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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Framing the ‘melancomic’: character, aesthetics and affect in Wes Anderson’s Rushmore

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Using Wes Anderson’s Rushmore (1998) as a case study, this paper will examine the relationship between irony and affect, and the way the tension between these aesthetic modes destabilises normative assumptions and expectations in relation to character engagement and what Murray Smith refers to as ‘the structure of sympathy’ (Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 3). Anderson’s films could be described, at a tonal level, as ‘melancomic’. They are undoubtedly unorthodox and idiosyncratic, displaying a perceptible, but gentle irony, levels of artifice, and a ‘weird’ self-aware precision that encourages a cognitive and affective distance. By a close examination of a specific set of stylistic practices and formal modes of address, this paper will argue that Anderson develops a symbiotic relationship between character and screen aesthetic that results in a dialectic between affective dissonance and arousal. It will examine the way cinematic conventions are defamiliarised in Rushmore utilising a series of strategies in relation to framing, camera angles, shot scales, sound and performance that are designed to unsettle the audience’s experience of proximity to, and hence intimacy with, the characters. This paper will also address the way in which, paradoxically, this distanciation is offset by the inclusion of other formal and narrative devices that convey momentary touches of affect, which imbue the film with a degree of psychological realism and authenticity in relation to character development and also encourage a discernable sense of spectator allegiance towards character.

Keywords: Wes Anderson; Rushmore; melancomic; irony; affect; aesthetics; Murray Smith; character engagement; structure of sympathy

Whatever emotions you’re dealing with, you just show enough, you don’t linger on it. (Anderson in G. Smith and Jones 2001, 29)

Introduction

Wes Anderson’s films are characterised by a ‘weird’, idiosyncratic and ironic self-consciousness, offset by levels of sincerity and pathos – a wedding of style

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and tone that could be described by the portmanteau, ‘melancomic’ (Bailey 2001; Brunetta 2003). As such, they can be contextualised within smart cinema — a wave of contemporary, often controversial American films identified by cultural theorist Jeffrey Sconce in his 2002 Screen article ‘Irony, Nihilism and the New American “Smart” Film’, which are particularly attached to the trope of irony. According to Sconce, smart film is especially aligned to the cultural tastes and consumption patterns of the educated intelligentsia of Generation X, who derive pleasure from their ironic ‘cleverness’ and ‘arty’ sm(art) sensibility (2002, 349–69). The cycle encompasses a rather diverse set of works, such as those by indie-styled directors Hal Hartley, Todd Haynes and Todd Solondz, and the films by screenwriter Charlie Kaufmann, as well as a number of individual features such as Ghost World (Terry Zwigoff, 2001) and Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly, 2002).

Most of the criticism and confusion in relation to the reception of smart cinema has been based not so much on the actual content of the films per se, but the manner in which it is conveyed. Smart films’ irony, quirky black humour, use of deadpan performance and observational, ‘blank’ style create an underlying, and frequently unsettling, affective ambiguity. The notion of character engagement is also particularly significant in the analysis of the affective dimension of smart cinema, given that character representation is one of the primary means used to establish affective links between the spectator and filmic world, and that smart cinema’s relatively low budgets incur a preference towards character-driven narratives rather than an emphasis on expensive locations, technology and stars. In classic narrative cinema, characters tend to be defined by identifiable, consistent traits, and are goal-oriented, with the narrative drive and causality of the film largely emerging from their desires. Character-oriented information also provides relatively unambiguous affective cues for the audience, which aim to cohere with the emotions being represented within the film. By contrast, smart films generally confound normative processes of engagement with screen characters, by featuring ambiguous protagonists imbued with both psychological realism and self-conscious irony.

This paper will examine this conflation between the aesthetics of realism and irony using Rushmore (Wes Anderson, 1998) as a case study. In particular, it will isolate a set of specific stylistic strategies that are used to problematise ‘the structure of sympathy’ (M. Smith 1995, 3) in relation to character. This will include an examination of the way in which Rushmore utilises anti-naturalistic and ironic strategies of performance to complicate a realist construction of character subjectivity, authenticity and allegiance. It will also discuss the way in which the presentation of character in the film obstructs the spectator’s ability to generate a coherent and normalised sense of affective connection with character by mobilising a series of specific aesthetic practices that invite a play between sympathy and antipathy, thereby fostering a rather paradoxical sense of character alignment and allegiance.
Character and smart film: verisimilitude, irony and ambiguity

Quirky, eccentric and ‘nerdy’ characters proliferate in contemporary American film. Pioneered by the trashy excess of John Waters, favoured by David Lynch in his darkly perverse explorations of small-town America and evident in the American regionalism of Jonathan Demme,1 David Byrne’s True Stories (1986), and Coen Brothers’ films such as Fargo (1996) and The Big Lebowski (1998), these character typologies are also evident in the work of smart directors, such as Anderson and Todd Solondz, as well as particular smart ‘one-offs’ such as Ghost World and American Splendour (Sheri Springer Berman and Robert Pucini, 2003). These films foreground American anti-heroes that become special by their very non-specialness; playing on banal, prosaic and conventionally unattractive qualities, apparent in their physical appearance, behavioural traits and enunciation, to create ironic, self-conscious character representations. They are the antithesis of popular Hollywood representations, which tend to conform to American ideals constructed around beauty, success and affluence. In fact, there are now a number of American character actors, such as Steve Buscemi and William H. Macy, whose less conventional physical characteristics fulfil the remit of such roles and have become stars in their own right. Parodic costumes also help lend an ironic ‘weirdness’ to social types. Particularly evident in the work of Anderson, this seems entirely appropriate for the slightly odd or dysfunctional worlds that these characters tend to inhabit (Figures 1–4).

