that transforms a princess into a silkworm, clothing and its creation are embedded in bodily experience. As Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario suggests, "the synthesis of body and clothing is essential to fairy tale, even where, as in Hans Christian Andersen's '*Kejerens nye Klader*' (The Emperor's New Clothes, 1837), there are no material clothes at all" (21). In "Reeling for the Empire" the women in the factory have been transformed into silkworms to replace traditional silk production, and in *Phantom Thread*, the action centers on Reynolds's couture fashion house and the dresses he designs on and for the bodies of women. For Kitsune in "Reeling for the Empire," transformation is bodily, and is neither welcome nor chosen, imprisoning her in a situation she fears she will never escape. On the other hand, Alma's transformation in *Phantom Thread* is one of social mobility, and takes place, like Cinderella's before her, in large part because of the dresses she now has the opportunity to wear. As a fit model,

Alma's body is intricately connected to that opportunity, but she is tied to it only in that she is tied to the socioeconomic securities it provides.

If the story of Rumpelstiltskin uses the magical production of salable "goods" to provide a "happy" ending, *Phantom Thread* and "Reeling for the Empire" use the production of "goods" (in this case silk and clothing) to ask broader questions about the trap set for workers who engage in labor that is overtly tied to their bodies, and about the complex ways in which "choice" plays into these exchanges.¹ It is no coincidence that both texts were released in the 2010s, when there was a growing interest in the conditions of workers in the factories that produce clothing and other products (predominantly for Western markets). In 2012 a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, burned down, killing 117 people and injuring hundreds more ("Bangladesh Factory"). In the same year, just five months later, the eight-story Rana Plaza garment factory near Dhaka collapsed, killing over a thousand workers and injuring over 2,000 people ("Abuses"). These events prompted concern in the West about the production of goods overseas and the working conditions of those producing fast fashion. And when Kitsune shares that the "new recruits" in their factory are "twelve and nineteen" (24), Russell makes the connection to child labor. Both "Reeling for the Empire" and *Phantom Thread* can be read in this context, then, and seen as drawing from the fairy tale to comment on these wider sociopolitical discussions about production and labor in the modern world.

In both texts, all of the workers are female, and they work for and under the direction of their male employers, but in *Phantom Thread*, Reynolds is a visible and opinionated presence throughout. Reynolds is the meticulous designer for House of Woodcock, for whom every dress is a work of art. As Bell observes, "everything is 'just so' in this world, precisely ordered to facilitate the unencumbered creativity of the great man at its centre. 'It's right because it's right,' as Reynolds says" (21). Reynolds's personality dominates both the screen (he features in almost every scene) and the House (as accommodation and creative working space). Reynolds's role as a designer means that he does take part in the process of producing garments (particularly drawing them, selecting fabric and adornments, and fitting/pinning the clothes on the model), but as he owns the garments, and is not seen to be involved in the labor of making the dresses (specifically the sewing, cutting, and such of the final items), his role differs from those of the women he employs. The women who work for Reynolds consist of Cyril, his sister and operations manager, a fit model who tends to live in the house with him and work long hours, and a group of seamstresses and dress cutters, who wear uniforms and appear in various scenes hard at work or waiting for Reynolds's approval on the dresses they have created. Until Alma's arrival, we are led to believe that there has been little

challenge to Reynold's dominance as employer over his staff, who all operate seemingly from a place of intense dedication and honor. Reynolds's position as the dominant figure is unequivocal, and this presence only furthers the fear and appreciation of him and his vision.

