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Mentored Scholarly Essay

The Fantastic Mr. Anderson?  
The Wes Anderson Presence in the Film World

Included in the DVD of *The Darjeeling Limited* is a twenty-minute documentary, by Barry Braverman, on the making of the film. The short is composed of production designer Mark Friedberg narrating and explaining details of the train cars used in the film, interspersed with shots of locals watching Wes Anderson, the director, and the actors shooting scenes in the cities and countryside of India. During Friedberg's segments, he points out a laundry list of handcrafted details that went into the making of the set. Tiny hand-painted elephants were placed all along the corridors of the train car, the chairs in the dining car were hand-carved, the dishes hand-painted and even the tablecloths hand-blocked with intricate designs. Friedberg expresses that Anderson was very specific about what he wanted. The documentary then cuts back to Anderson working with his crew, fixing the actors' clothing right before filming starts, instructing them where to move, and reviewing a shot through his Teletest. After examining a recently filmed shot, the audience overhears him say, "...and it's framed perfectly. That's the thing we were looking for" (*Darjeeling*). Just this brief look into the making of one his films reveals precisely who Wes Anderson is as a filmmaker. Obsessed with detail and involved in almost every aspect of the creative process, one understands how his films end up with such a distinctive "Anderson" fingerprint. A Wes Anderson film is unmistakably part of Anderson's world, for better or worse. Anderson's role as an auteur

has overshadowed the placement of his films into specific genres; he has created his own Andersonian genre. Proof of this can be seen in critiques of his work, as well as in his influence on other young, contemporary filmmakers. Although some may criticize his work for existing solely within the “Anderson world,” his influences, both those that inspire him and those that are inspired *by* him, demonstrate that his films participate in an extensive filmic conversation. But let’s first look at how and why Anderson has obtained the status of an auteur. It is necessary to examine the elements of his work that combine to create the Andersonian genre.

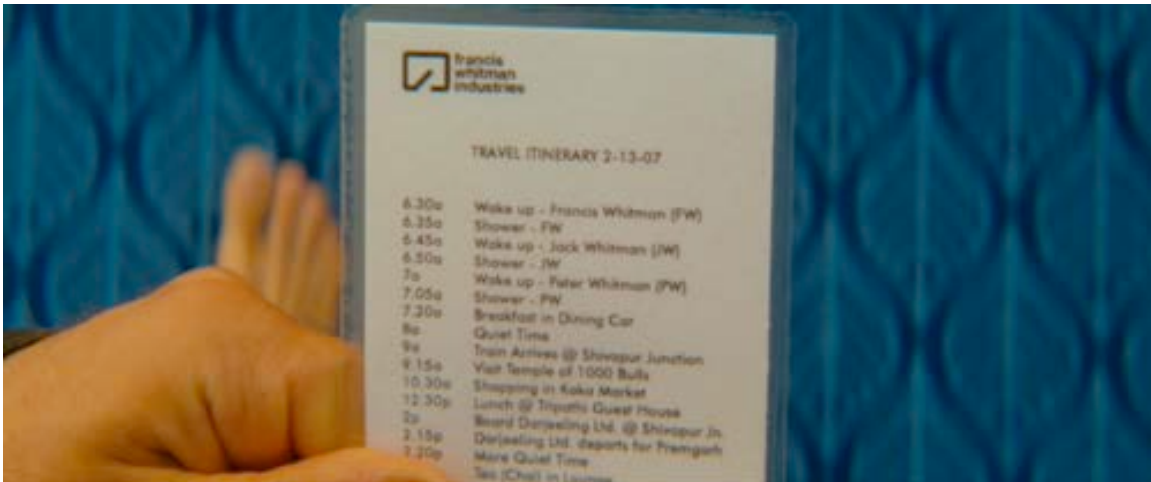
### **Shot Composition and Andersonian Camerawork**

One of the most striking aspects of Anderson’s work is how he arranges the composition of a shot. This includes placement of actors and cameras, as well as colors and settings. Anderson often uses perfect symmetry when balancing his shots. Mark Browning, in his book, *Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matter*, compares Anderson’s framing to that of paintings. He points out that Anderson rarely uses transitions, or at least those that call much attention to themselves, and that he focuses very deliberately on mise-en-scene. This deliberation is apparent in his placing of objects and actors in specific shots. Many scenes will have the main character positioned facing the camera and directly centered. The objects in the room surrounding the person often add to the symmetry of the shot. For instance, in *Life Aquatic (Aquatic)*, when Jane (Cate Blanchett) interviews Steve (Bill Murray) for the first time, he is sitting at a table, directly facing her (and the camera), with a large rectangular window behind him. This window is actually a tank filled with bright blue water that contrasts sharply with the actor placed in front of it.

