

Berkshire Community College

Wes Anderson's Influence on the Independent Film Industry
Polished Draft

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Indie style aesthetics in American culture have seemingly begun to explode in popularity throughout a variety of forms such as aesthetics, indie style in clothing, art, and most importantly film. Independent films are the main cause of this style exploding in popularity, bringing forward new ideas as well as inspiration to up and coming filmmakers who strive to have a unique and recognizable style that is adored by fans. One of the leading and most famous of indie filmmakers who lead this change and popularity in indie style is Wes Anderson. Wes Anderson is an independent filmmaker who is highly loved and critiqued strongly due to his style and accusations of touchy themes. Despite accusations due to the underlying themes of white privilege and sexism through his works however, he has continued to rise in popularity ever since his first successful film *Bottle Rocket* which was released in 1996. Fans and film critics commonly describe Wes Anderson's films as instantly recognizable due to his strong use of vibrant colors consistent through every frame and a theme of 70s style fashion that remains consistent throughout all of his work. His use of colors and 70s based aesthetics in clothing and props has led to popular luxury fashion brands such as Gucci and Lacoste runway walks that were inspired by his work. This has ultimately led to many cult followers of his films and style, as well as inspiring others through means of fashion and film making. Wes Anderson's unique style displayed throughout each of his films helps him stand out as a central figure within the independent film industry.

From Wes Anderson's very first film, *Bottle Rocket*, which premiered in 1992, Wes Anderson has continuously drawn on his childhood for inspiration. The popularity of his film *Bottle rocket* began his journey into film and is what led to the quick success of Wes Anderson's work. As his work continued they began to share common themes drawing on lots of factors

from his childhood. In Wes Anderson's early childhood his parents divorced while he was only eight years old which led to trauma that he draws back on for inspiration. Anderson had even claimed that, "The single most traumatic event in his childhood was the divorce of his parents. He returns again and again to the motif of familial dysfunction, conflict and pain" (Dilley 12). After his parents had divorced he began to act out in class as a result. Young Wes Anderson acting out and misbehaving in school did not stop until he was given a super 8mm camera from his dad which distracted him from misbehaving and instead gave him an art form to expel his energy into. Anderson felt like a misfit often as a child and perhaps still feels like one in adulthood and it reflects back onto every male lead present in his films, creating somewhat of a self insert in each and every one of his movies. Throughout all of his films Wes Anderson quickly became attached to pouring his own life and memories into all of the stories that he began creating as most filmmakers do. As Anderson began to create films and characters there seemed to be a running theme found within most of them. Lots of his characters deal with similar struggles of familial dysfunction and struggling through life all together. And most of the adult male characters seem childish making seem like Anderson's focus is "consumed with the way people fumble their way through life, the awkwardness of the fumbling, and the transcendent futility, and his characters are often misfits with the theme of alienation from the established order" (Dilley 2). Stories from his childhood as well as experiences from his college years are the main memories that he tends to draw back on for inspiration. Such as the plot of *Bottle Rocket*, a film that was "inspired by Anderson and [Owen] Wilson's experiences living in an apartment together in Austin, where they had a lengthy dispute with their landlord over several windows that were broken and could not be closed" (Dilley 15). The two worked together on the film drawing from this experience and created their own short film masterpiece based off of it

after the event had occurred. These key events from childhood lead to a familiar tone in all of his films. Creating his own characters that are seemingly repetitive with similar struggles all throughout. However, Wes Anderson makes up for the repetition with a distinct and intentional style that also seems to draw on childhood based themes as well as a consistent color palette throughout each movie.

Wes Anderson's style has multiple characteristics that makes it identifiable by almost any scene due to the strong use of colors and simplicity throughout all of his works, strongly inspired by 1970's retro style as well as visual symmetry. In each film Wes Anderson is known to carefully scheme together colors and patterns that draw on ideas of nostalgia from his childhood. Each movie tends to have a unique palette individual to the film that consists of different shades of the main base colors red, orange, yellow, and shades of blue. He also uses popular patterns such as corduroy and plaids that remain within the carefully calculated color theme. His use of different colors and shades helps evoke the emotion of the scene. In *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) for example, "the characters often sport black or white clothing as they deal with death" (Dark 1). Which strongly contrasts the rest of the movie's bright color palette. The vivid colors used in his films create a distinct stand apart style that no other filmmaker has. As well as the use of color in Wes Anderson movies, the use of visual symmetry is also noticeable and stands apart from other directors and filmmakers. Freelance writer and film/literature graduate Zoë Morgan describes Wes Anderson's use of symmetry in her article *Unpacking Wes Anderson's Cinematic Style* stating that, "Anderson is renowned for using symmetry in his films, which creates a sense of harmony and balance... In almost every shot there is symmetry. Those that focus on a single character almost always place them in the centre of the frame, and where there are multiple

characters, they often mirror each other on either side of a central point of the composition” (Morgan 2). The use of symmetry is another aspect that is rarely used throughout entire movies; however, Wes Anderson manages to do it with every scene whether it is the background or characters that are symmetrical in frame. Due to his consistency in filming the same style and symmetrical shots, many critics and film majors attempt to argue that Wes Anderson is a film *auteur*.