In contrast, the Agent in "Reeling for the Empire" is absent for most of the story (appearing only when he "recruits" new women to join the reelers). Though he has a similar, haunting power over the women, unlike Reynolds's dedicated employees, these women, transformed into silkworms by the Agent's magical tea ("Kaiko-joko, we call ourselves. Silkworm-workers" [Russell 26]) do not remain at their work out of choice or honor but are imprisoned, both in the factory itself and in their newly transfigured bodies. If what enables Reynolds's behavior is his earned social standing as a genius, the Agent positions himself as having high standing only in order to lure the women to work for him: "we were all brought here by the same man, the factory Recruitment Agent. A representative, endorsed by Emperor Meiji himself, from the new Ministry for the Promotion of Industry" (Russell 26). After encouraging the often-desperate families of these women to sign contracts for their daughters to become reelers (the metamorphosis that will occur is concealed), he blindfolds them and brings them to the factory that the women unaffectionately call "Nowhere Mill" (Russell 49) and swiftly leaves them with their fate, his presence remaining only in their desperate desire for him to release them.

Spinning, weaving, reeling, and sewing have historically been associated with women, as in many cultures across the world women were relied on to make thread, fabric, and clothing. As Hunter observes: "It fell to women to spin the thread and weave the cloth because it was something they could do near or at home. It was compatible with child rearing and cooking" (206). But as Zipes notes, these roles were dramatically reduced with the onset of new technological equipment to work with thread:

What was disastrous to women was the fact that the actual spinning of yarn and thread became more and more mechanized. ... These machines were taken out of the house, and small factories were established. Although women continued to work in these factories ... the management was predominantly in the hands of men. (66)

Having once been valued for this work, as "the provider of the thread of life" (*Fairy Tale as Myth* 61), women became replaceable, and their work devalued as menial. As Tatar suggests, in fairy and folktales, spinning "occupies a highly ambiguous status," for "like manual labor in general, [spinning] goes hand in hand with industry and achievement, but it is also associated with physical oppression and enslavement" (Tatar 123).

Phantom Thread's focus on industry revolves around the image of a group of women working for a sole man. Its director, Anderson, notes in interview that the film adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes" from 1948 "was a particular touchstone, its tale of an obsessively committed man at the head of a creative enterprise—and the exploration of the personal and emotional toll of that commitment—an obvious parallel" (in Bell 24). He also speaks of his interest in the Gothic: "I would keep seeing pictures of these couture houses, and it was always a man with dozens of women behind him, in lab coats, doing his work. That lent itself to a gothic story, I felt" (Bell, 2018: 24). While the Gothic and fairy tale as traditions are clearly delineated, some crossover occurs in tales such as "Bluebeard," which is mirrored in Reynolds's replacement of fit models and the large house that Alma only leaves in the company of Reynolds. While Anderson places these ideas in a literary context, Bell suggests that there is also a historical element to the emphasis on women working for men and "doing his work":

The "phantom thread" in the title of Paul Thomas Anderson's eighth feature, it's said, refers to a term that seamstresses working in the East End of Victorian London used to describe the sensation they felt after emerging from long, repetitive hours in the workshop. After returning home exhausted, the women would find their hands moving involuntarily, their fingers clasped as though sewing invisible, "phantom" threads. (21)

By setting his story in a couture design house in the 1950s, Anderson focuses on traditional sewing techniques over technology, and the covert nod in the title of the film to the invisible impact on the female workers suggests an underlying interest specifically in the way that these workers' bodies are engaged in the work they do for men, and how they are invisibly affected by it.

Reynolds's female dressmaking employees reflect the spinning women of traditional fairy tale, whose skills and labor were often seen as "a girl's best dowry" (Tatar 123). Tatar observes that such stories recognized the skill involved in this form of work, but also the consequences of such labor:

In folk tales of a more realistic bent, spinning rarely builds character; it deforms the body and dulls the mind. To avoid it, a heroine is entitled to resort to almost any means. . . . Hard work was one of the perceived methods of getting ahead or at least staying even, but it also proved disfiguring and could impede the very goals it set out to achieve. (Tatar 123)

That Reynolds's girlfriends tend to be fit models rather than seamstresses furthers the connection to that fairy-tale tradition, for as Tatar suggests, tales like "Rumpelstiltskin," bring together "the pro-spinning ideology of magical fairy tales with the anti-work ethic of humorous folk tales" by featuring a protagonist who "works her way up the ladder of social success through her alleged accomplishments as a spinner, yet she also manages to avoid sitting down at a spinning wheel" (123). Any sewing Alma does comes from her own interest rather than obligation, and so she is relatively free from the toil of manual work.