There are two parallel lines in the tank, which run directly behind each side of Steve's head, which frame him within the shot and are perpendicular to the outline of the window and the horizontal plane of the table. When Anderson sets up these entirely symmetrical frames, he situates each character directly in front of the camera, as though he or she is speaking to the audience, as opposed to over-the-shoulder shots, which are common in most scenes of conversations between two characters.



This deliberate framing is also used in showing the audience specific objects that are of importance to a character. Usually these objects will factor into the narrative, and Anderson gives them significance by allowing them to fill the screen. In many of his films, the camera will be placed directly above the object, so the audience is looking straight down at it. There are several examples of this in *The Darjeeling Limited* (*Darjeeling*), such as the stewardess's tray or the trunk with the perfume bottle being held over it. Also, at the beginning of *Rushmore*, Max (Jason Schwartzman) is walking down the hallway with the piece of paper with Ms. Cross' name and room number on it. The audience views the paper from directly above, looking straight down at the paper in his hands and at his feet moving on the carpet. This exact composition is also used in *Darjeeling*, when Schwartzman's character is walking down the corridor of the train, holding the itinerary in his hands.



Another example of typically Andersonian camerawork in *Darjeeling* is Jack's (Schwartzman) entrance into the temple. He reaches up and rings the bell hanging in the doorway as he walks through and the audience is shown the bell from directly underneath, in the center of the screen, as he rings it. Then the camera pans along the colorful ceiling of the temple and down to his brothers standing directly in front of him. This creates an atypical point of view, as though the audience is experiencing the strangeness of the situation along with Jack.

Anderson also uses the montage to give the audience a large amount of information in a short amount of time. This rapid succession of shots allows him to skip any sort of exposition and get right on with the story. Jean-Pierre Jeunet also uses this technique for the same purposes in *Amélie* (2001). Jeunet shows a quick montage at the film's beginning to introduce each of the characters and give background on each of them. The first time Anderson uses this technique is in 1998's *Rushmore*, but it resurfaces then again in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (*Tenenbaums*) released in 2001 and in *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* (*Mr. Fox*), released in 2009. It is difficult to say who is inspiring who, but both filmmakers embrace this technique in order to glide quickly through background

information and establish a character's history and personality. While Jeunet's use of montage shows that Anderson is not the only one to tell a story in this way, it does exhibit that Anderson is part of a larger dialogue among filmmakers. Whether he is the one being inspired or doing the inspiring, he is participating in a conversation that exists outside his own world. In *Mr. Fox* there is a description of the three farmers with a voice-over by Bill Murray. This montage is shown very rapidly with a great deal of symmetry. We're told very specific and peculiar characteristics of each farmer. The way this is set up reminds one of the portrayal of Margot's history in *Tenenbaums*, as well as the initial introduction of the family in that same film. In *Aquatic*, we're given a tour of Steve Zissou's boat, and in *Rushmore*, we're shown a montage of all of Max's activities. Anderson often employs the use of a montage or gives the audience a catalog of information in quick succession, often in perfectly balanced shots. The rapidity of the information given and the peculiarity of the details has become a trait of Anderson's work.

Another technique that Anderson uses is a sudden switching from normal speed to slow motion and a change in music at the point of this change in speed. This is used in *Tenenbaums* when Richie (Luke Wilson) picks up Margot (Gwenyth Paltrow) at the bus station, and she departs the bus in slow motion, walking towards Richie. In *Darjeeling*, this occurs when Peter (Adrien Brody) is running to catch the train at the film's beginning. The scene suddenly becomes slow motion, and the music abruptly changes from a pulsing sitar to the steady beat of a British rock song. The technique is used again at the funeral of the little boy in the Indian village. There is a slow motion shot of the three brothers in pale clothes, getting into the Indian cab to go to the funeral, and

suddenly the music stops, and it cuts to the three of them sitting in the back of a limo for their father's funeral in New York, all dressed in black. In this particular example, Anderson has chosen to not only change the music, but this time, to also cut to a different location.

### **Color!**

In addition to symmetry and slow motion sequences, the audience will notice a striking array of colors in his presentations, in both the costumes that his characters wear and in the settings that they inhabit. *Tenenbaums* is saturated with brilliant color, and one has to look no further than the bright pink of the walls of the house or Pagoda's costuming to notice this. Anderson seems to use bright, often primary, colors in his work to enhance his trademark symmetrical compositions, as well as to signify certain feelings or make certain characters stand out more. In one scene of *Aquatic*, Eleanor (Anjelica Huston) is leaving the island at night. She is wearing bright green pants and scarf, which make her stand out against the darkness of the water and sky behind her. Also, during the scene of the helicopter crash, Anderson refrains from even showing us the characters in the crash, but instead flashes of solid colors fill the screen, signifying the pain and chaos of the crash.



