Wes Anderson: a ‘smart’ director of the new sincerity?

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EDITORIAL

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See here: I do not live in a postmodern time. I did not live in a time when something new was called modern, so for me there is no such thing as modern, and thus there cannot be anything postmodern. For me, where I am standing, it is all New. (Dave Eggers, quoted in Timmer 2010, 17)

In response to my call for academic papers on the films of Wes Anderson – 10 of which are published in this special issue – two key terms regularly cropped up to make sense of his films: the ‘smart’ film and the ‘new sincerity’.

In an essay published in 2002, Jeffrey Sconce set out to identify the stylistic, narrative and thematic elements present in what he called the new American ‘smart’ film. According to Sconce, this loose grouping of filmmakers includes Todd Solondz, Neil LaBute, Hal Hartley, Alexander Payne, P.T. Anderson, as well as Wes Anderson (whom Sconce only mentions in passing). Their smart films are ‘not quite “art” films in the sober Bergmanesque art-house tradition, nor “Hollywood” films in the sense of 1200-screen saturation bombing campaigns, nor “independent” films according to the DIY outsider credo’. Instead, ““smart” films … share an “aura” of intelligence that distinguishes them (and their audiences) from the perceived “dross” (and “rabble”) of the mainstream multiplex’ (Sconce 2002, 351). The cohesion of smart films is created through their shared manifestation of a sensibility or ‘structure of feeling’ that articulates the historical moment of the 1990s: the postmodern sensibility of Generation-X, which Sconce characterises as a mix of cynicism, irony, secular humanism and cultural relativism. Sconce focuses in on irony – on ironic disengagement, non-participation and disaffection. This ironic disengagement is manifest in smart films through a ‘blank’ style of filmmaking, involving the use of long-shots, static composition, awkward two-shots (or family gatherings) and sparse cutting. This style creates an experience of distance in the audience, which Sconce characterises as a form of ‘clinical observation’ (rather than Brechtian distanciation) (360).

Whereas critics of these films identify them as apolitical and amoral, Sconce argues that they manifest an ambiguous attitude towards politics and morality, coupled with a critique of contemporary society: ‘To the extent that these films have an explicit political agenda, it lies in the familiar theme that repression and miscommunication make the white middle class particularly ill-suited to either relationships or marriage’ (384).

Sconce places Wes Anderson squarely within this smart film tradition. However, many authors (following Mark Olsen [1999]) place him in the opposite, new sincerity camp. Jim Collins is generally credited as the first to...
introduce the term ‘new sincerity’ into film studies back in 1993 (before Wes Anderson began making films [Collins 1993]). Collins set up an opposition between hyperconscious postmodern irony and the new sincerity. Both are responses to what Collins calls ‘the array’ – ‘the perpetual circulation and recirculation of signs that forms the fabric of postmodern cultural life’ (1993, 246). Whereas irony endeavours to master this array, the new sincerity rejects it and attempts ‘to recover a lost “purity”’ (Collins 1993, 245). For Collins, the new sincerity reflects a nostalgia for an authentic past and a fetishisation of belief rather than irony. Referring to films such as *Dances With Wolves* (1990), *Hook* (1991) and *Field of Dreams* (1989), he argues that:

Rather than trying to master the array through ironic manipulation, these films attempt to reject it altogether, purposely evading the media-saturated terrain of the present in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity, attainable only through a sincerity that avoids any sort of irony or eclecticism. (Collins 1993, 257)

Yet, Collins seems to mean simply ‘sincerity’ rather than ‘new sincerity’. The *new* of new sincerity signifies it is a response to postmodern irony and nihilism: not a rejection of it, not a nostalgic return to an idyllic, old sincerity. Instead, in a dialectical move, new sincerity *incorporates* postmodern irony and cynicism; it operates in conjunction with irony. (In a reverse move, Steven Shaviro uses the term ‘sincerity’ when he appears to be referring to the new sincerity [see Shaviro 2010, 91 and 176, notes 61 and 62].)

In a review of contemporary new artworks at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010, Jerry Saltz noted that ‘these young artists … grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind’ (Saltz, ‘Sincerity and Irony Hug it Out’, quoted in Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 3). This understanding of the new sincerity’s dialectical relation to postmodern irony can be found in several contributions to this special issue. In the opening paper, James MacDowell presents a long and careful definition of quirkiness, taking into consideration its status as a sensibility, mood, tone or structure of feeling. Quirkiness, MacDowell argues, ‘is a contemporary comedic sensibility that is intimately bound up with the tonal combination of “irony” and “sincerity”’. This comedic sensibility creates a form of comedy that elicits both embarrassment and sympathy for characters. MacDowell calls this a conflicted tone premised on the coexistence of and tensions between ‘irony’ and ‘sincerity’. He views Wes Anderson’s films within the context of this conflicted tone.

