

The Fabulist Oeuvre of Wes Anderson
The Research and Opinions of Matthew Key

The first thing that Martin Scorsese directed after he graduated from the NYU film program was *Who's That Knocking?* in 1968. It did not receive any critical acclaim nor did it warrant a substantial buzz about him among those in Hollywood. The first thing that Francis Ford Coppola directed after he graduated from the UCLA film program was *Dementia 13* in 1963. As with Scorsese he did not receive much acclaim for this work. It is virtually unknown. The first thing that Wes Anderson directed after graduating with an undergraduate in philosophy was a movie by the name of *Bottle Rocket*. It received positive reviews from the critics and earned Anderson the *Best New Filmmaker Award* at the MTV Movie awards. Due to the success of this film Anderson was given more opportunities by Hollywood with the two films of his that have followed, *Rushmore* and *The Royal Tenenbaums*. With each film he gains more notoriety and more critical acclaim. Moreover, with each film released he receives progressively more audience acclaim. It will be the purpose of this paper to know who Wes Anderson is; to understand what it is that Wes Anderson does as an auteur that sets him apart, to develop an awareness of the genre in which he works and to identify the cultural influences at play in his Oeuvre and how critics have responded to this work.

Wes Anderson was born in Houston, Texas on May 1, 1969. The Anderson family was a well-educated family: his mother was an archaeologist and his father owned his own advertising firm. Anderson, as a child, would stage plays that he had written, draw pictures of his room, make illustrations of literature that he had read and directed

friends on his super 8 camera in elaborate action sequences. His mother recounts, “Wes was a creative child. He was always making wonderful costumes for Halloween, like an R2-D2 outfit out of throwaway pie tins and spray paint” (www.wesanderson.org). He attended a private boys’ school named St. John’s. He spent most of his free time in the library where he would read film reviews and profiles of obscure personalities of genius in old issues of *New Yorker*. He attended the University of Texas in Austin where, in a playwriting class, he met Owen Wilson. Since meeting one another the two of them have been good friends sharing many similarities, including their sense of humor. The both of them have co-written all three of Anderson’s films.

Anderson is a different filmmaker in that he tries to create family not only on screen, but also off of the screen with his crew. He has used the same Director of Photography, Composer, Editor, Production Designer, Costume Designer, Set Designer and AD team in all three of his movies. Not only that, but the family that he had made before he ever made his first film now follows him as different characters in each one of his new screen creations: all three Wilson brothers, Dipaq and Kumar Pallana, Brian Tenenbaum, and Steven Dignan. Moreover as he has moved on to each successive project he has picked up different high profile actors who want to work with him such as Bill Murray who has done two movies with him and is rumored to be in the next Anderson film. The Wes Anderson film family is constantly growing.

There are particular marks in an Anderson film that betray the auteur. Most obviously, Anderson always has a camera shot underwater, he always has a soundtrack for the film which includes no contemporary rock music and his films characters always have a uniform that they wear throughout the movie -- changing only when their situation

has changed. However, if one studies his films a bit more closely one can find a wealth of more parallels between his three-piece collection of work. Kent Jones notes in his *Film Comment* article on Anderson, “the framing (in Anderson’s films) is always neat, and four-square, the action shaped into compact, unit-like scenes.” Moreover, Jones remarks on Anderson’s ability to take the most private traits of his actors and build them on screen. For example, Gene Hackman has a “penchant for bobbing and weaving with his fellow actors” and “Bill Murray’s wistful, sad-sack withdrawal and real-life disenchantment.” Anderson is a very detailed film maker: he knows his characters down to what hue of red his character’s jogging suits are and he knows his environment right down to the placement of stain-glass windows and the color and texture of brick. He will not settle for anything but what he has already planned.

It is this attention to detail that aids Anderson in his endeavors to make his films fabulist. Anderson always creates a world that is believable, but not real. In other words, his worlds seem to exist as that of a fable. Moreover, his films seem to take place in no real era: they are timeless. This also lends to them being fables. It is in creating worlds where the style of clothes and the settings of the story are both static and full of unusual color that Anderson establishes a children’s book world. The stories inside of them are ultimately designed to remind the viewers of their common humanity and the miracle of relationships inside of that fragile human dynamic.

Anderson also has a similarity of theme and story that is parallel in all of his work. In order to understand the themes that he espouses it is best to know his common milieu due to the sprouting of theme out of this environment. Despite a sort of acceptance to the core group of characters, the central character in the film is always a

sort of outsider lower in economic class: there is always something that sets them apart enough from the other characters that they will never fully be accepted. “Each of his three films is set within a sheltered, semi-exclusive, self-contained universe” (Jones). For instance, in *Rushmore* the character of Max is a 15 year old middle class student at the school on scholarship who longs to be a member of the school’s intellectual and affluent elite. In *Bottle Rocket* the character of Dignan is lower on the economic ladder than his best friends, Anthony and Bob, but his desire is to escape his relative rags and, through a life of crime, rise to the middle class riches of Anthony and Bob.