### **Metaphors Literalized**

Some have accused Anderson of being too deliberate in his interpretations of metaphors on screen, but one wonders if this heavy-handedness, which is so common in so many aspects of Anderson's work, is purposeful. The scene of the brothers in *Darjeeling* finally dropping their father's "baggage" is one of the most mocked. How much more literal can one get than leaving behind your actual luggage? But does Anderson do this purposefully? This particular trope appears quite often in his work, allowing Anderson's visual style to invade even the mind. During another scene in *Darjeeling*, the brothers are meditating silently with their mother. The audience sees a montage of shots showing what is happening in each of their lives at that moment. Peter's wife is pregnant and lying in bed; Francis' assistant is on a plane home. Each scene is depicted as a compartment on the Darjeeling Limited, so the audience is quite literally seeing their train of thought. This deliberate visualization seems to fit with the rest of Anderson's interpretations and style. He resists realist elements in favor of more fanciful ones. The bright colors, overly stylized camerawork and deliberate placement of his

actors in the frame all call attention to themselves as purposeful visual techniques.

Anderson's literalized metaphors seem to have the same effect of being self-aware.

### **Family Matters**

In addition to visual elements that appear in almost every Anderson film, there are also several thematic features that are common in his work. Familial issues, particularly involving parents, are also a frequent theme in Anderson's films. The strained father-son relationship is especially prevalent in his work, such as the long-absent Royal Tenenbaum, Ned and Steve in *Aquatic*, and Mr. Fox and Ash. Similarly, but slightly more complicated is Max's relationship with his real father, as well as his relationship with his surrogate father, Mr. Blume. Unhappy marriages also abound in Anderson's work. Mrs. Fox tells Mr. Fox: "I love you, but I shouldn't have married you." Royal and Etheline Tenenbaum are estranged, and then eventually divorced. Steve spends almost all of *Aquatic* attempting to prove his worth to his wife, who is separated from him. In *Darjeeling*, Peter tells his brothers that he always assumed he would end up divorced, and the boys are on their way to confront their mother about not coming to their father's funeral. Anderson's movies usually revolve around a partially estranged family with anxious relations with one another.

### **Existentialism**

In all of Anderson's films, there is a repeated sentiment of questioning the meaning of life: "What am I doing here?" Characters are looking for meaning and significance, and there is an outright admittance to not knowing what they want, as well



as a sense of embarking on a journey. In *Darjeeling*, the brothers are on a spiritual journey to find both themselves and answers to life's questions. Steve Zissou is on a journey not only to find revenge, but also to find himself and figure out why he has become a failure. Both Mr. Blume in *Rushmore* and Richie in *Tenenbaums*, are questioning their own existences and asking why they are here. Under the layers of bright colors and upbeat music, Anderson has his characters asking themselves some deep questions: what is the point of it all?

### **Fetish Actors**

Like many auteurs, Anderson has the tendency to work with the same cast of actors in many of his films. These include Owen and Luke Wilson, Anjelica Huston and Bill Murray, Jason Schwartzman, Michael Gambon, Willem Dafoe, Kumar Pallana, Brian Cox, and Adrien Brody. He also uses his close friend, Wallace Wolodarsky, who appeared in *Rushmore*, *Darjeeling*, and *Fox*. And while he is not in *Aquatic*, there is a character named Wolodarsky after him. He also uses his brother, Eric Anderson, who also appeared in *Rushmore*, *Tenenbaums* and *Aquatic*. As with other auteurs, this effect helps in creating a specific Andersonian world. The audience begins to associate certain actors with Anderson's films, and not only do we expect specific visual and thematic elements when viewing his work, we expect to see the same group of actors who seem to exist within Anderson's universe.

## Typography

In more than one of Anderson's films, the audience is shown written words on the screen, in either Futura or Helvetica font. In *Rushmore*, he labels all the clubs in which Max is involved. In *Aquatic*, he writes out the day of the journey and where they are located. In *Tenenbaums*, we're visually shown the names of Etheline's various suitors, as well as Margot's history, and in *Mr. Fox*, he uses the yellow font again, to set up each new chapter of the story. Browning relates this habit of writing on the screen to past directors that seem to have influenced Anderson. "Unlike Godard's use of intertitles, breaking the dramatic illusion, forcing viewers to read text rather than images, and overtly reminding viewers of the presence of the director, Anderson adopts a more subtle version of this technique" (108). On more than one account, Anderson has admitted to being heavily inspired by Godard, and, here, Browning makes a connection between the two directors' work, but he also points out how Anderson uses this technique in his own way.