Deborah J. Thomas also explores the concept of tone, emphasising the way spectators are invited to engage with characters in the smart film. She uses *Rushmore* (1998) as a case study, and employs another term that has come to be associated with Wes Anderson – ‘melancomic’ (a fusion of the comic and the melancholic) – to examine how the film’s irony distances spectators from characters but also how moments of affect encourage allegiance towards them.
In the third paper that addresses the concept of tone, John Gibbs begins by discussing *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004) in terms of allusionism, the ‘smart film’ sensibility, the new sincerity and the quirky, before settling on tone. Gibbs analyses in some detail several key sequences, including the moment when Steve Zissou first meets Ned Plimpton, who could be his estranged son. The styles of acting set the tone for this potentially emotional encounter: Owen Wilson plays Ned Plimpton in a ‘truthful and unaffected performance’, whereas Bill Murray plays Steve Zissou in a ‘deadpan, melancholic, detached, world-weary and sarcastic’ manner. Nonetheless, for Gibbs, ‘Steve seems genuinely disturbed and moved by the encounter with Ned’, suggesting this scene from the film is a perfect instance of what MacDowell calls the tonal conflict of irony and sincerity. Like Deborah J. Thomas in relation to *Rushmore*, Gibbs argues that, in *The Life Aquatic*, ‘ironic and empathetic [i.e. sincere] elements clearly temper each other, ebbing and flowing across the movie’.

The tone of Anderson’s films is partly controlled by four dominant stylistic traits: the blank style of the smart film mentioned above, the use of music (especially 1960s and 1970s rock music, which creates a nostalgic mood), montage sequences and slow motion. Moreover, as Elena Boschi and Tim McNelis make clear in their contribution, these traits usually work together, since each montage or slow-motion sequence is unified by a song. The authors examine the main songs that Anderson employs from *Bottle Rocket* (1996) through *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, and argue that the songs function not only to set the tone but also to enrich character development.

Donna Peberdy turns to performance studies to examine another dominant trait of Anderson’s films: the performativity of masculinity (especially fatherhood). Anderson’s representation of masculinity is usually defined in terms of crisis, manifest on screen as a ‘blankness’ of expression (blank face, flat vocal delivery, muted and minimal actions, unblinking and stiff body language, especially in the characters played by Bill Murray). Peberdy goes much further than simply defining such performances as ‘deadpan’ by ending up characterising this acting style as autistic, for the characters’ emotions are not so much absent as blocked. Bill Murray’s face, Peberdy argues, registers boredom, apathy, hopelessness and an inability to express emotion. Only at extreme moments can the male characters be expressive:

Dignan and Anthony (Luke Wilson) shouting at each other in *Bottle Rocket*, Peter and Francis fighting in *The Darjeeling Limited*, Steve’s ‘crazy eye’ and turning against the pirates in *The Life Aquatic*, Ritchie’s attempted suicide and Eli’s near-death in *The Royal Tenenbaums* can all be read in terms of what Erving Goffman described as ‘flooding out’ where the character is unable to maintain their constructed image and breaks the frame they have previously constructed for themselves.

In contrast to the study of male characters in Anderson’s films, Cynthia Felando examines the middle-aged female characters typically played by
Anjelica Huston (in The Royal Tenenbaums, The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou and The Darjeeling Limited [2007]). Felando argues that, unlike the male characters Bill Murray plays, ‘[Huston’s characters] are confident, secure in their middle age, and they are neither embittered nor given to regret’.

Stefano Baschiera studies Wes Anderson’s representation of domestic spaces and his careful attention to objects (usually meticulously arranged and filmed from a high angle shot pointing straight down). In particular, Baschiera focuses on the narrative significance conferred upon these objects, especially in the domestic space of The Royal Tenenbaums and the way the train in The Darjeeling Limited creates a surrogate family home for the three brothers. Many of the objects are vintage and take on a nostalgic role, particularly in relation to an absent or dead father.

Whereas Baschiera examines domestic space in The Royal Tenenbaums, Brendan Kredell broadens the focus to the way the film ‘developed a vexed relationship with the city and with urban life’, a relationship structured via gentrification: ‘we can see in Tenenbaums the purest manifestation of the gentrifying impulse, a desire to selectively reappropriate the city as an aesthetic object’.

David O’Grady explores the way documentary filmmaking is incorporated into The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou. In particular, O’Grady analyses Zissou’s need to come to terms with the possible end of his documentary career, as he encounters clashes between his child-like adventures and his middle-aged realities. O’Grady focuses on Zissou’s tendency to conflate fiction, documentary and home movie: ‘Zissou … cannot differentiate among cinematic modes of consciousness: the fiction of personal hagiography equals the actuality of documentary equals the commoditization of his home movies’.

Finally, Tom Dorey analyses Anderson’s paratextual material (especially special features included on DVDs, and official advertising), and in doing so addresses his paper to the dominant, if somewhat implicit, paradigm at the centre of this special issue – auteur theory. Dorey examines the way this paratextual material promotes Anderson as an auteur, focusing in particular on how Anderson successfully adapts Roald Dahl’s Fantastic Mr. Fox while maintaining his own auteur status.

In the epigraph to this editorial (from the appendix to A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius), Dave Eggers rejects the postmodern as expressing the new and the oppositional. For him, born in 1970 and writing at the beginning of a new millennium, the postmodern is already old; it represents the standard by which something new needs to be defined. In a similar vein, Wes Anderson, born less than a year before Eggers, does not fit neatly into the postmodern irony of the smart film. His films incorporate (and thereby transform) the postmodern through a new sincerity that articulates the structure of feeling of the present moment.
References


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