One of the most prominent themes that run through Anderson’s films is that of the human search for glory and how individuals handle the effects of glory lost. In other words, how they handle their failures. In the film commentary for *The Royal Tenenbaums* Anderson says that he is always fascinated with, “failure and its effects on people.” This theme is easily seen in the movie: the three Tenenbaum children peaked early as juveniles and then quickly fell away from their status as successful geniuses. The movie now finds them in the aftermath of that loss and follows them through their respective recoveries.

Their failure as geniuses usually stems from their loss of drive for success or their inability to access that part of them that is potentially genius as is the case with Dignan in *Bottle Rocket*. This usually finds itself actualized in an alienation of that character. Due to this alienation the character must now regain that drive to succeed or face the possibility of forever being alone. In *Bottle Rocket* Dignan is faced with the fact that his crime heist has failed and Anthony has given away their money. In a scene that blatantly illustrates the Anderson penchant for isolation of the character he puts Dignan in a wide

open field with no one around him as he walks away from his one true friend. Later, Dignan realizes his mistake and goes after his best friend Anthony in an attempt to regain his self-perceived status as a criminal genius.

Most beautifully the theme of redemption found in redemption compulsion: favorite scene.

My favorite theme found in the Anderson works is that of redemption. This theme is found both in the renewal of relationship after the character's respective alienation and is also found in the character's success at recovering their lost genius. Anderson uses the losses of his characters to accentuate and drive the characters into a redemptive act at the end of the film that ultimately brings everything full circle to a place that is better than where they started. Throughout the whole of *The Royal Tenenbaums* the viewers yearn to see the reunion of Chas to his father Royal. Both characters have isolated themselves in their own lonely world. In one of my favorite cinematic moments Royal lovingly replaces the recently deceased Buckley (Chas's sons' dog) with a Dalmatian. Chas, who has done nothing but push his father away throughout the movie, looks his father in the eye and opens up to him that, "this has been a rough year, dad." Royal reaches out to him and grabs his neck and responds, "I know son, I know." The two characters, through their trials of alienation and their attempts to regain their fallen childhood glory, stumble across a reconciliation that leads them into relationships they never could have had in, or preceding, their alienation.

Moreover, there is a redemption found in the soul of the character as they rediscover who they truly are. They destroy the disillusionments that they have of their fallen selves and regain a stronger confidence in their abilities than they may have had before.

Max Fischer, in *Rushmore*, after retreating to his father's barbershop defeated, is reawakened by his best friend while flying a kite. Max charges back into his high school life with a new stage spectacle based on the Vietnam War that warrants high applause from the people that he respects. Moreover, it is the play after-party wherein he is finally given the hand of Ms. Cross, the teacher that he loves, in a dance. In the redemptive act of writing the play, Max reconciles himself to himself and to the community of people that he respects.

All Anderson films are stamped with the comic styling of a minimalist. Anderson, using a minimum of set ups, allows his characters' situation to build emotionally and allows the often-found awkwardness of his scenes to carry the comedy. Likewise, his minimalist tendencies are accentuated by his ability to explain less about his characters and their situations than other directors may attempt to do. In this way Anderson creates for the audience an aura of reality and recognizability in the characters. This is found in the fact that the individuals composing the audience, like Anderson's characters, hide their uncertainties and core dilemmas out of a fear that they will be exposed and can therefore identify with the characters. This is why Anderson only mentions the problem once or twice. In so doing Anderson creates a world that, while looking fabulist, makes us laugh because it feels so real: so "achingly human" (Jones). A good example of all of this can be found in the character of Max Fischer in *Rushmore*. It is only mentioned twice that Max's mother is dead and that is why Max acts in the manner that he does: he is trying to make his mother proud of him. Since Anderson has explained this as little as possible, the character of Max is validated by the audience as a character with a soul while still appearing to be a sort of cartoon. Likewise, the audience

can identify with Max's desire to keep himself hidden and safe. This allows the audience to guiltlessly laugh for they are not laughing at Max's misfortune, but are, in a manner of speaking, laughing at the sensation of being human.