## Uniforms

Anderson loves using uniforms and specific outfits for his characters. In *Rushmore*, Max wears his school uniform with a navy blazer, even when he is kicked out of Rushmore Academy and attends the public school. Mr. Blume (Bill Murray) appears to wear the same suit throughout the entire film, with different shirts and ties. However, the shirts and ties are always monochromatic. In the last scene, when they have reconciled, and Max is celebrating the success of his play, he is dressed like Mr. Blume, with a shirt and bow tie that are the same color. Here, Max's clothes seem to change depending on whom he is aligning himself with at the time. They reflect his relationships with the other characters in the film. Clothing in *Tenenbaums* reflects the inability to grow out of childhood, as the audience is forced to notice that all the characters wear the same outfits both as children and as adults. Margot has her fur coat and barrette in her hair, Richie wears his tennis headband, brown suit and oversized sunglasses, and Chas is always in his red tracksuit. Later in the film, Royal and Pagoda get jobs as elevator operators in a hotel, and spend the second half of the movie wearing their work uniforms. Eli wears a cowboy outfit, Etheline (Huston) wears only monochromatic dress suits with a pencil in her hair, and Henry Sherman (Danny Glover) wears bright plaid button-up shirts, large bowties, and navy blazers. In *Aquatic*, Team Zissou wear matching light blue uniforms and red hats. In *Darjeeling*, the three main characters wear the same three suits they brought with them or are in matching pastel-hued pajamas. Once a character puts on a piece of clothing, it will continue to show up throughout the rest of the film. Even in *Mr. Fox*, uniforms play a part in the narrative of the film. When the characters go on raids, they wear bandit hats, which serve as a sort of rite of passage. It is when Ash

finally receives his father's approval that he receives one of these prized hats to wear. As in most of Anderson's films, there is a tie between material objects, usually clothes, and family approval. When Steve Zissou in *Aquatic* is disappointed in Ned, he tells him to take off his Team Zissou uniform. In *Darjeeling*, the brothers spend the film fighting over their dead father's personal belongings.

### **Retro Anachronism**

Anderson tends to create an ambiguous time period in all his films. We know that *Tenenbaums* is supposed to take place in the present (21<sup>st</sup> century), but he uses dated fashions, electronics from the 80's and other retro props. The time period of *Mr. Fox* is also ambiguous. Mr. Fox's walkman that he uses to listen to music and the TV in the farmer's house look like they could be from the 80's or 70's, respectively. The town looks like an English village from the early 1900's, but there is a TV news van parked next to one of the businesses with a satellite on top. This temporal confusion seems to give his films an anachronistic feeling, which makes his work seem to not fit into a specific time period. When asked about this ambiguity, Anderson states, "I almost unconsciously decided to not specify where [my movies] were taking place, and to fill them with details that were not of any particular time period" (Tucker).

All these elements, both stylistic and thematic, combine to show how Anderson can be considered an auteur. Although many other auteurs share these same techniques (specific camerawork, onscreen font, fetish actors, etc.), the above examination shows how Anderson uses these elements in order to convey his own story through his work.

Now that it Anderson's role as an auteur has been established, we will look at how movie reviewers, critics and the public received his films.

## **Reception**

In reviewing commentary of Anderson's work, it is of note to see how critiques changed over time, as his career progressed. From the start, critics and moviegoers have been divided in their reactions to Anderson's films. Due to the contemporary nature of Anderson's work, and stemming from a desire to examine public opinion at the time of release, many of the following critiques come from popular entertainment magazines and websites. A review in *Entertainment Weekly*, gave Anderson's first film, *Bottle Rocket*, a B+ and described it in this way: "Director Wes Anderson may prove a bottle rocket himself – like so many indie auteurs, he's got a charming voice and not a lot to say with it" (Daly). His next film, *Rushmore*, received great reviews and critics and audiences began to take note of this new director. *EW* gave it an A, and described Anderson much differently than their first review. "Anderson [...] is blessed with a vivid sense of humor and an artistic integrity unlike those of any other American filmmaker working today" ("Rushmore"). *Tenenbaums* was released in 2001 and also received an A rating from *EW*. Schwarzbaum praises the acting of the star-studded cast, and states that they "rise royally to the occasion of Anderson's fresh and happily idiosyncratic style of storytelling" ("Royal Tenenbaums"). It seems as though, with the making of *Tenenbaums*, the Anderson style began to become recognizable. Another review from *EW* states that, "If *Tenenbaums* suffers slightly, it's from its own sense of nostalgia. The film is so in love

with its quirky clan of exquisite failures that it – like the characters – prefers a fond look back to moving forward” (“Reviews”).

