

The Life Aquatic



The Royal Tenenbaums



Moonrise Kingdom

Wes Anderson

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Fantastic Mr. Fox



Wes Anderson is the son of a writer and an archaeologist – perhaps the most effective appraisal of everyone’s favourite enigmatic filmmaker yet written. Post-modern but ‘pickled in a world of his own creation’ is how one critic put it. Pickled implies stasis and a leaching away of colour – neither seem fitting for the kaleidoscopic, bustling imagination of a director whose films divide and dazzle.

As a description of a career it comes closer. The worlds Anderson creates are consistently arch, out of time, sumptuously styled, wonderfully shot, artfully stage-managed. Kitchen-sink realism they are not. The pervading chocolate box Roald-Dahl-meets-Hal-Ashby tone of whimsy has affronted its fair share of commentators – “I love Wes Anderson’s films, or at least his film” – and other such catty backhanded compliments befitting a vampish Anderson character.

That there are recurring themes in Anderson’s work is inarguable: a family, or family member, sets out on a quest to make reparations for a colourful past of indiscretion, betrayal and disappointment. Certainly that’s most true for the pair of exiled patriarchs in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *The Life Aquatic* (2004). For a director stuck in another time, in music, in set design, in filmic references, old age perfectly attunes to his default setting of sentimentality masquerading as indifference. Forces of nature Steve Zissou (Bill Murray) and Royal Tenenbaum (Gene Hackman) crack into wounded humanity like perfectly cooked *crème brûlées*.

The relationship across his films between stories, colours and even cast members suggests repetition, but you can’t plagiarise yourself as a filmmaker when each nowhere, no-time, no-place world you create is by its nature undefined. There is an ever-present ‘quirkiness’ to Wes Anderson, yes, but no two characters’ or locations’ idiosyncrasies are the same. He performs a juggling act with the two opposing sensations of overblown and refined, with the safety net of being able to throw up his hands and say it was just for laughs. One riotous jamboree. Quite literally in *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012). But I’d defend him against the charge of heartlessness

Herman Blume:
You guys have it real easy. I never had it like this where I grew up. But I send my kids here because the fact is you go to one of the best schools in the country: Rushmore. Now, for some of you it doesn’t matter. You were born rich and you’re going to stay rich. But here’s my advice to the rest of you: take dead aim on the rich boys. Get them in the crosshairs and take them down. Just remember, they can buy anything but they can’t buy backbone. Don’t let them forget it. Thank you.

and style over substance. Everything is about the characters. Even the sets are about the characters.

So much of American independent cinema mistakes depression and inaction for profundity. Individuals are often well-rendered at the expense of story and entertainment. Getting to know depressed people in film should be more engaging and pleasurable than it is in life. Anderson’s are funny, error-prone and, while you know you won’t feel heartbroken if they die or fail, you’re always interested in how it turns out for them.

By comparison, Noah Baumbach (who incidentally co-wrote *The Life Aquatic* with Anderson) fails to evoke that kind of empathy

in *Greenberg*, a film where Ben Stiller acts a similarly neurotic, middle-aged man-child to his character in *Tenenbaums*. Perhaps only Alexander Payne has as consistently found optimism and humour in human imperfection, and given audiences such enjoyable romps along the way. A Wes Anderson film must be the party invitation everyone in Hollywood hopes they get.

That said, there are transcendent moments when Anderson really allows some heart to be glimpsed and raw emotion judged; where the wry and the unfeeling give way to something unapologetically beautiful or sad. The appearance of a jaguar shark in *The Life Aquatic*, the lonely wolf at the end of *Fantastic Mr Fox* (2009), Richie’s attempted suicide in *Tenenbaums*. Whereas some films have comic interludes, Anderson’s have dramatic ones. Often slow-motion, always conducted against an impeccable tune from the archives of The Kinks, Peter Sarstedt, Elliot Smith or Nico.

Not that the director ever allows the seriousness to linger. In *Tenenbaums*, Dudley, one of the coterie of secondary characters who add colour to the main Anderson ensemble, is diagnosed in the chaos as being somewhere on the autistic spectrum. He comes out of a hospital room covered in Richie’s blood. “Dudley, where is he?” asks Richie’s panicked sister, Margot. “Who?” responds the idiot savant.

There has to be a willing suspension of disbelief watching Wes Anderson films. Big wides and swish pans establish expressive, colourful sets in a self-consciously theatrical manner. Characters often seem to enter and exit shots ‘stage left’ or ‘stage right’. *Fantastic Mr Fox* and *Tenenbaums* are books whose illustrated pages open to introduce the story being told. Titles and chapter cards mark the narrative and call attention to the fact this is a ‘story’ not real life, in just the same way the over-styled props do.



M. Gustave:
You see, there are still faint glimmers of civilization left in this barbaric slaughterhouse that was once known as humanity. Indeed that's what we provide in our own modest, humble, insignificant... oh, fuck it.



The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014) © Fox Searchlight



Marine biologist-explorers who smoke weed and fight critics, or louche ex-attorneys who live in hotels seem more literary than cinematic. People are what they do in Anderson films, and if they're not, they're emphatically not. Like the bondsman keeping Steve Zissou's expedition on budget in *The Life Aquatic* who redeems himself by playing hostage negotiator when the crew are kidnapped by Filipino pirates.