The modern day comic form of audience choice is slapstick and base humor. This form is expertly wielded by directors such as the Farrelly brothers and SNL. Moreover, the popular comedy of today is one in which the comedic situations are pointed out in the film by heightened reactions to the situation in the film itself; in essence prompting the audience to laugh. However, Anderson has taken the comedy genre in a different direction. He has attempted to turn in the direction of Sturges (one of his influences) and write comedy that is funny, comedy that is found not only in the actions taken on screen by the actors but is funny also in the structure of the dialogue, the flow of the script and the cinematic devices used. For instance, he uses montages of images and loud rock music where he could use dialogue to explain a situation. In *The Royal Tenenbaums* he uses this device quite effectively when the P.I. reports to Murray's and Wilson's characters about Margot's promiscuous lifestyle. Where he could have merely told us about her sexual antics he chooses instead to show us her antics. Because of the sudden change in the tempo of the film (the main characters sitting at a desk calmly previously) and the audience's recognition that they could simply be told about her lifestyle, the humor of her cuckoldry is emphasized.

Anderson subverts the pop-comedy genre further by his minimalist methodology: he does not draw attention to the comedy found in a scene. In the popular comedies of today the comedy is not a part of the story but remains its own separate entity. In other words, the comedy that takes place usually does nothing to further the plot but is instead

a sort of sketch inside of the movie. Moreover the director usually calls attention to the comedy; almost as though they are pointing it out to the audience for fear that the audience will not know where to laugh. As Jones points out, in *The Royal Tenenbaums* when Etheline Tenenbaum and her landlord, Henry Sherman, are at her archaeological dig Sherman takes a prat fall into a ditch and Etheline continues to walk, not noticing the fall. The pop-comedy movie would have done some sort of loud noise, followed by the workers around the site laughing and may have furthered the whole fall with Etheline getting pulled into the ditch as she helps Sherman out. This would have been the director's way of pointing it out to the audience. Furthermore the fall would have served no purpose other than making the audience laugh. Anderson, however, recognizes that by calling attention to the fall one discontinues any feeling of reality and turns the film into an unrealistic spectacle of sketch comedy. This is contrary to Anderson's desire to make a parade of the human condition and show how beautiful humanity truly can be. Anderson, allowing the comedy to develop out of the situation instead of forcing it, uses the fall as impetus for Etheline to express her loving admiration for Sherman so that the comic event does not stand apart from the story but instead services the trajectory of the love that is taking place between Henry Sherman and Etheline.

The critics' response to the Anderson oeuvre has been overwhelmingly positive. After viewing *Bottle Rocket* the critics welcomed Anderson to the scene as a long-awaited change to film directing. This was proven as he won a "moon man" (the MTV award) for best new director for the film. Scorsese, after viewing the film, declared it to be one of his top 10 movies of the decade and said of it, "I responded to its heart. I think he has a real love for people, a gentle way with people that has a charm and a beauty..."

The critics recognized the influence of bildungsroman films such as *Easy Rider* and also *Saturday Night Fever* among others on Anderson's own take on coming of age in Middle America. The audience response, although it has grown since its life on video, was originally poor. This was due to Columbia's failure to give the movie any sort of promotion. *Rushmore* received, as with *Bottle Rocket*, good critic reviews but it had a hard time resonating with most of the popular audience. When the film was released in 1999, after touring festivals for a few months, *Premiere* magazine had said of the film that it was the best film of the year and many critics had given Bill Murray a best supporting actor award. The audience, who was expecting a typical Murray laugh machine, came out disappointed at the lack of physical comedy and one-liners. This contributed to the failure of the movie at the box office.

Finally, after two films that exhibited the dichotomy between educated film watchers and pop culture Anderson hit pay dirt with his third effort, *The Royal Tenenbaums* which grossed 51 million dollars world wide. The audiences generally wanted more: they would suggest television sitcoms. Anderson does not really like that idea but he was pleased with the response to his film.

In one of the greatest compliments any filmmaker could ever receive, *Premiere* magazine staged an interview between Anderson and Scorsese to talk about contemporary movies and the status of Hollywood at the turn of the century. The magazine asked Scorsese who he believes will be the Scorsese of the new generation and his answer was Wes Anderson. This is why they interviewed the two of them together. This was quite the homage to Anderson.

Wes Anderson has lived the life that so many movie nerds across America have prayed for, including me. He has creative control over his movies due to how his producers interact with the funding studio, yet he has studio money to complete his creative vision. He has accomplished all of this without ever studying film in a school program, but instead is self-taught. Moreover, the first attempt he ever had at making film was a successful one: one that got him recognized in Hollywood and the promise of even more studio money for each successive film. With every film he does he learns from his mistakes and continues to improve his craft. There is no sign of Anderson wavering in his steadfast march forward. Most likely his next film, rumored to be a spy movie taking place in Mexico, will carry many of the same elements of his other films such as a comedy that comes out of the situation and persists in carrying the story of the film. Most likely his film will be colorful and will be, for the most part, without location and without time: fabulist. And, if we are to learn anything from history we should know that the next Anderson film will be even more of a success than *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Wes Anderson is truly one of the “talks of the town.”

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