With the release of *Aquatic*, however, critics were disappointed. Field Maloney, from Slate.com, writes that up until this point, Anderson’s movies had, “what fictions writers call ‘voice’ – a coherent and distinct cinematic language and sensibility.” According to Maloney, however, the problem becomes the fact that Anderson taps into this “voice” too much and too often, to the point of over-saturation, and ends up getting trapped inside his own world. “[E]ach film seemed more enclosed in the storybook boundaries of Anderson’s fantasy world than the one before” (Maloney). Maloney is not the only critic to see Anderson’s work this way. Dana Stevens, also from Slate.com, notes that Anderson seems more focused on his own private world inside his head, rather than what is happening in the world around him. And, as David Edelstein, also of Slate.com, writes, “when an artist learns to do something well, he or she must control it and do it more selectively. Anderson is not, to put it delicately, given to self-control.” Reviewers began to criticize Anderson for staying too long within his own stylized world. What began as a distinctive, quirky voice and delivery quickly turned into an over-stylized sealed world, bordering on self-parody.

It was with the release of *Aquatic* that reviews took this turn, as many critics saw the film as getting buried by Anderson’s heavy-handed irony and style. Ken Tucker, of *New York Magazine*, states, “What Anderson has shot is at once his most ambitious, emotionally varied, and wobbly movie to date.” Tucker goes on to explain that the film “feels a little hemmed in by his stylized approach.” Edelstein, in reviewing the film, states that the potentially successful narrative of the film is overshadowed by the

production design. While admitting to not being a lover of Anderson’s work, in general, he attempts to examine the film objectively: “But even a lot of Wes-worshippers concede that this one is a mess – a misshapen mawkish tragicomedy bordering on self-parody.” Most critics seem to agree that Anderson started out with great possibility, but by the time he got to *Aquatic*, he became almost a parody of himself. He had created his own quirky style and established himself as an auteur but, many argue, he relied too heavily on this equation. There is an “Anderson look” that is almost too familiar, and he has become trapped in his own world. An *EW* review of the film states that, “Once again, he creates a hermetic, glassed-in movie world of postmodern anachronisms that charms and distances in equal measure” (“Reviews”).



Critiques for *Darjeeling*, in general, did not improve. Dana Stevens feels stifled by Anderson’s films and finds that he is still too involved in his own world. “But like in his last movie, *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, Anderson makes the mistake of

keeping its protagonists trapped for too long aboard a means of conveyance.” She admits that the film is beautiful, but it’s also uninviting and impenetrable, and she describes it as being “haunted by Anderson’s oppressive good taste.” Stevens believes that Anderson needs to get outside his own head, or he will eventually just retreat into it for good, bringing about his own downfall.

### **To Laugh or To Cry?**

Another frustration that critics have of Anderson’s world is that they do not know in which category to place his films. Take for example, *Darjeeling*. In their initial review of the movie, Entertainment Weekly classified it as a comedy (Schwarzbaum). On IMDb.com, they list it as: “Adventure, Comedy, Drama.” Netflix places it under the genre categories of “Indie Dramas” and “Indie Comedies.” How do audiences reconcile a film that is considered both a comedy and a drama? Often, Anderson’s films are marketed one way, yet deliver something quite different. For instance, *Aquatic*’s trailer focuses mainly on Bill Murray’s more humorous lines in the film, starting out with a scene of him dancing in a poorly fitting wetsuit. The viewer watching this preview would expect an adventures comedy, starring Murray’s dry wit throughout. The audience’s expectations would be dashed, however, as drama far outweighs humor in the film. We’re then forced to ask how Anderson blurs the line between genres so consistently in his work? Is there a specific genre into which we can place his any of his films? Anderson himself has stated that, “Usually, when I’m doing a scene, I don’t want it to feel specific – I want to make something that different people will feel in different ways” (Desplechin). Other auteurs may work within the framework of a particular genre, but



then make it their own by adding specific touches that give it their personalized mark. Joel and Ethan Coen are an example of this. While *Miller's Crossing* (1990) may be considered a gangster movie and *True Grit* (2010) a western, the Coens have re-imagined these genres into "Coen Brothers Movies." What is significant, however, is that while a Coen Brother production can be easily identified, they tend to work within the confines of specific generic categories. While *The Big Lebowski* (1998) clearly belongs to the Coen Brothers, it is also a neo-noir film and includes all the trappings and characteristics of one. Instead of starting with a generic framework and then making it his own, Anderson tends to focus more on conflating humor and pain, or comedy and drama. In each of his films, there are specific scenes that showcase this conflation and demonstrate the difficulty of categorizing his work into singular genres.

