does the work as a matter of routine. Another grey-haired lady turns up in the country house just long enough to explain the difference, equally required by the plot, between edible mushrooms and the other sort. On Woodcock's first visit there at the beginning of the film, before he meets Alma, he seems to arrive at an empty house which is nevertheless in every way ready for him. When he takes her back with him to stay the night, there's even a dog to greet them, a dog that is never seen or heard from again. Perhaps it starved to death, waiting in vain for the return of its preoccupied master.

In other words, *Phantom Thread* is not one of those rare works able to offer social criticism of a past period, as *Mad Men* did on television and Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven* did on the big screen, rather than simply wallowing in its more glamorous aspects. Daniel Day-Lewis is a late-arriving and exceptional practitioner of the approach associated with Method acting, and no doubt he could explain to his director's satisfaction how Reynolds Woodcock coped with his childhood experiences, just as Lesley Manville, though she passed through a different school of authenticity (Mike Leigh's), would be able to explain why her character is called Cyril, and why she has no life of her own outside the business. It's just that little of this presumable psychological depth makes it as far as the screen.

It's a strange role for Daniel Day-Lewis to choose as his last performance before retiring, but then announcing your retirement is a strange thing for an actor to be doing anyway. It seems to emphasize that acting is a physically demanding job, which it can be but isn't necessarily. It's possible to scale down your workload, just as Alfred Brendel did when he stopped playing certain large-scale works, such as the *Hammerklavier*, a decade or so before he retired altogether. From Day-Lewis's point of view it seems to be accepting defeat to settle for supporting roles or cameos (in his supporting role on *Gangs of New York* he ate the supposed star of the film, Leonardo Di Caprio, alive). Ralph Fiennes has seemed in the past to take himself and his craft as seriously as Day-Lewis, but in recent years has improved his prospects of professional longevity, partly by exploring a comic vein that might have seemed closed to him.

Day-Lewis seems to be implying that he goes deeper into a character than anyone, and pays a greater price for his excellence, but it's possible to disagree. In the years between *Lincoln* in 2012 and *Phantom Thread*, for instance, Daniel Day-Lewis appeared in no films, while Meryl Streep is credited with eight over that period – only two of them in leading roles, it's true, but it's unlikely that she appeared on set to play the supporting role of Emmeline Pankhurst in *Suffragette* any the less prepared or immersed.

Neither Daniel Day-Lewis nor Paul Thomas Anderson would take kindly to *Phantom Thread* being described as a melodrama, though that unfairly despised genre has been revived and repurposed with great success not only by Todd Haynes but by Pedro Almodóvar. A melodrama is what it is, though, and as it works itself out rather a silly one, with a resolution that may even excite the protest of laughter. Somewhere in the background of the film are several templates from classics of the genre. There's the narrative of an infatuated innocent trying to understand her place in the life of a complex older man – that's *Rebecca*, and there's undoubtedly some of Mrs Danvers's possessiveness in Cyril. But Alma is well able to look after herself. There's the story of a woman whose passion leads her towards unlimited sacrifice, and that's another Joan Fontaine role, *Suspicion*, with the ending that Hitchcock had to soften – except Alma is serenely confident that she will be with Reynolds Woodcock in many future lifetimes. And there's *All About Eve*, its genes resourcefully spliced onto *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Almodóvar for *All About My Mother*, with its drama of a mature woman's usurpation by someone she relied on. But *All About Eve* loses its flavour in the absence of original sin, and Alma in her own particular way just wants them all to be happy.

Mutually assured

The soulful story of amphibious love

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

THE SHAPE OF WATER
Various cinemas

Guillermo del Toro's best films encompass both brutal violence and the supernatural in tense narratives about the Spanish Civil War. Many of the scenes in *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), a heart-rending portrait of an orphanage run by Republican loyalists in a remote part of Spain, are Goyaesque: ghostly apparitions, sadistic suffering, dusty sun-bleached floors and walls. Del Toro's rich imagination went a step further in the stylish, disturbing fantasy *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), with characters such as the Pale Man, a hairless monster with eyes in the palms of his hands.

Interspersed between these, though, were a couple of unremarkable superhero films (including *Hellboy*, 2004) and the disastrous *Crimson Peak* (2015), a Victorian-period horror with a paper-thin plot (an incestuous brother and sister, played by Tom Hiddleston and Jessica Chastain, seduce and poison an heiress; and it turns out they've done it a few times before). The film's only saving grace is Del Toro's signature atmospheric visuals. The siblings' mansion slowly subsides into the blood-red clay that it sits on; in a seduction scene, we see a close-up of an ant's mandibles crunching into the eyes of a dying butterfly. In his latest offering, however, Del Toro has returned to using the darkness of real events (the Cold War, this time) as the backdrop for a lithe commentary on love, loss and prejudice.