Figures 1–4. ‘But they all make great efforts to look right for their world – part of the anticipatory pleasure of an Anderson film is what dreadful costumes he will get his team to submit themselves to this time. After the jump suits (Bottle Rocket) and the tracksuits (Royal Tenenbaums), there was a certain inevitability, as you can see on Bill Murray’s resigned face ... that Anderson would one day have them all in frog suits’ (Mackenzie 2005, 5).
Overall, this form of characterisation provides a departure from that deployed in the dominant style of mainstream film – the classical, or what is sometimes referred to as the realist narrative system. This aims at verisimilitude, endeavouring to present a relatively seamless and immersive style of narration by the creation of a coherent diegesis, which typically feature ‘psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or attain specific goals…. The principal causal agency is thus the character, a discriminated individual endowed with a consistent batch of evident traits, qualities and behaviours’ (Bordwell 1985, 157). Verisimilitude is also partly developed by the inclusion of logical and discernable action/reaction links between the character and their situation within the milieu of the film (Deleuze 1986, 141). These in turn enable the spectator to discern a sense of the character’s subjectivity, which ‘may be conceived as a specific instance or level of narration where the telling is attributed to a character in the narrative and received by us as if we were in the situation of the character’ (Branigan 1984, 73).

Thus, the demands of verisimilitude in the classical system implicate the notion of expressiveness in relation to the performance. This is instilled, or cued, by a specific set of ‘acting signs’ comprised of ‘the facial, the gestural, the corporeal (or postural), and the vocal’ (Higson 1986, 112). This is further enhanced through the use of a number of formal techniques, such as the close-up and reaction shot, which require ‘criteria of appropriateness’ (Carroll 2003, 69) in the externalisation of emotion. Overall, the classical narrative system utilises a more naturalistic style of performance designed to minimise ambiguity, communicate information about character interiority and motivation, and encourage a sense of affective connection with character, whether it be sympathy, empathy or antipathy. In saying this, it is important to reiterate that these connections are also fostered by additional connotations that may arise from the expressiveness of other elements of the mise-en-scène, such as lighting, production design and costume, as well as sound, cinematography and editing.

By contrast, performance that is marked by a level of irony and distanciation complicates this mimetic display of expressiveness, and thus the process of affective engagement. As Charles Affron notes, the aesthetics of irony tends to create a distance between the fiction and viewer by foregrounding artifice and technique, which therefore can inhibit an affective response (1980, 42). Thus, ‘the film that makes a fiction of performance tests the medium’s approximation of verisimilitude against fictivity: our affect is inflected by our reading activity, our ability to see performance as performance’ (Affron 1980, 42).

Smart film largely deploys a stylisation of performance that invites this more self-reflexive response than that demanded by more immersive, naturalistic mimetic strategies. In a broad sense, the strategy of performance in smart film resists the excess that is apparent in the more melodramatic method style of acting, instead marked by what Andrew Higson refers to as an ‘economy’ (1986, 113) of acting signs. To a large extent, this style draws on Brechtian theatrical devices of distanciation in relation to performance. This includes a minimalism and precision
of actor movement and gesture in relation to the camera’s field of vision, deadpan or impassive facial expressions, and a relative sparsity of dialogue enunciated with ‘flat’ vocal intonations. However, at times this self-conscious performance style shifts into a more naturalistic mode. This creates a play between empathy and distance, thereby soliciting an unstable and paradoxical range of emotional responses in the spectator towards both character and text.

**Smart film and character engagement**

Ironic character representations and performance strategies also complicate the ‘structure of sympathy’ and empathic arousal in smart film largely because of the way they foster a sense of distanciation. According to Murray Smith, this structure is constituted by three important elements: recognition, alignment and allegiance (1995, 5). Character recognition involves a ‘mimetic hypothesis’ by referring to physical features, psychology and behaviour about individual human agents derived from a correlation to those evident in real-world experience (M. Smith 1995, 82). Character alignment, in turn, is developed via a character, or perhaps a group of characters, which are allocated the most screen time and space within the diegesis, and also those with which the spectator can develop an understanding of their perspective in relation to their beliefs, motivations, feelings and desires. Therefore, a ‘structure of alignment’ is created by the way in which the narrative knowledge of a film is filtered through a particular character – specifically by the degree of ‘spatial attachment and subjective access’ (M. Smith 1995, 188). Finally, character allegiance pertains to the moral and ideological evaluation of characters by the spectator (M. Smith 1995, 84). Encompassing both affective and cognitive dimensions, it ‘depends upon the spectator having … reliable access to the character’s state of mind, on understanding the context of the character’s actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge’ (M. Smith 1995, 84). This evaluative process is associated with the arousal of an emotional response in the spectator, which may vary in intensity and ‘shift depending on the situation in which the character is placed, but … [is] determined by an underlying evaluation of the character’s moral status within the moral system of the text’ (M. Smith 1995, 62).

Murray Smith also argues that in order to attain a more comprehensive theory of character engagement, these three levels ‘must be supplemented by accounting for “empathic” phenomena’ (1995, 13). In doing so, he makes a distinction between sympathy and empathy. A sympathetic response is ‘when we cognitively recognise an emotion and then respond with an appropriate emotion based on our evaluation of the character … [while] empathy is when we simulate or experience the same affect or emotion experienced by the character’ (M. Smith 1995, 102). Murray Smith identifies three ways in which empathy manifests ‘emotional simulation, motor and affective mimicry, and autonomic responses like the startle response’ (1995, 81). Emotional simulation is the aspect that is most commonly associated with the popular conception of empathy. It involves imaginatively
projecting ourselves in the character's situation, and then hypothesising 'as to the emotion(s) they are experiencing' (M. Smith 1995, 97). Affective mimicry is an involuntary feedback process of 'an almost perceptual registering and reflexive simulation of the emotion of another person via facial and bodily cues' (M. Smith 1995, 99). Finally, autonomic reactions are reflexive reactions prompted by unexpected noises or movements within the frame (M. Smith 1995, 102).