The women who work for the Agent in "Reeling" are enslaved, and so their bodies are property, but as silkworm-women their bodies are inextricably changed by the work they do. As Kitsune, the narrator, explains: "I couldn't run away from the factory and I couldn't die, either, explained the Recruitment Agent. ... 'If you die, your father will pay'" (Russell 34). As fantastic creatures whose bodies are turned into living silk producers, their new form embodies the relationship between producer and product in a broader labor market based on toil, in which a product created "by hand" is born of the bodily functions (blood, sweat, and tears) that went into it. As David McNally argues, in a capitalist system, "rather than their own life-force, their fundamental human creative energy, workers' labouring power becomes a commodity, a separable and detachable thing that can be sold, handed over to someone else" (14). Kitsune and the other *kaiko*-women clearly demonstrate the complexity of such an exchange when their bodies are producing the product—the thread—and though there is machinery to extract the thread from them (the Machine), they must also serve as the "machine" that creates it, leaving them entirely tied to the job of production: "Ceaselessly, even while we dream, we are generating thread. Every droplet of our energy, every moment of our time flows into the silk" (Russell 30). As Tianhao Hou observes:

Using Foucault's words, capitalism operated through "the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production" (Foucault, 1978, p141). Thus, the control of the body in capitalist production allowed the formation of such a power that directly manipulated and subjugated human bodies. (Hou 1)

Kitsune and the other reelers act as a representation of the bodies of workers who are subjugated by the extraction of their labor: they are magically tied to the labor that in the real world is seen as separate from bodies but is, in fact, indivisible.

The character of Alma, who is Reynolds's girlfriend and who acts as his fit model in *Phantom Thread*, also occupies an unusual and revealing

space as a worker. As a fit model, Alma's role is to be a kind of living mannequin on whom clothes can be pinned, designed, and viewed. The role enables a designer to see how a piece of clothing will fit on a living wearer, how the fabric will fall, and so forth, but it also provides a consistent base for sizing, which is then scaled up and down for production depending on the size of the customer. As a fit model, Alma must work long hours, standing very still, while the dresses are designed on her body. Her first day working with Reynolds involves an unspecified start time—he simply informs her that he will knock on her door in the morning (“we will start early in the morning” “what time?” “I’ll wake you”) (Anderson 0:34:25–0:34:33). Though Alma is not imprisoned like the reelers in Russell’s story, and her working conditions, in a large and beautiful townhouse in London, are far superior, Reynolds’s room is directly next door to her own, and the lack of a specific start and end time for her working hours suggests a blur between Alma’s life as a person and her life as a worker, creating a suffocating tension, which is furthered only by the fact that this work sees her living and working in an elevated social class to her own. As Zipes suggests of “Rumpelstitskin,” “The miller’s daughter cannot spin straw into gold, and there is not even any mention that she can spin. She must depend on a man, who has miraculous powers of spinning (almost like a machine)” (*Fairy Tale as Myth* 68). Alma too must rely on a man to elevate her status: though she need not spin, her body enables her to make her way up the social hierarchy.

Alma’s body is, in a different way to the reelers, essential to her role, because were she to become pregnant or to gain or lose weight, it is likely that she would be unable to maintain her job. The specificity of Alma’s body is key too—the way she walks and moves is something that Reynolds observes with interest, his intense gaze locking on to her from the beginning. He also likes her to look a particular way; after wiping off her lipstick on their first date, he says: “I like to see who I’m talking to” (Anderson 0:17:34–0:17:34). Reynolds later comments on her physical body as though he were discussing an object: “you have no breasts” (Anderson 0:30:02–0:30:04). When she is visibly embarrassed and apologizes, he replies: “No, no, you’re perfect. It’s my job of give you some ... if I choose to” (Anderson 0:30:12–0:30:21). Aiming to put her at ease, he simultaneously reveals that he sees her body as his to mold with his dresses. There is an awkward separation of mind and body here with the body as a kind of tabula rasa that the designer can shape as he pleases, which paradoxically suggests disembodiment within the labor context:

As a commodity, labour is not seen as integral to human personhood but, instead, as something that can be isolated and given to a buyer for a stipulated period of time. In buying labouring power, then,

capital takes possession of labour, effectively draining it of its substance as a series of unique and unrepeatable acts tied to specific human personalities. Commodified abstract labour is thus effectively disembodied, detached from the persons who perform it. (McNally 14)

For Alma and Reynolds, the complexity of their arrangement is most tested when Alma does not stick to the role of fit model when Reynolds would like her to and instead inserts her *self* into a role for which he requires only her body, her compliance, and her stillness.

Part of the difficulty for Alma in acting the role of a fit model is that she is also his girlfriend, and so the boundaries between love and work are muddled. Alma's relationship with Reynolds begins in a café where she works as a waitress. Their brief exchange is full of chemistry, after which he asks her to dinner and she (already prepared for the question) drops a napkin with her phone number on it in an early display of her agency and free will. Like a fairy-tale heroine born to a life of poverty who meets a prince, this romance will offer more than just love: it will come to offer the security of wealth and status. When Alma agrees to go for dinner, she does so on the assumption that the meeting will be romantic, but at the end of their first date, Reynolds shows her his studio and asks her to try on a dress for him. When she does, he proceeds to pin the dress to fit her, and she willingly complies. The evening shifts from one of romance to one of work, which is made more pronounced by the entrance of his sister Cyril, who also speaks of Alma's figure as though it were an object: "You have the ideal shape. ... He likes a little belly" (Anderson 0:31:00–0:31:09). Cyril's distant and objective reaction to Alma highlights what the audience has already been told, that Reynolds has romances with his fit models and then casts them aside when they no longer serve him. Of one of Reynolds's former lovers, Cyril says: "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" (Anderson 0:09:52–0:10:01), confirming that: "romances with women only last while they're useful for the work—once the muse is used up, Cyril steps in to usher the ladies out the door" (Bell 21). At the same time, however, she also suggests that the woman's body is viewed as part of the transaction, and if she is "getting fat" she no longer serves either role. The relationship into which Alma and Reynolds enter is both professional and romantic, and her living in his home intensifies this bond, but it also complicates the lines between one and the other, particularly when this new world of beautiful clothes and overt wealth is so different from the one Alma used to inhabit, and therefore what she stands to lose is greater.

The boundaries between love and work are blurred too in "Reeling," but here these flirtatious beginnings serve as a way for Kitsune to feel trapped by

her complicity. When Kitsune meets the Agent, she is immediately drawn to him, explaining: “I had never seen such a handsome person in my life,” and “I met his gaze and giggled, embarrassing myself” (Russell 34). She dreams of their life together even after she realizes he has drugged her: “I even let myself imagine that the Agent might marry me” (Russell 37). She drinks the potion to impress him, discovering later that the other women had to be held down and forced to ingest it, and her reflection that “I drank the tea of my own free will” (42) is both the cause of her shame and a denial that she entered into a contract she did not understand the terms of. While Kitsune is the only one who willingly drank the potion, the other women were also excited to reel for the empire:

We were sisters already, spinning identical dreams in beds thousands of miles apart, fantasizing about gold silks and an “imperial vocation.” We envisioned our future dowries, our families’ miraculous freedom from debt. We thrilled to the same tales of women working in the grand textile mills, where steel machines from Europe gleamed in the light of the Meiji sunrise. (Russell 25)

The women were sold the story of the glory of work, and just as in a fairy-tale romance narrative of becoming a princess, they saw themselves in a role that lifted them from poverty and sadness into a glorious future, but the reality was far from it.

