Wes Anderson is smart, shrewd, cool. But there was always a hint that his taste for the whimsical could lead to nothing but whimsy.

In the 2002 edition of the Biographical Dictionary of Film, I wrote of Wes Anderson: “Watch this space. What does that mean? That he might be something one day.” It was a well-intentioned remark: I had liked Rushmore a good deal, and had enjoyed The Royal Tenenbaums even more. But whereas I was already prepared to place Paul Thomas Anderson in the pantheon after any one of his pictures — Hard Eight, Boogie Nights or Magnolia — I was not convinced that Wes Anderson had yet made a real picture that possessed an emotional power rooted in the use of the medium that was a comprehensive revelation of artistic nature.

It was clear that Anderson was smart, shrewd, cool, fashionably affectless, and with his fingers on what you might call the lost pulse. But there was already a hint that his taste for the whimsical could lead to nothing but whimsy. He had a way of quietly evading pain, no matter that his most persistent subject was the failure of family. And rather than arrive at outrage or agony in that search, he was settling for a weird (but very cute) mixture of stoned numbness and absent-minded euphoria.

Perhaps all families fail; perhaps it is the duty of us all to live on in twisted survival, wry or resigned. But Anderson has never suggested that possibility. His enfants maudits are stricken prodigies, ecstatic misfits, or traumatised brothers taking some inane train ride through the idea of India — I say “idea” because, after all, they are affected by nothing of the vast reality there to notice or consider. The Darjeeling Limited, his latest film, has been praised for its Indian colours, but this is mere decoration compared with the way that genteel house theatres. And who could miss the gulf between the inanity of the big film and the emotional force of the short? For that matter, who could fail to miss that Portman was the first wholesome compelling female in Anderson’s work?

One can understand that someone of his age, upbringing and intelligence may be aghast at modern America. But helplessness is not enough — and it begins to look like a privileged self-pity. Anderson cannot hide his fondness for rich kids too strung out to suffer.

The future of American cinema depends on enough people summoning the will to tell a few dark stories with sufficient conviction and lucidity to rehinge a flapping door. It may be that the country is no longer strong enough to do that. In which case, there is all the more reason to see how screwball film noir (so opposite, yet each so close to madness) went a long way to relocating the country emotionally in the critical years from 1930 to 1950. I do not ask that films save the world — but they must notice it. Thus the truly infantile indifference to India expressed in Darjeeling (after insisting on shooting there) is a gesture of empty vanity as much as alienation from the outside world.

Anderson is far from a write-off. But if he is to last as more than a minor jokeret he has to educate himself. You can still find comparisons to Wes Anderson and Preston Sturges. Their glaring inaccuracy has to be spelled out. Sturges was a pained yet robust citizen of an unhappy world who had thought deeply about the need to be cheerful, while Anderson shows no more than sophomoric petulance that his brittle, tender promise counts for so little. He thinks that he and his brethren are misunderstood!