The 'structure of sympathy' in relation to character engagement generally has a more complex configuration in smart film than that of classic narrative cinema. As Murray Smith observes in his later work, the inclusion of 'graduated reactions, contradictory responses, ironic detachment' can generate a more ambivalent and occasionally 'perverse allegiance' to character (1999, 220). This idea has some relevance to smart film, and is probably most notoriously exemplified by the predatory, morally repugnant, but cordial and apparently benign character of paedophile Bill Maplewood in *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998). However, by and large, Murray Smith's work does not aim to provide an extensive analysis of the way in which ironic detachment may specifically impact on the structure of sympathy in a film, and also tends to downplay the extent to which the particular formal elements of a film may contribute to this ambivalence. In contrast to this, I would argue that aesthetic configurations can play a significant role in the way the spectator is invited to engage with character in smart film. This is particularly evident in Anderson's work, which will be addressed more fully in my case study of *Rushmore*.

More generally, in terms of character recognition, 'weird', ironic representations can potentially complicate a sense of realism that is cultivated by the 'mimetic hypothesis'. In smart film, this is often compounded by the use of a number of anti-realist formal strategies. For example, the extensive deployment of a wide-angle lens, and high or low angled shots, can lend a slight surrealistic effect to characters; creating ironic exaggerations or minor distortion of features that resist the verisimilitude of realist modes of representation. These also create spatial and perspective distortions, which further consolidate a sense of distanciation (Figure 5).

As Murray Smith notes, classic narrative cinema usually aligns the spectator with mostly sympathetic characters, which also allows for the relatively straightforward development of character allegiance. In smart films, such as *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Todd Solondz, 1996), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), *Rushmore* and *Napoleon Dynamite* (Jared Hess, 2004), this is somewhat problematised by the tendency to present essentially anti-heroic protagonists 'around which an alignment structure ... is built but who remain unsympathetic' (M. Smith 1995, 81), largely due to their moral perversity and/or an undue emphasis on negative and irritating character traits, which can make them unlikeable. This complicates the moral status of the protagonist in question and hence the development of a defined sense of character allegiance. Smart films' aforementioned undetermined dramaturgical codes also impact on the structure of sympathy, by offering little in the way of normative affective cues for the
spectator. This can obscure a more defined sense of character subjectivity in relation to thoughts, motivations and feelings, and limit the provision of feedback mechanisms that Murray Smith argues are necessary for the development of empathy towards character, particularly that which arises from emotional simulation and affective mimicry. However, it is important to reiterate that smart film is generally characterised by a coalescence of both irony and realism. How this is evident in smart film, and the way this may invite particular spectator positions and responses, particularly in relation to character engagement and affect, will be analysed in more detail in the following case study of *Rushmore*.

Wes Anderson and the ‘melancomic’

Anderson co-wrote his first three features with actor Owen Wilson, who is also one of a series of regular performers in Anderson’s ensemble casts. In fact, the two have a long-time friendship forged from their Texas college days, where as roommates they used to pass the time together by writing and performing plays, among other things (Colloff 1998). Such activities have provided a rich source of inspiration for their film scripts and there is a perceptible autobiographical flavour to their collaborations.

Although Anderson’s films establish a deliberate distance between text and spectator, their tone differs from the blankness of Todd Solondz’s *Happiness* (1997) and *Storytelling* (2001), the hip nihilism of Greg Araki’s *The Doom Generation* (1995) or the stony, observational aesthetic of *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003). Certainly, the overall critical reception of Anderson’s body of work...
is usually quite positive, and lacks the ethical controversy that other smart directors like Todd Solondz and Neil LaBute have generated. No one accuses Anderson of being ‘shocking’ or ‘nihilistic’, which, as Sconce notes, was a criticism frequently levelled at a number of smart films. However, the tone of Anderson’s films means that they are not always grasped in the precise manner that the writers desire or aim for. As Anderson himself observes, ‘with our movies, there’s been a pitch they operate at, tonally – what is and is not acceptable as “real”. And it’s a tone that is not always immediately apparent. Some people get it and others don’t find it’ (G. Smith and Jones 2001, 29).

This tone could be described as a fusion of the comic and the melancholic – ‘melancomic’; a term possibly derived from the Italian, melancomico and supposedly coined by Italian film director Carlo Verdano (Brunetta 2003, 294), but is also used by film critic Andy Bailey, who in a review of The Royal Tenenbaums (2001), refers to the way Rushmore ‘popularised the Andersonian cinematic style of the melancomic’ (2001). This tone is likely to arouse a distinct recognition of the peculiar, developed partly because of the playful use of comic irony, which veers off sharp-edged satire, and also incorporates the whimsical and poignant. Overall, the look of Anderson’s films conveys an inherent strangeness and self-aware precision. The camerawork, with its controlled, static framing and angled perspectives, adds to the creation of a ‘blank’ affect. The colour palette is also carefully chosen – a little brighter and more enhanced than reality, imbuing the films with a ‘chocolate box’ (Le Cain 2002) quality. This adds to the level of artifice, and is also characteristic of a number of other smart films, such as Ghost World.