What Alma and Kitsune come to realize in their respective narratives is that in order to provide the labor that is expected of them they have to give all of themselves to it, for the employer is—as the villain of folklore and the metaphor of capitalism—the vampire, who takes as much blood as often as he likes. When the Agent imprisons his captives in “one brick room” (Russell 26) and transforms them into beings that produce silk that must be removed by the Machine, he creates a system that not only controls their every waking moment, but drains them physically of, not blood, but thread. Reynolds too is vampiric, stalking around like the Gothic figures Anderson was inspired by. He demands excellence and exactness from everyone around him, becoming enraged when he is not given everything he desires. When Alma is asked what he wants, she replies, “every piece of me” (Anderson); fully aware of his desires, she is happy to be drained by him. As Jason J. Morrisette argues:

Motivated solely by profit, factory owners emerge as a form of economic vampires, improving their bottom line through longer hours, lower wages, and poorer working conditions. Capitalists are, in effect, draining away the value of their workers’ labor to enrich

themselves—just as supernatural vampires drain their victims' life force to grow stronger. (639)

Though in "Reeling for the Empire" Kitsune has no choice but to stay and serve and in *Phantom Thread* Alma willingly plays the role asked of her, both women are reliant on men who will consume whatever they can.

The Machine in "Reeling" and Reynolds in *Phantom Thread* are both, interestingly, depicted as representations of monstrosity and as something that the women need or want. Alma is in love with Reynolds, and so her experience of his snapping at her for eating too loudly or speaking too much may be affronts to her, but they do not prevent her from staying even though she knows she exists on a precipice, only ever seconds from being discarded. Reynolds's monstrosity is the passive aggressive kind: he bristles and flinches at others' discretions, like a lion in a cage he paces and occasionally rages, and his threat is expulsion from this new life that his wealth, artistry, and power provide. When she challenges him, he asks, "Is this my house?" (Anderson 1:09:37–1:09:38), reminding her of the terms of their agreement: that engagement will be on his terms, or not at all, and that this house is his to expel her from.² As vampiric monster, Reynolds's mere physicality emulates those gothic antagonists like Dracula who have long been defined by their dignity and strangeness; their smiles both appealing and dangerous. The Machine, under the control of the Agent, however, is more traditionally monstrous:

The Machine looks like a great steel-and-wood beast with a dozen rotating eyes and steaming mouths—it's twenty meters long and takes up nearly half the room. The central reeler is a huge and ever-spinning O, capped with rows of flashing metal teeth. Pulleys swing our damp thread left to right across it, refining it into finished silk. Tooka shivers and says it looks as if the Machine is smiling at us. (Russell 31)

Like the open mouth of capitalism, ready to consume whatever it can sell, the "ever-spinning O" with "rows of flashing metal teeth" echo the long-held fears of consumption by ogres or vampires in folklore (see Warner), while also alluding to the relentless consumption of capitalism. The Machine's "smile" is haunting and dangerous but also reflective of the joy of the vampiric capitalist that Morrisette suggested delights in consumption. And yet, as Alma longs for Reynolds's favor, the women long for the mercy of the Machine, which is the only thing that will offer a release from the burden of their ever-growing thread: "I can hardly sleep, moaning for dawn and the machine" (26). The Machine that reels until they are empty and Reynolds who wants "every piece of" Alma (Anderson 0.01.27), are the monstrous, vampiric threats that become

symbols of the desire that fuels capitalism and the ways in which that desire is inextricable from the bodies that contain it.

However, though they may crave their employers, the women in these narratives (perhaps with Reynolds's sister Cyril as the sole exception) are all ultimately replaceable. As Bell observes of *Phantom Thread*:

The bodies of Bluebeard's former wives (22) were locked away in the forbidden room in the old fable, but Reynold's women simply vanish from the house once they are no longer needed, living on only as phantoms in the exquisite dresses they once inspired and wore. (21–22)

During an argument, Alma says to Reynolds: "I'm standing around like an idiot waiting for you ... to get rid of me, to tell me to leave. So, tell me, so I don't stand around like a fucking fool" (Anderson 1:09:08–1:09:26). And while Kitsune is told by the Agent that she must "not die," when another reeler, Dai, goes on strike and refuses to reel any silk, the Agent doesn't appear until three days after she dies. The seeming lack of urgency, combined with his cold response to Dai's dead body—"he touches her belly with a stick" (Russell 44)—reveal the reality: that his workers are expendable and will simply be replaced.