In *Bottle Rocket*, Anderson displays the restless emotions of Anthony (Luke Wilson) by placing them against a backdrop of absurdity. Anthony is telling a serious story of his mental breakdown, yet the delivery and what is happening in the background create a humorous scene. Anthony is sitting outside Bob's (Robert Musgrave) house, while Bob is inside, being beaten up by his brother. During the scene that follows, the viewer can hear the muffled sounds of Bob and his brother shouting and fighting with each other. A girl, who goes to college with Anthony's ex-girlfriend, approaches Anthony and asks why he was in the hospital in Arizona. He answers with, "I went nuts" (*Bottle Rocket*) She asks him how it happened, and he says:

One morning, over at Elizabeth's beach house, she asked me if I'd rather go water skiing or lay out, and I realized that not only did I not want to answer *that* question, but I never wanted to answer another water sports

question or see any of these people again for the for rest of my life. Three days later, I was on my way out to the desert, and that was that. (*Bottle Rocket*)

After stating this, there is a moment of silence between the two, and the audience can hear the crashing of Bob and his brother in the background. The girl responds finally with, “You’re really complicated, aren’t you?” Anthony looks at her blankly and says, “I try not to be” (*Bottle Rocket*). Anthony’s story of being put into a mental institution is juxtaposed with the humorous sounds of the fight between Bob and his brother. Anderson combines humor and pain, and the audience is left wondering whether to smile or take this seriously.

In *Rushmore*, perhaps more than any of his other films, Anderson conflates humor and pain. As Jesse Fox Mayshark points out in his book, *Post-Pop Cinema*, “But the film, as funny as it is, seethes with a barely articulated anger that gets well beneath the skin of conventional schoolyard drama” (123). One example of this blurring of comedy and distress is shown during the revenge montage. Max (Schwartzman) and Mr. Blume (Murray) are angry with each other over a mutual love of Miss Cross (Olivia Williams). The scene opens with Blume suddenly getting attacked by bees while sitting in his hotel room. Upon finding the source of the bees in his room, he realizes that Max has planted them there. This is followed by a cut to Max in the hotel service elevator, wearing a hotel uniform and carrying a wooden box that supposedly held the bees. At this moment, the action comes to a halt, and the shot goes to slow motion. Just as this happens, the song “A Quick One While He’s Away,” by The Who begins to play. Then there is a cut to Blume repeatedly running over Max’s bicycle with his Jaguar. The next shot shows Max

cutting the brake cables on Blume's car, followed by Blume careening out of control. The montage ends with Blume giving police a physical description of Max and the latter being arrested, as the music comes to a halt. The sequence has the feeling of actions more suited to a cartoon, than a live-action film. Each of the character's actions is horrifying, if taken seriously, but Anderson displays them in such an amusing way, that the audience can't help but smile.

*The Royal Tenenbaums* showcases a bizarre mixture of depression and comedy. A perfect example of this combination of pain and humor is shown during the montage of Margot's past life. Raleigh (Murray), her husband, has hired a private detective to investigate her life and secretive ways. He, Richie and the boy he is studying, Dudley (Stephen Lee Sheppard), go to the P.I.'s office, and Raleigh is handed Margot's file. Upon handing it to him, the detective asks, "Gentlemen, how much do you already know?" (*Tenenbaums*). Raleigh answers, "Very little, I'm afraid" (*Tenenbaums*). Raleigh opens the file and is silent for a few moments. There is then a fast cut to a quickly-paced montage showing the audience all the various stages of Margot's life, from age 12 to the present. These shots show Margot engaging in acts that Raleigh never knew about, including a romance with another woman, a smoking habit, a marriage in Papua New Guinea, etc. Once the montage arrives at Margot's present age, the music stops abruptly, and the audience is brought immediately back to the detective's office, looking at Raleigh's disturbed face. After seeing all these shocking images, Raleigh's only response is: "She smokes?" (*Tenenbaums*). Anderson manages to present this deeply troubling information in a humorous way. Once again he has blurred the line between comedy and drama, all while showcasing it in a purely Andersonian fashion. The quick distribution of

information, with text printed right on the screen, to the rapid rhythm of The Ramones blasting over it all, screams of the Anderson touch.