Anderson’s films, while incorporating anti-realist devices, do not fall into the typology of the European-derived art films conceptualised by Bordwell, which strive to obstruct knowledge and meaning via convoluted narrative structures. Although episodic, they maintain narrative linearity and temporal logic. In fact, the concept of ‘story’ and ‘storytelling’ is self-consciously foregrounded in Anderson’s work. Anderson’s third feature, The Royal Tenenbaums, for example, is presented as a book, punctuated by ‘chapters’. Rushmore, in turn, has a play-like structure, which is divided into months announced by the use of titles and curtains. These are partly inspired by the economic pragmatics of the films’ relatively low budgets, which impact on editing choices. As Anderson himself admits:

I’ve never had a single dissolve in my movies, except for a fade-out at the end of Bottle Rocket. It’s all hard cuts and a lot of jump cuts. In Rushmore we did curtains, and in [The Royal Tenenbaums] we did chapters, anything at all to avoid a transition that involves sending you to a lab. (G. Smith and Jones 2001, 29)

This feature in Rushmore is also thematically aligned to the narrative as the chief protagonist, Max Fischer, has a penchant for staging his own dramatic productions. However, these devices also ensure that from the outset the films are not necessarily attempting to construct a cinematic world aimed at verisimilitude, but are signalled as works of fiction, which also helps to foster a degree of intellectual and emotional distance.
Although featuring youthful protagonists in a school setting, *Rushmore* departs from the conventional teen-pic. Its target demographic embraces, and could even be primarily aimed at, an adult audience. This is evident by the film’s self-conscious, meticulous set design, comprised of objects and props that not only appear to be the idiosyncratic preoccupations and obsessions of the filmmakers themselves, but which also conform to the semiotics of the smart film. Playfully ironic and nostalgic, these are designed to evoke the cultural memories of Generation X spectators. For example, in *Rushmore*, Max is intrigued by his discovery in the school library of the book, *Diving for Sunken Treasure* by Jacques Cousteau. This ‘Jacques Cousteau’ motif re-occurs and is developed thematically in Anderson’s fourth feature, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004). It would resonate with those members of the audience that grew up watching the adventures of Jacques-Yves Cousteau, deep-sea diver extraordinaire, on Sunday afternoon television c.1970. In *The Royal Tenenbaums*, there is a brief shot of an interior of a cupboard filled with well-used family board games, such as *Risk*, which would also prompt the childhood memories of the same generation. It is also indicative of Anderson’s thorough approach to filmmaking, whereby *mise-en-scène* and set design are meticulously developed in order to sustain the unique tone of his films.

**Rushmore and character**

*Rushmore* is the story of Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman), a 15-year-old sophomore who attends a private school in Houston, Texas, called The Rushmore Academy. The school belies its Texas setting by its overtly preppy, ivy-league East Coast iconography, reminiscent of J.D. Salinger’s book *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and familiar from other films, such as *Dead Poet’s Society* (Peter Weir, 1989). Anderson has a predilection for idiosyncratic and comical characters, and Max Fischer is no exception. Like most of his protagonists, Max is an outsider. His appearance suggests a visual gag. His wild eyebrows, heavy-framed glasses and prodigious nose, are somewhat reminiscent of Groucho Marx nose and glasses joke accessories. Unconventional camera framing and angles lend a slight but visible figural distortion, which deliberately foregrounds and accentuates Max’s features (Figure 6).

In contrast to his classmates, Max wears a smart uniform, with a blue blazer and occasional red beret. Max’s adherence to Rushmore’s regulation dress code is indicative of the kind of image that he wants to project – one that emphasises his aspiring preppy pretensions. Max is actually the son of a humble barber and attends Rushmore as a scholarship student. He is essentially ashamed and secretive of his background, and rather than admit his father’s true profession, he tells people that he is the son of a neurosurgeon. In spite of this, Max and his father, Bert (Seymour Cassel) display a close relationship. Bert is portrayed sympathetically in the film, and his love and acceptance of Max remain unperturbed by this deception.
In terms of character recognition, it would be easy to stereotype Max as the social archetype of the idiosyncratic high school outsider, referred to in popular vernacular as the ‘geek’ or the ‘nerd’, who ordinarily attracts derision and abuse from his classmates. As Timothy Shary observes, the ‘nerd’ is one of a staple of teenage identities ‘most commonly seen in school films’ (2002, 9), and is generally characterised by a series of recognisable cultural codes, such as non-conformist, unfashionable attire, an overtly studious appearance predominantly signified by thick, black-rimmed looking spectacles, and perceived to be low in the high school social hierarchy. However, *Rushmore* resists developing this more normative, clichéd perception by portraying Max as a kind of anti-heroic rebel. Although possessing a longing to belong, Max is different. His almost sociopathic narcissism and hyper-confidence allow him to transcend or ignore social rules of conduct. He displays a precocious suaveness and charm, which includes gestures such as cigarette smoking that imitate adult behaviour. Max’s self-centredness and immaturity also means that he frequently appears unlikeable and exasperating – a fact that was noted in a number of reviews of the film. For example, online critic James Berardinelli writes, ‘Max is a schemer, a manipulator, a stalker and an all-around despicable person. There’s nothing appealing about him’ (2007). Thus, while *Rushmore* predominantly aligns us with Max’s character by his occupation of a significant amount of the film’s spatial and temporal regions, and offers insights into his character subjectivity via behaviour and dialogue, these negative character traits undoubtedly impact on the degree to which the spectator can foster both sympathy and empathy for Max. As Murray Smith argues:

Figure 6. In *Rushmore*, the wide-angle lens lends a visible figural distortion, accentuating and ‘weirdening’ Max’s features. Creates affective dissonance by Max’s face thrust intrusively ‘in our face’. Camera position creates an anti-realist effect as Max uses the screen as a blackboard.
sympathetic allegiance is not automatically produced by alignment with a character. What counts in how we evaluate and respond emotionally to a character with whom we have been aligned is not merely that we have been aligned with him, but what we discover about him through that alignment. (1999, 220)

Of course, the assignation of character traits in Max that are ‘contradictory in terms of their moral valence’ (M. Smith 1995, 76) also problematises the ability to foster allegiance towards him. It is also worth noting at this point that these processes of character engagement are further obstructed by the inclusion of specific formal devices in the film, some of which I referred to previously but will analyse in more detail in the next section.