The disposable nature of these workers is connected to the lack of humanity granted the women by the men in both narratives. Kitsune's nonhumanity is literal in her form as an enormous silkworm, while Alma's is far more subtle and figurative. As Reynolds's fit model she is expected to behave in ways that do not exhibit her personality or too much of her humanity. He becomes enraged when she has opinions about the dress, suggesting she has "no taste" (Anderson 0:36:07–0:36:08); when she butters her toast at breakfast he finds it "hard to ignore, it's like you've just ridden a horse through the room. It's too much movement" (Anderson 0:38:52–0:39:04); and he is even infuriated when she brings him tea while he's working as "the tea is going out—the interruption stays right here with me" (Anderson 0:47:17–0:47:21). Reynolds chose her to work for him and love him, he will "give" her breasts should he choose to, and he wants control over every aspect of their lives, even down to the way they eat asparagus, leaving very little spontaneity or decisions for Alma to make and expecting her to exist, perhaps, less like a human being, and more like the mannequin she emulates for a living. McNally suggests that:

when Marx claims that capitalism is organised on the basis of *abstract* labour, he also has the literal sense of the word in mind. To abstract [Latin: *abstrahere*, "to draw away"] is literally to separate, detach, cut

off. And capitalism abstracts (detaches, cuts off) labour and its products from the concrete and specific individuals who perform unique productive acts, treating all work as effectively identical and interchangeable. (14)

Alma's personality is the thorn in Reynolds's side, denying his attempts to abstract her labor from the "concrete and specific individual" that she is. When he snaps at her she rebuffs him, refusing to let his obvious power dominate, and challenges his pettiness, for example, when he scolds her for moving too much at breakfast she says, "I am buttering my toast. I am not moving too much" (Anderson 0:38:35–0:38:38) and when Cyril asks her to eat her breakfast elsewhere after he compares buttering toast to riding a horse through the room, she replies: "He's being fussy" (Anderson 0:39:33–0:39:34). Alma's job becomes her life, and so the stakes are high when angering him, and yet she cannot contain her humanity and her individuality, and her rebuttals confront Reynolds with the difficulty of containing a living human in the form of inhuman worker.

McNally observes that "commodified labour involves a profound and thorough-going restructuring of human experience: people's sense of their very bodies, of their capacities and creative energies, of the interrelation of self and things, and of self and others—all of these are utterly transformed by commodification" (15), and Alma and the *kaiko*-women of the Nowhere Mill factory, in many ways demonstrate this restructured human experience. When Marx suggests that "the working class cannot simply *lay hold* of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes," he might have seen the contemporary equivalents of Alma and Kitsune in his mind, trapped by the capitalist working structures that contain them, either physically or economically or emotionally. Yet, as McNally goes on to say: "workers do not submit to this new reality without resistance. Because it ruptures established customs, social relations and sense of personhood, the rise of capitalist labour-markets invariably meets with potent opposition" (15), and the final stages of these texts reveal the resistance that Alma and Kitsune engage in, ultimately overpowering, in very different ways, the oppressive work-contexts they have been metaphorically and literally imprisoned by.

In "Reeling for the Empire," resistance begins with a strike by one of the other reelers, Dai, based on the sudden realization that "the silk belongs to us, we make it" (Russell 43) and therefore can stop making it. But after Dai's death, Kitsune and the others realize that they cannot exist outside the factory because they need the Machine: "Unless we live here, where the Machine can extract the thread from our bodies at speeds no human hand could match, the silk will build and build and kill us in the end" (Russell 45). This reality