In *Aquatic*, Anderson combines the anger of an irreconcilable relationship with visual whimsy and dry humor to create another scene of ambiguous genre placement. Steve (Murray) enters Ned's (Owen Wilson) cabin on the ship to find the latter in bed with Jane (Blanchett). In an even-tone, Steve says, "I'm about to blow my stack. I turn my back and the bullshit begins. Ned, you're a scumbag, and Jane, you're a goddamned liar" (*Aquatic*). Steve and Ned exit the room and continue arguing, as they weave their way through the entire boat. Their progress is nonstop and is shown by cutting the boat directly in half, so that the audience is shown a cross-section of the ship. The two characters move from room to room, arguing and interacting humorously with other characters as they go. Upon reaching the top of the ship, Steve looks at Ned and says, "That pregnant slut has been playing us like a cheap fiddle." Ned states indignantly, "That's it. I'm gonna fight you, Steve." Steve pauses a moment, rolls his eyes and punches him in the face. When Ned falls down, Steve explains that you never tell the person you are going to fight him before you do, you just smile and sucker-punch him. Part of what makes this whole sequence so ludicrous is not only Steve's foul language and interactions with the other crew members as he walks by, but the fact that he and Ned are trying to have a serious conversation about Ned's relationship with Jane, and about Steve and Ned's relationship with each other. They are discussing Ned's role as a symbolic and possible biological son to Steve, and Ned's rejection of him as a father figure. While the exchange is deeply emotional and serious, Anderson has them arguing about it in such a ridiculous capacity, it becomes hard not to laugh at the scene.

Throughout *Darjeeling*, the viewer wants to take the characters seriously, but there is an overwhelming sense of irony or humor at the same time. This, as in Anderson's other work makes the film difficult to place in one genre. After the brothers are kicked off the train for bringing a poisonous snake onboard, they are wandering through the Indian countryside, trying to find the nearest village. Anderson shows them looking ridiculous as they carry their heavy, matching luggage down narrow dirt roads under the blazing sun. The trio stops as a printer falls off their load of baggage, and the brothers notice three young boys attempting to cross a nearby river. Francis points to them struggling and says, "Look at these assholes" (*Darjeeling*). Directly after he says this, the raft flips and the three brothers run to save the boys from drowning. Francis' comment is inappropriate and ill-intended, which makes it humorous, but just as the viewer starts to laugh, it is revealed that one of the boys has drowned. The bumbling and emotional incompetence of the brothers is combined with a grave situation, and Anderson creates a humorous set-up, followed by disastrous results. This is merely one example of how the film refuses to rest within the framework of one particular genre.

*Mr. Fox*, in particular, may be the most difficult to place in a genre. One could argue that it is a children's movie, as it is based on a kid's book and Anderson uses puppets, instead of live actors. Yet, the situations concocted and the issues dealt with are decidedly un-childlike. As discussed previously, Mr. Fox expresses his confusion at the meaning of life and why he is a fox and not some other animal. He even uses the word "existential" in attempting to explain himself to Kylie. While this is a particularly deep conversation, the fact remains that it is a puppet fox and a puppet opossum. How seriously can one take this exchange? In his latest film, Anderson has continued to

conflate conflicting emotions and feelings to create a work that becomes difficult to place in one generic category.

### **The Andersonian Genre**

The above examples display Anderson's inability to contain his work within one genre. This resistance to categorization, combined with his strikingly identifiable brand of filmmaking, allows Anderson's auteurism to outweigh any generic conventions, therefore, creating his own "Andersonian genre." His narratives incorporate both humor and sadness in a way that makes them strange and entertaining, but also makes them difficult to categorize as well. Elena Past describes his work as being "characterized by the curious mix of irony, comedy, and sincerity that has become the hallmark of Anderson's filmic style" (53). It appears that generic conventions are ignored, and, instead, replaced by stylistic, auteur elements. Anderson himself has admitted to staying within one genre, and in talking about *Aquatic* specifically, says, "I don't know how to present it to people. It's not a traditional adventure movie. It's not a comedy or a drama specifically. It's hard to know exactly what it is" (Mottram 395). He also made a similar comment earlier in regards to *Rushmore*, saying, "If you know what genre you're in, you know which way to turn. When Max builds the aquarium...well there's no 'aquarium-building' genre..." (Mottram 212-13). This disregard for genre and emphasis on Anderson's brand of filmmaking has led to his influence on other contemporary directors.