However, I would also argue, in contrast to Berardinelli, that Anderson clearly intended to create Max as an ambiguous character with some dubious and unlikeable characteristics, but also with some redeeming features. Although irritating, Max possesses an underlying insecurity and melancholy. This appears to be attributable to the absence of his mother who died when he was very young, a fact that may go some way in provoking a degree of sympathy for Max. However, the most appealing and funniest aspect of Max is his indomitable resourcefulness and enthusiasm for extra-curricular activities, all of which are depicted through a montage sequence early in the film. Max is the Editor in Chief and publisher of the Rushmore Yearbook The Yankee Review, Captain of the Debate Team, President of the French Club, Vice-President of the Stamp and Coin Club, Calligraphy Club President, Astronomy Society Founder, Fencing Team Captain, Director of the Max Fischer Players and founder of the Beekeepers’ Club, among many others. These projects display an inspired, quirky genius but are juggled at the expense of his schoolwork.

In spite of their disaffection, Anderson’s films are primarily about connections between people. In Rushmore Max forges a friendship with Herman Blume (Bill Murray), a misanthropic, morose industrial tycoon, who, like Max, is somewhat of an outsider. Blume drinks and smokes incessantly, and cannot abide the company of his wife or oafish sons. He is obviously depressed and, like many of Anderson’s characters, suffers from a form of arrested development. Early in the film, we see Blume cannonball into the swimming pool at his son’s birthday party, followed by a shot of him lingering underneath the water, as if deciding whether it is really worth his while to emerge.

Both Max and Herman become infatuated with the young, widowed first grade teacher at Rushmore, Miss Cross (Olivia Williams). Adolescent sexuality and romantic delusions are explored with Oedipal undertones, as the motherless Max blindly and relentlessly pursues Miss Cross, unable to conceive of the impossibility of their age difference. When it transpires that Herman is also in love with her, this instigates a spate of petty, inventive and comic vindictiveness from Max, which is returned by Blume with equal measure. These acts are presented in a montage ironically juxtaposed to the tune of The Who’s ‘You Are Forgiven’. It is an example of the way in which music in the film departs from realist conventions by providing an ironic juxtaposition that does little to cue the
audience as to how a particular character is feeling or behaving. However, the up-
beat tempo of the soundtrack, comprised of an eclectic mix of British music from
the 1960s and 1970s, imparts an optimistic (and nostalgic) feel to the film overall,
and adds momentum to the narrative. In addition, significantly, it transpires that
the film is ultimately about forgiveness, as the conflicts between characters are
resolved in the film’s finale.

Max’s efforts to win the heart of Miss Cross culminate in the unauthorised
construction of an aquarium in which he destroys part of the school grounds. He
is finally thrown out of Rushmore Academy by the long-suffering headmaster
Dr Nelson Guggenheim (Brian Cox). In Max’s estimation, this is probably the
worst thing that can happen. In spite of this, he manages to find a place for himself
at the local state school, where he enthusiastically embarks on yet another round
of extra-curricular activities.

**Rushmore and the symbiosis of character, milieu and aesthetic**

The performances of the ensemble cast in *Rushmore* are typical of Anderson’s
films. They are largely rendered in a deadpan, disaffected fashion, which creates
an affective dissonance and limits access to character interiority. One of the
criticisms of Anderson’s work is that his stylisation of performance is somewhat
overdone, so that the characters are not developed beyond mere caricature. In
other words, the image of the character is ‘stylised to such an extent that it falls
out of the flow of the narrative, halting that flow and resisting the struggle to
contain it as character, in role’ (Higson 1986, 124). Maximilian Le Cain, for
example, writes of *The Royal Tenenbaums*, that:

> a good director of character based cinema will, by any number of methods, bring the
audience into the emotional world of the people being dealt with. By undercutting
our exposure to his character’s suffering ... we are given no opportunity to engage
with them and they remain abstract. (2002)

This, he argues, creates a ‘sterile film ... [which] remains emotionally crippled
to the end’ (Le Cain 2002).

However, I would suggest that this is actually reflective of the way in which
Anderson develops a symbiosis between character and aesthetic in his films. In
*Rushmore* the restraint exercised in relation to performance is consistent with the
way in which the protagonists, Max, Herman and Miss Cross, are distanced from
their own emotional interiority, and suffer from a lingering sense of unresolved
grief – a theme apparent in all of Anderson’s features, except perhaps *Bottle
Rocket* (1996). The precise formal qualities of *Rushmore*, especially in respect to
framing, reinforce this emotional repression. Cinematic conventions are repeatedly
defamiliarised by the use of camera angles and shot scales that destabilise and
distance the spectator. In addition to this, the repeated use of the wide-angle lens,
which, as I noted previously, is a stylistic trait evident in Anderson’s work as a
whole, creates a skewed or anamorphic on-screen image and barrel distortion that
reinforces Rushmore’s odd world and its eccentric inhabitants.
The repeated use of the wide-angle lens for close-ups on characters’ faces, for example, dislodges the ‘mimetic hypothesis’ (M. Smith 1995, 31) inherent in the verisimilitude of a realist construction of character by perceivably distorting and unexpectedly ‘weirdening’ the face. At the same time, this makes it harder to assimilate a comprehension and interpretation of normative facial recognition cues, therefore inhibiting the affective feedback mechanisms that, according to Murray Smith, are associated in the creation of empathy. After all, the close-up is generally used in film as a site of affect to establish intersubjective mimetic links between the spectator and character. This occurs by drawing attention to ‘facial expressions … [which] not only communicate emotion, but also elicit, clarify, strengthen affective response – especially empathic response. This is possible because viewing the human face can elicit response through the processes of affective mimicry, facial feedback, and emotional contagion’ (Plantinga 1999, 240). Close-ups of faces framed by the wide-angle lens can obstruct these links, evoking more mixed feelings than simply registering an empathic response, including possible disconcerting sensations at being ‘thrust’ so closely into an examination of a ‘weird’, even slightly repugnant, face. Their capacity to forge an intimate connection between character and spectator is further diminished because they occupy less room within the frame than normal close-ups, so that more background is visible on either side of the character’s face.