spurs Kitsune to remember that silkworms are the caterpillars of silk moths, and moths have “wings and teeth” (Russell 46) and realize that she does not need magic to transform, she can rely on a metamorphosis found in nature. When Kitsune begins to weave her own cocoon it is therefore like breathing: “The weaving comes so naturally to me that I am barely aware I am doing it, humming as if in a dream” (Russell 47). But in order to have the right density of thread, she has to think repeatedly of her life as a human, has to relive a time when she existed in human form, and the choices she made to get here. When the other reelers understand what she is building, they too begin to weave their own cocoons, and then dismantle the Machine itself: “we spend the next six days dismantling and reassembling the machine, using its gears and reels to speed the production of our own shimmering cocoons” (Russell 49). It is surely no coincidence that “kitsune” means “fox” in Japanese, and in Japanese folklore the fox is a shapeshifter who often tricks humans, especially men. When the Agent returns, they suffocate him in a cocoon they designed especially for him, reciting their names to see if he remembers their humanity. In a kind of reverse echo of “Rumpelstiltskin,” whose name is guessed, the *kaiko*-women call out theirs to reclaim their subjectivity.

Already able to fly a little, but waiting for the final transformation into moths, they look up to the only window in the building, high on the ceiling. After she says her name one last time, Kitsune observes: “the last thing I see before shutting my eyes is the reflection of my shining new face” (Russell 52). The story ends there, with the rebellion complete but the future as mere potential, and yet Kitsune’s “shining new face” is one that reveals the joy of that resistance. These nonhuman workers, who in time can even shed language to communicate with each other, embrace their nonhumanity, but more importantly, their new and embodied existence and use it to break the system that enslaved them—they literally do “*lay hold* of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes” (Marx). Though it is not simple, and they do not have assurances for the future, both the Machine and Kitsune’s own body (made by the state) are the machinery that can be wielded here, and claimed, freeing her and her fellow *kaiko-joko* from that old existence at least.

Alma’s resistance sees her “lay hold of the ready-made state machinery” that is embodied by Reynolds, but what differs here is that Alma does not want to escape the situation by transforming herself, she wants to change him. Early in the story, she notices that Reynolds is very different when he is ill, and after a series of unpleasant exchanges she cooks a poisonous mushroom and serves it to him. When he is bedbound for days he relies on and wants only her, and following this illness, even marries her, and so in a kind of fairy-tale transformation, he becomes, in that state, the man the beast usually hides.

Following this temporary bliss, however, he returns to his usual self, and Alma prepares to poison him again. Anderson says of Alma's character: "if this is what love is meant to look like [a cynical, financial arrangement], she doesn't want a piece of it" (Bell 24). For her, the only way to reach that power balance is by taking control of his body with a poison that makes him ill enough to submit to her love and share his own. The film's twist comes with the realization that Reynolds knows what she is planning and takes part willingly. In the end it is not accepting the Beast for who he is that gives her a happy ending, but resisting his passive aggressive tyranny with a poisonous "spell" that transforms him on her own terms.

*

China Mieville (2002) has argued that: "'Real' life under capitalism is a fantasy," and therefore "the fantastic might be a mode peculiarly suited to and resonant with the forms of modernity" because it "mimics the 'absurdity' of capitalist modernity" (42). Though *Phantom Thread* is presented realistically, it is based in fairy-tale tradition and in the absurd and can therefore be seen to exist in parallel to the fantastic. McNally argues that

the very insidiousness of the capitalist grotesque has to do with its invisibility, in other words, the ways in which monstrosity becomes normalised and naturalised via its colonisation of the essential fabric of everyday life, beginning with the very texture of corporeal experience in the modern world. (2)

Fabric and texture are appropriate metaphors here, especially when we consider the normalization of Reynolds's behavior as the employer of women, and the ways in which it is the corporeal experiences of both Alma and Kitsune that reveal their oppression within the context of their work. Both of these texts ask us to confront the hypocrisy of our relationship with production, with what goes on behind the scenes—from slave labor, to the workers whose bodies retain the work that they do after they leave, the attitude to workers as replaceable, and the objectification of those workers. These narratives involve the creation of beautiful products, but the power relations behind their creation can be ugly, often becoming dangerously normalized to the participants while remaining invisible to the outside world.