### **Inspiration**

Whether audiences and critics like or dislike Wes Anderson's work, it cannot be denied that he has been influential in the cinematic world. He has garnered inspiration from past auteurs, re-imagined certain aspects of their work to fit into his universe, and then inspired his contemporaries with the results. When asked specifically what director has influenced him in his work, Anderson answered:

If you're asking me which director I think about in terms of just living my life – maybe this is crazy, but I'm going to have to say Stanley Kubrick [...] He only did the ones he wanted to do. He had total, utter, complete creative control over not just the movies but also the life of making them.  
(Desplechin)

This desire for control is apparent in Anderson's own work, as he oversees and manages every detail of his films. Kubrick isn't the only filmmaker that has impacted Anderson's work, however. Lee Weston Sabo, in an essay for *Bright Lights Film Journal*, explains how French directors have played a role in Anderson's films. "That Anderson's films are almost equally derivative of Godard, Truffaut, Renoir, and Tati is more because of eccentric francophilia than plagiarism" (Weston Sabo). French auteurs have heavily influenced Anderson, but he has managed to reshape their techniques and traits into his own.

Not only has Anderson obviously been influenced by past directors, he has inspired many contemporary filmmakers. Elbert Ventura, from *Slate.com*, wrote a short essay chronicling the pervasive influence that Anderson has had on other filmmakers. Ventura looks into how Anderson never really sticks with one genre, but, instead, has created his own. In doing so, he has influenced and encouraged other young filmmakers

to do so also, even if this inspiration has been unintentional on his part. Ventura purports, “A popular strain in recent American indie cinema has been the Andersonian quirkfest.” Examples of this “quirkfest” are: *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007), *Napoleon Dynamite* (Jared Hess, 2004), *Son of Rambow* (Garth Jennings, 2007), *Charlie Bartlett* (Jon Poll, 2007), and *Garden State* (Zach Braff, 2004) (Ventura). Lee Weston Sabo, in an essay for *Bright Lights Film Journal*, reiterates this point: “The entire pseudo-genre now unbearably known as ‘indie-comedy’ can be traced back to Anderson’s retro-chic geekiness and precocious quirks: *Juno*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Be Kind Rewind*, *(500) Days of Summer*, and all such films are, in some way, imitations of *Rushmore*.”

Armond White, also of Slate.com, continues in this same vein, explaining that Anderson is part of a new, young generation of filmmakers whom he calls the American Eccentrics. (These include Spike Jonze, David O. Russell, Alexander Payne, Paul Thomas Anderson and Sofia Coppola.) White states that, “These Eccentrics have added luster to independent filmmaking through stories and visual approaches that are slyly intellectual and charmingly mannered – truly millennial” (White). Again, Anderson is shown as a leader of this new group of American filmmakers. His work has inspired other young directors to imitate his style of making films, as opposed to making movies that follow more traditional generic conventions. White even points out that these American Eccentrics differ from the “entertainment specialists (Quentin Tarantino, M. Night Shyamalan, Bryan Singer, Michael Bay, Brett Ratner, John Moore), who work regularly in the Hollywood system and turn out updated genre vehicles as if on schedule.” Anderson has been pivotal in inspiring up-and-coming filmmakers to think outside the classic genre box, and take part in his “quirkfest.”



## **The Big Picture**

When an audience sees a film by Anderson, his fingerprint on it is immediately recognized. Mottram points out, “Anderson’s hermetically sealed celluloid universes are, by now, instantly recognizable” (391). While many would agree with Mottram that Anderson creates a “hermetically sealed” universe, Anderson’s reach extends far beyond the confines of the Tenenbaum house or Steve Zissou’s boat. Inspired by past directors, he has manipulated aspects of their work in order to create his own role as an auteur, and then, in turn, passed that inspiration on to new, upcoming filmmakers. In this process, he is not only reaching into the past, he is also participating in a broader dialogue that will affect filmmaking in the future. Jason Morgan, from [filmcritic.com](http://filmcritic.com), worries that Anderson’s work could get stale because of the repetitive stylistic and thematic elements in his films, a fear which Anderson, himself, has expressed. Ultimately, however, Morgan believes it is precisely the enclosed universe that Anderson has created that engenders his success. He states, “As long as Anderson keeps looking inward, his films will continue to develop into honest films with a dash of quirkiness.” Lisa Schwarzbaum’s review of *Darjeeling* for *Entertainment Weekly* also comments on the success of Anderson’s methods and how they relate to the world around him. She explains that he shows “a compassion for the larger world that busts the confines of the filmmaker’s miniaturist instincts” (“Darjeeling”). It is by reshaping influences from the past, using his status as an auteur to create his own genre and inspiring new directors to follow in his footsteps that Anderson’s range reaches far beyond his own enclosed world.

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