In addition to the extensive deployment of the wide-angle lens, normative spatial relations are further destabilised in Rushmore via a number of other formal features. This includes sudden and disorientating bird’s eye or overhead camera angles, as well as a significant number of jump cuts that create a momentary dislocation, both temporally and spatially, from the diegesis. There are also a number of instances where characters are framed by a long telephoto lens, creating a shallow depth of field and a flattened aesthetic. While this is not a particularly unusual cinematic technique in itself, in Rushmore it is once again reflective of the symbiosis between character and aesthetic. For instance, in the conversation between Max and Olivia in Rushmore’s library, the flattening effect of the long lens is matched by their ‘flat’ performances, evident from their lack of expressiveness. Overall, this makes the scene appear strangely depthless, with the disaffected performances offering little in the way of demonstrative affective cues that can arouse an empathic response towards character.

Rushmore also flouts realist conventions of spatial continuity in other ways that can be construed as a formal gesture to reflect this symbiosis of character and aesthetic. This occurs, for example, in a sequence of five shots just over halfway through the film, which depicts a muted, but rather hostile exchange between Max and Herman at the cemetery, over their rivalry for Miss Cross’s affections. The alternating use of a wide-angle and normal lens, and lack of continuity in terms of shot angle and editing across the shots, creates a discernable distortion of perspectival relations that generate unusual shifts in relation to character position and alignment. In the establishing shot, the figures of Max (sitting) and Herman (standing) appear to be several metres apart with the use of a wide-angle lens.
elongating the apparent distance between the characters, while, at the same time, making them appear as if they are bending slightly towards each other. This is followed by a low level, almost neutral angle shot of Max beside the gravestone of his mother, seemingly set up from Herman’s perspective, but spatial logic would dictate that this should be a high angle shot with Herman looking down at Max to a greater degree. At the same time, it appears that Herman is in closer proximity to Max than the previous establishing shot would suggest. The shot is therefore misaligned with Herman’s probable viewing, and hence character position. It is also worth noting that the words, ‘Eloise Fischer 1942 – 1989. Beloved wife of Bert and mother of Max’ clearly engraved on the gravestone lend a rather poignant significance to the scene that is aligned with Max’s character position, although this is somewhat undercut by a touch of Anderson’s characteristic low-key ironic humour by the words, ‘Paths of glory lead but to the grave’ displayed underneath the names.

The next shot is an extreme low angle shot from Max’s perspective of Herman towering over him, which spatially aligns us with Max’s viewing position. However, once again, this is not set up by the previous shot. Shot four is another frame of Max at the grave looking up at Herman aligned from Max’s character position, but its higher angle indicates that this logically should have been shot two in the sequence. The film then cuts to shot five in the sequence, which is a more omniscient high angle frame, with shallow depth of field, of Max and Herman. Distorted relations of proximity and perspective make Max look as though he’s sitting far away at the bottom of a hill compared to Herman, when in actual fact they should appear closer together. However, this also parallels the emotional distance between the characters. Overall, the lack of spatial continuity and alignment throughout the sequence can be read as a visual interpretation of character conflict and miscommunication, as Max and Herman literally do not see ‘eye to eye’. In addition to this, a little later in the scene, the viewer’s intimacy and distance from character is further manipulated via the inclusion of relatively self-conscious zooms (Figures 7(a) and (b)).

Finally, in common with a lot of smart cinema, there is a general lack of camera movement in *Rushmore*, which helps to convey a precise, static quality to the film. This is in marked contrast to the ‘intensified continuity’ (Bordwell 2002, 16) evident in much of contemporary cinema that is aimed at creating a more visceral and immersive cinematic experience where ‘viewers remain in the grip of the action’ (Bordwell 2002, 25). This includes the framing of character action by faster cutting, fuller compositions and a mobile camera, which can generate sensory–motor links that provide affective feedback mechanisms for the arousal of an emotional response towards character, which, as Murray Smith notes, is necessary for the development of both empathy and allegiance. By way of contrast, the relatively static framing of character action evident in *Rushmore*, means that these mechanisms remain somewhat underdetermined, and ensure that the spectator has to work harder to discern affective cues that can sustain these forms of ‘imaginative engagement’ (M. Smith 1995, 6) with character.
Overall, there is a literal distortion of the way in which we view the characters in *Rushmore*, and a conscious attempt to confound the way in which we are normally interpellated by the camera into an affective position in relation to character. Thus, while the spectator can sustain a level of ‘perceptual and cognitive’ (M. Smith 1995, 231) sympathy for the film’s protagonists by assimilating a knowledge of their personality, motivations and conflicts, via dialogue, and the portrayal of a linear sequence of narrative events, the ability to foster an emotional connection with character and a sustained sense of allegiance is complicated by the film’s anti-realist strategies in relation to performance and formal styling.