When Rumpelstiltskin spins his final round of gold for the miller's daughter, what she has traded, by then, is her firstborn child—her future flesh and blood—because, at that point, the threat of death is a concrete reality, and the child only exists in the abstract. Later, however, the miller's daughter,

now a Queen, will enlist her own laborers to help her win back the right to her child. While the trading and laboring do not end, then, what the woman has now is the agency to make her own choices and to refuse to trade in her own flesh and blood. Zipes observes that for a long time,

the spindle was associated with the womb, [a woman's] ultimate power of creativity, her autonomy. The woman as spinner was the provider of the thread of life, the producer of clothes was one of the earliest marks of civilization distinguishing humans from animals, and the producer of surplus profit. (*Fairy Tale as Myth* 61)

What these two contemporary narratives suggest, however, is that a woman's creativity is stifled by the working systems of capitalism, and that the way to challenge "commodified abstract labour" as "disembodied, detached from the persons who perform it" (14), is to recognize labor as an embodied act, not alienated from the self but fully a part of it. It is only when Kitsune and Alma bring their identities, feelings, desires, and the darkness and resistance that come with these, to their work (and in Alma's case, her relationship) that they can reclaim both their bodies and their lives from their masters. Alma can relish giving "every piece" (Anderson 0.01.26) of herself when she knows she can ask for (and take) the same. Having been emotionally bruised by Reynolds's tyranny, she forces his transformation to reclaim her own life. And Kitsune's "shining new face" (Russell 52) is glimmering with the potentiality that transformation can bring when it is hers to own, and to choose:

I had unreckonable power. I didn't know that at the time. But when I return . . . now, I can feel them webbing around me: my choices, their infinite variety, spiralling out of my hands, my invisible thread. (Russell 45)

Unlike the "phantom thread" that leaves workers the feeling of the work they have carried out, Kitsune's "invisible thread" is the source of her power, creativity, and autonomy once she claims it.

Zipes observes that: "According to the Aarne-Thompson tale type 500, Rumpelstiltskin is categorized as a helper, while he is obviously a blackmailer and oppressor" ("Spinning" 43), which reflects (among other things) the shift that takes place in his story—from the exchange of jewelry for work, to the exchange of human lives. *Phantom Thread* and "Reeling for the Empire" echo, if not the narrative of "Rumpelstiltskin," then certainly the complexity behind the exchanges, and the ways in which a shift in intention can turn exchange into oppression and back again. They also offer protagonists who, like the

millers daughter, find a way to “win” against the odds, for Kitsune and Alma both find something like joy in their resistance, a kind of happy ending. The fantastical transformations Kitsune and the other reelers have suffered become biological transformations that offer hope and represent the freedom of the enslaved. When Alma says that Reynolds has made her “dreams come true” (Anderson 0:01:13–0:01:14) she echoes the Disneyfied idea of the fairy-tale ending, but unlike “Beauty, the heroine, as the questor who discovers [the Beast’s] true nature” (Warner 275) and finds him permanently transformed by her love, Alma must force Reynolds’s transformation over and over again into the man she loves. In the final moments of the film she describes the potential for the inflicted sickness to kill him, but smiling as she does so, she reveals that the real transformation of the film is hers: she is now a Beast too. But these “happy endings,” in all their complexity, also highlight the reality that happy-ever-afters are not possible for everyone within this system. Outside the fantasy endings of these tales, exchanges continue to be made in the real world for bodies and labor that leave workers, like those seamstresses in Victorian England and the disfigured spinners of folk and fairy tale, sewing phantom threads and waiting for relief.

Notes

1. Of course, all human work is tied to the body in that it is undertaken by embodied subjects, but there are also types of labor that are *more* connected to the physical body itself, such as when a person’s physical abilities/physique are crucial to the work, e.g., manual labor, or in the examples studied.
2. The house is, in fact, paid for by a benefactor, to whom Reynolds is begrudgingly indebted (another layer of exchange)—but to all intents and purposes the house is his to live in and use as he pleases.

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