[A woman asks a question about the shark Zissou is hunting]

Festival Director: [translating] That's an endangered species at most. What would be the scientific purpose of killing it?

Steve Zissou: Revenge.

At the other end of the directing spectrum, Scorsese's *Casino* and *Goodfellas* are wonderful films that share ensemble casts and dysfunctional families but their grittiness gives them the lustre of reality. Does the average cinema-goer have more experience of American Mafia culture than of Anderson's offbeat worlds and their inhabitants? How do we know these people don't exist? I've met a few of them but wouldn't have recognised them without Anderson.

Both directors are masters of dialogue and coaxing commanding performances from their actors. It's taken as read in the film community (particularly the awards circuit) that Anderson is a stylish ham, but a performance like Gene Hackman's as the eponymous Royal Tenenbaum is nuanced and so terrifically written as to surpass the bounds of 'serious' acting. It's seriously funny and seriously deep.

The phrase 'a Wes Anderson film' describes a specific visual grammar that even averagely cine-literate people will be familiar with. That is Wes Anderson's curious gift; that he has made the crossover from the cult fringes to mainstream imagination with the contrary and opaque stories he tells. Even the newfound popularity of the font Futura is due to its use in his film titles.

The consistent aesthetic in his set, props and costume departments comes from repeat collaboration. Milena Canonero, Anderson's regular costume designer, got her first gig on Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. Production designer Mark Friedberg has not only

realised several Anderson universes but also Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* and Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche New York*. Director of photography Robert Yeoman has worked on all of Wes Anderson's live-action films and this expert pedigree has been turned to other comic creations like *Bridesmaids*, *Dogma* and *The Heat*.

On set, the director's exacting eye means many, many takes and an obsession with detail, but the films bear witness to his success in creating a family atmosphere to loosen up his players. For *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, his cast and crew stayed in the very hotel they were filming in. Jeff Goldblum played piano in the lobby, formal dinner started every night at 7.30pm and there was a library of classics from the silver screen available to the cast for inspiration. Much of the dialogue in *Fantastic Mr Fox* was recorded at George Clooney's Lake Como mansion between meals.

Mrs Fox: Why did you lie to me?

Mr Fox: Because I'm a wild animal.

Everything creative needs boundaries and Anderson's world is defined by the edifices that contain the parlours that contain the games. We are invited to travel with the camera through giant doll's houses, *Synecdoche New York* style. Only unlike Kaufman, when he shows a cross-section of a train, boat or house with each character compartmentalised, Anderson isn't trying to press home a meta-narrative. His actors respond to these constraints.

Anderson has moved from road trip to high school to domestic to adventure to animal fable to India to island to *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. His career began at university with Owen Wilson, as the two wrote a screenplay and shot a short for it called *Bottle Rocket* starring Wilson and his brother Luke. The script won the attention of influential independent producer James L. Brooks (*The Simpsons*, *As Good as It Gets*) and was made into a feature of the same name for \$7 million where James Caan added his weight to the cast of virtual unknowns. It flopped at the box office but delighted critics.

It's interesting to see that Anderson has never revisited the more intimate bromance of that first feature, expanding his palette and cast as his resources have swelled. This year's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* certainly

reads like Harvey Weinstein's Christmas card list, with regulars Dafoe, Goldblum, Murray and Schwartzman joined by first-timers Law, Fiennes and Wilkinson.

Jack Whitman: I wonder if the three of us would've been friends in real life. Not as brothers, but as people.

One long-term collaborator no longer around is Kumar Pallana, whose gnomish cameos dot all of Anderson's films up to *The Darjeeling Limited*. Pallana's story embodies both the Anderson aesthetic and the director's wonderfully self-indulgent methods. As a successful entertainer, Pallana was known as 'Kumar of India', a circus-based performer who even appeared on *The Mickey Mouse Club*. After he retired, he moved to Houston and opened a café there, the Cosmic Cup, where Anderson and the Wilson brothers hung out, forming a low-rent Texas *salon* where herbal tea and chess were the order of the day.

Once *Bottle Rocket* (1996) was green-lit, Anderson and Wilson invited Pallana to play the small part of an inept criminal. Anderson then cast him as Mr Littlejeans, the school groundskeeper in *Rushmore* and then again as Pagoda, the elderly Tenenbaum retainer. The actor says virtually nothing in all these films but his enigmatic silence and presence easily convince. What sets Pallana's cameos and his director apart are their economy, their pathos and the release in the laugh that always comes. It's as if Wes Anderson wants to compress as many stories and suggested histories into his characters as they can fit. As a scrupulously private person, he also wants some things to be just for him.

[Royal motions to Pagoda]

Royal: He saved my life, you know. Thirty years ago. I was knifed at a bazaar in Calcutta, and he carried me to the hospital on his back.

Ari: Who stabbed you?

[Royal motions to Pagoda again]

Royal: He did. There was a price on my head, and he was a hired assassin.[Falls silent remembering] Stuck me in the gut with a shiv.