The Shape of Water is at its core a whimsical romance between an amphibious creature (Doug Jones) and Elisa (a brilliant performance by Sally Hawkins), a mute who communicates through sign language – we find out that she was abandoned in a river as a baby and discovered with three claw marks on her neck; that's why she cannot speak. The film opens underwater: we're taken through the doorway of a verdigris-heavy lair into Elisa's dilapidated flat above a cinema in the 1960s, where chairs and a table float in time to pizzicato strings and accordion (Alexandre Desplat's jaunty score is reminiscent of Yann Tiersen's from *Amélie*, 2001). Elisa starts awake with the noise of her alarm clock and the green water that surrounded her disappears. A narrator – Elisa's neighbour Giles, played by Richard Jenkins – introduces her as "the princess without a voice" and speaks of "the monster who tried to destroy it all".

But unlike the fish-human in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), the thriller that Del Toro clearly references, Jones's blue-striped amphibian is not the monster here; he is soulful and mesmerizing. The villain is an all-American government agent, Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon), who captured the "ugly as sin" thing in the depths of the Amazon, dragged it in a tank to an aerospace research laboratory in Baltimore and now wants scientists to vivisect it to find out about its complex respiratory system. They think this information will help them win the space race against the Soviet Union, another monster, represented as a caricature of the mob, dressed in black suits and mishearing passwords, who are plotting to steal the creature from the Americans. By making fun of the Russians, Del Toro, who co-wrote the film, diminishes their menace and importance, as he does occasionally with Strickland, too (he carries an electric cattle prod that he calls "my dingus").

Elisa works in this research lab as a night-shift cleaner. When she and her colleague Zelda (Octavia Spencer) witness Strickland lurch out of a secret room covered in blood with two fingers missing, they are brought in to clean up "the pickle". One of the many joys about this film is its flashes of eccentric comedy: here, Elisa throws a bucket of water at the bloody floor and two small pieces of human flesh appear in the backwash. She then notices the "asset", as Strickland and his team call it, injured and chained in a small pool. Soon, she's feeding him boiled eggs, playing him music on a portable record player and mirroring his elegant movements by dancing with her mop. They understand each other, they connect. This creature "doesn't know how I am incomplete", she signs to Giles. "He sees me for what I am." The schmaltz is a little overdone, although it is remarkable how much tenderness and playfulness Hawkins expresses with her face alone. Overhearing Strickland's plans for the asset, Elisa decides to rescue him. But it is far from smooth: busy scenes of saturated colour, careering laundry vans and clandestine shoot-outs add to the almost cartoon-like feel of the film.

Sally Hawkins as Elisa

There is a lot more on offer here, though. Baltimore during the 1950s and 60s, along with other cities in the Northeast, saw a shift in its population, as many white people moved to the suburbs and those left were likely to be black. Not being the right race, gender or sexuality was a problem. In the film, we see Strickland drive back to his picket-fenced suburban home, complete with blonde housewife and two kids. During awkward, mechanical sex, his injured hand bleeds all over his wife's face; she hesitatingly mentions it, but he covers her mouth and tells her to be silent. (When Elisa drops her clothes and embraces the creature, however, the shot pans away, dissolving through a door; it's to Del Toro's credit that we believe their lovemaking is too magnificent to be shown.) In another scene, Giles, a struggling illustrator, quietly homosexual, chats up a waiter in a local diner, touching his hand. Giles is thrown out, just after a young black couple who are told there is no space in the empty restaurant.

This moves Giles to help Elisa rescue the creature. Before, we watched him switch the television channel from race riots on the news to golden age musicals (Elisa and Giles spend their time watching Judy Garland, Bojangles, Shirley Temple). Now, he is attuned to the persecution of minorities. For a film about being heard, or the lack of it, the dialogue suffers from a couple of bumps, all the more noticeable because elsewhere it is sharp and often funny. When Strickland sees for the first time how powerful the creature can be, he delivers a clunky one-liner: "Fuck, you are a god".

The Shape of Water revels in its likeness to folk tale, mythology and Hollywood, even to the extent of reuniting actors with previous characters: Shannon plays what amounts to a variation of his role in the television series *Boardwalk Empire*; Spencer's performance could have been lifted from the one she gives in *The Help* (2011); and, apart from not being able to talk, Jones's amphibian looks very like the humanoid Abraham Sapien that he plays in *Hellboy*. And yet, as in all the best tales, this patchwork of borrowed material somehow works. It infuses the film with gravitas and nostalgia. An irresistible scene towards the end sums up Del Toro's intelligent and meaningful repurposing: Elisa sits opposite the creature at her kitchen table, knowing she will have to give him up later that day. As a spotlight falls on her, she mimes the words to an Alice Faye song ("You'll never know just how much I love you") that plays in the background. The image quickly turns black and white and she is transported onto a sparse film set in a full-length ball gown, like those worn by the heroines she watches on television. She sings and waltzes with the creature for a few seconds, then everything disappears; back in the kitchen, she can't cough up a sound. This interlude is the only moment in the film where we hear Elisa's voice. It is filled with glorious elation, followed by anguish.