‘Standing just behind’: *Rushmore* and character allegiance

However, although the spectator has to work harder to figure out how to engage with the characters in *Rushmore*, I would argue that, overall, the film establishes a discernable sense of allegiance towards its protagonists, especially Max. As film critic Mark Olsen notes, ‘Anderson stands beside (his characters) – or rather just behind them – cheering them on as they chase their miniaturist renditions of the American Dream’ (1999, 12). This is managed in several ways in *Rushmore*. Firstly, the film’s entire narrative focus is on a handful of eccentric characters and their interactions, depicted in a relatively microcosmic, insular milieu confined to a limited number of locations and sets, with minimal reference to an external world. At this point it is perhaps useful to draw on the work of Steven D. Katz (2004) and Warren Buckland (2006) on the notion of a film’s ‘circle of action’ (Katz 2004, 6), and the way in which this relates to spectator position and character in *Rushmore*. Katz suggests that in film staging ‘there are essentially two approaches to space. One is to place the camera in the action the second is to place it outside the action’ (2004, 6). As Buckland elaborates:
if the camera is placed inside the circle of action spectators are placed close to, and interact with the events. If the camera is placed outside the circle of action spectators are presented with a more neutral, distanced view of events. (2006, 35)

In *Rushmore* there is an absence of extreme long shots framing the film’s milieu in an external and more anonymous context, such as a town or city, thereby ensuring that the spectator is visually located within an insular filmic world and therefore less distanced from the film’s ‘circle of action’.

There are also a series of jump cuts in the film from a long shot of a particular scene to a close-up, or medium close-up, of character. So, for example, in Figures 8(a) and (b), the radical shift from a long shot of the house outside the film’s ‘circle of action’ by a 180-degree cut, which takes place along the axis of action, results in a direct visual placement of the spectator’s gaze within the more intimate framing of a medium close-up of character inside ‘the circle of action’. This suddenly, and rather dramatically also aligns us with Herman’s character position. However, at the same time it is worth noting that Herman’s gaze in the shot in Figure 8(b) does not meet that of the camera – he appears as if he is looking off-screen just above the frame line. This, in typical Anderson fashion, also somewhat undercuts the proximity and intimacy with character that would be registered via a more direct gaze at the camera.

The casting in the film is also especially apt, notably Jason Schwartzman and Bill Murray. This helps lend a sense of authenticity and conviction to character, taking them beyond mere caricature. Murray’s signature brand of rather deadpan, low-key humour that he lends to his performances seems particularly suited for the character of Herman, while Schwartzman’s physical features and competency as a performer are well adapted to convey Max’s ‘nerdiness’. In fact, Schwartzman’s subsequent roles in films such as *Slackers* (Dewey Nicks, 2002) and the television show *Bored to Death* (Jonathan Ames, 2009–), among others, are indicative of the way in which he seems to readily conform to what Richard Dyer would categorise as a star ‘type’ (1998, 47), in this case the ‘geek’ or ‘nerd’.

Figure 8(a) and (b). Sudden 180-degree jump cut from long shot directly to the more intimate framing of the medium close-up visually situate the character firmly inside *Rushmore*’s ‘circle of action’, and enclosed, microcosmic milieu.
In addition to this, the film offers brief, affecting moments of sentiment. Anderson remarks ‘whatever emotions you’re dealing with, you just show enough, you don’t linger on it’ (G. Smith and Jones 2001, 29). Stylistically this can be emphasised by the use of the cut-away at moments of narrative crisis. Love in the film is also conveyed by small but significant gestures between characters. For example, Margaret Yang, Max’s young high school admirer, tenderly offers him a small plant as a tangible expression of her admiration for him. Brief, yet significant, moments of dialogue allow the spectator to develop glimpses of character interiority and motivation. For instance, when Miss Cross informs Max that her husband is dead, he sadly replies, ‘we both have dead people in our families’. This provides a degree of ‘subjective access’ (M. Smith 1995, 188) to Max’s grief, and forges a possible connection between characters via their shared experience of death. However, at the same time, this is somewhat complicated by the fact that Max apparently filters the revelation via his own experience of his dead mother, which is perhaps indicative of his somewhat stunted emotional growth, and an inability to truly empathise. Max also displays intense feelings for Rushmore Academy that are apparent when he declares, ‘I think you just gotta find something you love to do and then do it for the rest of your life. For me, it’s going to Rushmore.’ Later in the film, as Herman Blume describes his love for Miss Cross to Max, he says, ‘She’s my Rushmore.’ Max wistfully replies, ‘Yeah I know. She was mine too.’ Brief as these moments are, their pathos, and hence affective impact, is made more significant by the way they are set up in direct contrast to the film’s comic irony and distanciation.

However, it is not until the end of the film that a more discernable sense of character allegiance is established. Overall, Rushmore, in spite of its anti-realist styling and non-naturalistic approach to performance, adheres to a realist narrative framework, which provides ‘moral resolution’ (M. Smith 1995, 213) to the story, and allows the spectator to experience an emotional connection with a series of strange, but ultimately sympathetic characters. In the finale of Rushmore, all of the film’s characters are drawn together under the pretext of Max’s inspired dramatic re-enactment of Vietnam, reminiscent of Full Metal Jacket (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) and especially Apocalypse Now (Coppola, 1979), entitled Heaven and Hell. Replete with an impressive level of authentic-looking violence, it is Max’s conciliatory homage to Herman, who is a Vietnam vet.

Of course, this is the utopian happy ending to Anderson’s fictional contrivance but it is convincing, and affecting. The final scenes of the film allow the characters a substantial measure of grace, particularly Max, which allow for a more positive moral evaluation of his character, thereby consolidating of a sense of allegiance towards him. Max resolves his conflicts with Miss Cross and Herman, and achieves a discernable level of honesty as he relinquishes his social pretensions and unashamedly introduces his father to Herman. He finds love with someone more suitable, in the form of Margaret Yang, and reconciles his differences with his young sidekick, Dirk Anderson. This is also represented by a number of stylistic shifts from the weirdly distancing manner of the body of the
film, to add conviction and sincerity to the emotionally affecting ending. There is a more intimate framing with a normal lens. The final scenes, such as that of Margaret and Max dancing, are shot with a gentle light and no distorting lens or angles (Figure 9). One of Anderson’s stylistic signatures is to end his movies with a stylistic shift that displaces the film’s otherwise distanced aesthetic so that it can assist the spectator to develop a sense of allegiance towards character (notably Max).

Figure 9. Margaret and Max dancing. This is shot in a more naturalistic style, using a normal lens with no perspectival distortion and gentler light. Stylistic shift that displaces the film’s otherwise distanced aesthetic so that it can assist the spectator to develop a sense of allegiance towards character (notably Max).

Figure 10. Concluding 20-second slow-mo shot focuses the spectator on the resolution of conflict in the Rushmore world. It helps create a sense of affective arousal and gratification that we come to expect from films shot in the classical realist style.
a brief slow motion shot. In *Rushmore*, this 20-second temporal shift focuses the spectator on the resolution of conflict in the Rushmore world (Figure 10). Ironic distanciation and affective dissonance is therefore displaced by a pronounced sense of affective gratification and arousal that we come to expect from realist films. Music by The Faces adds an up-beat, although not overly sentimental feel to these scenes. Thus, while it is apparent that unorthodox stylistic techniques and strategies of performance problematise the ‘structure of sympathy’ in *Rushmore*, the film’s finale cements a discernable level of character allegiance. A positive cognitive and emotional response towards character is secured – particularly in relation to Max. Overall, *Rushmore* displays a humanist integrity by striking a delicate balance between eccentric, comic irony and touches of affective realism that impart a comprehension of the fragility and poignancy of life.

**Conclusion**

The undetermined and inherently ambiguous emotional cues instilled by the ironic apparatus in *Rushmore* challenge the greater certainties offered by the verisimilitude of a realist aesthetic, thereby drawing on the spectator’s imaginative capacities to a greater degree than conventional narrative cinema. By developing tensions between ironic distanciation and affective realism, *Rushmore* positions the spectator as a more ‘active participant in the production of meaning’ (M. Smith 1995, 40) in relation to character, than that implicitly evoked by the apparent seamlessness of the realist process. Greater demands are placed on the ‘imaginative spectator’ (M. Smith 1995, 6), to inscribe a sense of agency and activity to the reading process and our ability to respond to the texts. Overall, the development of tensions between ironic distanciation and affective immersion in *Rushmore* aim to ‘not simply make strange, to distance the spectator, and refuse empathy, but to create tension between pleasure and instruction, between empathy and critical distance, between the strangely revealing and the natural’ (Higson 1986, 118), thereby inviting a more ‘complex heterogeneous set of interacting responses – autonomic, cognitive, affective – to what we know to be fictional entities’ (M. Smith 1995, 43).

However, it is also important to acknowledge the subjectivity of the spectator as a renegade determinant in this process. Both irony and affect/s are intensely subjective modes of recognition, mediated by various cultural and social factors, which vary from individual to individual. This paper has argued that *Rushmore*’s aesthetics and formal styling may invite or solicit particular spectator positions and responses specifically in relation to character engagement. However, the hermeneutics of irony also require an epistemological framework that is based on the recognition of its semantics, that is, a comprehension that the utterance, representation or image is not serious but actually ironic. Thus, the use of an ironic tone can immediately divide audiences between those who manage to comprehend the nuances of meaning and those who don’t. Indeed, the whole notion of ‘smart’ cinema is constituted by *différence* (Derrida 1982, 1) whereby,
'someone or something must be perceived and portrayed as “stupid”, a demarcation that can understandably lead to conflict’ (Sconce 2002, 353). While a detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that a consideration of spectator engagement with smart film, specifically in relation to their affective and ethical regimes, necessarily extends into an evaluation of the socio/cultural cognitions and epistemology derived from the circulation and comprehension of discourses of irony.

Notes
1. Emanuel Levy in his book *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, argues that Demme’s work such as *Citizen’s Band* (aka *Handle with Care*, 1977), *Melvin and Howard* (1980) and *Something Wild* (1986) ‘set the tone for a number of idiosyncratic comedies both indie and mainstream, peopled by eccentric personalities in seemingly ordinary locales’ (1999, 159). He also observes that ‘the hallmark of Demme’s populism is his taste for kitsch; he rummages around the American landscape like an antique hound in a thrift store’ (155). However, although this is similar to smart film, Demme’s works are generally more optimistic and lyrical than the majority of smart films.

2. Of course, it is possible to engage with characters that are not necessarily human, for example, E.T. and Shrek. However, characters such as these usually possess sufficient anthropomorphic qualities to make this possible.

3. Although Anderson’s films could hardly be described as nihilistic, it is, as Sconce notes, a criticism frequently levelled at a number of smart films. For example, film critic Manohla Dargis, coined the phrase ‘the new nihilism’ to describe a body of films that conveyed ‘a pervading sense that moral choice is not just difficult but impossible, perhaps irrelevant’, and ‘a cinema of hate, a cinema that encourages our sadism, our scorn and, worst of all, our total disinterest – toward the world, other human beings, and just maybe ourselves’ (1998).

4. Higson notes that Bertolt Brecht stressed this idea in his later writings in order to avoid ‘empty, superficial, formalist, mechanical acting’ (1986, 118).

References