Auteurists are filmmakers that can easily be recognized by their style and influence over the film rather than the actors that are used. The artistic qualities such as color heavily mark and name a film maker as an auteur. “In order for a director to be considered an auteur, they must exert such artistic control and personal influence over their films that they may be regarded as their author” (Dow 1). Auteurism tends to credit a single director with the work of the entire crew, putting them on a pedestal and labeling them as the single creator. Many people have tried to argue that Wes Anderson should not be considered an auteur however, his style has such a strong influence on his films that leads to him being the one awarded for his artistic talent and work. This usually creates accusations of a bad work environment however American production workers and actors he has worked with such as Adam Stockhausen say that working on set is “like a theatre troupe. It’s the same people. You know each other better and the communication is easier and faster.” These popular actors even go far enough to describe how Wes Anderson provides them with hotels and dinners all in the same area, creating a family feel and dynamic between all of those working on set. Many of the same actors are seen time and time again in his movies such as Owen Wilson, Bruce Willis, Bill Murray, and Anjelica Huston who all also make his films instantly recognizable. The use of the same colors and themes as well as actors and

actresses makes his work stand apart from any others during this era, as well as the way that he gained inspiration and used camera techniques to show aesthetics and real life beauty.

During Wes Anderson's time of writing and filming stories, he traveled, gaining inspiration from each place he went. Everytime he traveled he took key components of the visuals of the places he went to, and even went to these places first hand to film his movies and show the beauty of each place he visited. All while trying new filming methods and art styles while still showcasing the unique style he is known for. When Wes Anderson began work on one of his most popular movies, *Fantastic Mr. Fox* he traveled to New York to meet with Roald Dahl, the writer of *Fantastic Mr Fox* to discuss and gain rights to make the movie. As he spent time in Roald Dahl's house he took note of the visit, taking inspiration from his house to include within the movie. Anderson included some of Dahl's belongings in the film to give a reference to the creator such as Dahl's "pocket holder, electric pencil-sharpener and a ball of chocolate wrappers" (Dilley 20), that were all spread throughout his studio. As he continued making movies he traveled for each one to a variety of places such as Rhode Island for *Moonrise Kingdom*, Italy which inspired his writing of *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, India which *The Darjeeling Limited* was shot in as well as England, Germany and Paris which lead to lots of personal influence on his works and aesthetics. Wes Anderson also visited antique stores in the towns he visited from, from which he collected his well known 70s style props used throughout his films to add a touch of nostalgia. Wes Anderson also took advantage of the places he went to such as Rhode Island in *Moonrise Kingdom*. The weather in Rhode Island fit perfectly for the style full of days of gloomy rainy weather mixed with bright sunny days. Wes Anderson even worked in the real rain for the filming of *Moonrise Kingdom* describing the rain as very cost expensive due to the amount of waterproof equipment that had to be used but as Wes Anderson

put it, “Adding rain, bringing in the rain machine, never has the depth of real rain or the kind of light you get with real rain. It’s kind of magical. It’s the same way with snow- the whole world has changed” (Anderson 1). Even though the cost of new waterproof equipment was pricey, Wes Anderson did and continues to do anything to get the aesthetics of his works to be the exact vision that he had in his head. Going out of his way to film in different places to nail each scene to be perfectly fitting to the filming location while bringing his style into the scenes and still ensuring that the same original touch of the filming location was still there. Even though Wes Anderson goes out of his way to travel and gain inspiration for his films he faces critiques no matter where he goes.

Many filmmakers face constant criticism, after all they are making and producing stories for the world to view. Wes Anderson is amongst those who face constant critiques. His cult followers are known to rush to his defense in any situation and are even known to scour online forums just to back up any wrong doing that he has been accused of. Wes Anderson has been accused for a multitude of things such as anti feminist works, racism, and white privilege. Which are all touchy but important subjects to be aware of while remaining a fan of a creator's work. He has also been critiqued on his style being repetitive as well as lacking any sort of deep meaning and plot. In many of Wes Anderson's films the main character is always a male lead and never a female going on her own expedition and exploration. In fact, in most of his movies “ Women can be absent or remote as well in Anderson’s work- or even, quite commonly deceased” (Dilley 5). Most of his films do not include females and if they do they are never a key part of the plot or resolution to the movie. They often hold little to no importance at all and are just used as side characters in the main character's life. His films tend to focus on the idea of boyhood and

child-like innocence which is a stylistic choice, however the exclusion of women in lead roles is questionable and very noticeable once it is pointed out.

Wes Anderson's films also tend to focus on whiteness often excluding many people of color, and if they do include POC they are usually used as a joke and never as a key component or main character. Film critics such as Evangelique Poh claims that “Anderson favours white American actors and it has to be said Asians are not the only disadvantaged race in his movies. His films often include no people of color (POC) or if they do, they are the token minority to add ‘colour’ to his films” (Poh 1). The lack of attention towards people of color and non white cultures is prevalent and almost hard to ignore watching all of his movies. One of the most heavily accused and critiqued Wes Anderson movies due to blatant racism is *Isle of Dogs*. The *Isle of Dogs* is full of racist stereotypes such as ideas that Asians hate dogs and would easily kill one. In spite of that idea people such as Browning have come to say that “it is not perhaps that Anderson’s films condone overt racism but that in a series of films, non white roles are often subordinate and for sexual/comic relief only” (Browning 121). Overt racism is still racism hidden under the excuse of comedy, which filmmakers and creators tend to get away with nearly every day still making profit off of fans who will watch and support them no matter what. These critiques aren’t just critiques, they are entirely true and very important to acknowledge while watching and reading into Wes Anderson films. The subtle jabs and stereotypes at different ethnicities as well as women in general is quite prevalent and obvious when you watch with intent. While these critiques are valid and important to discuss, Wes Anderson still remains as a lead figure within independent film and a winner of multiple awards. No matter the amount of critiques and criticism that is thrown his way, he still continues to produce the same content either intentionally ignoring or not acknowledging the accusations.

Another rising criticism facing Wes Anderson during his early years was focused around whether or not his films were made with true artistic intent or if they were purposely made for the market and for money, as most usually are. Independent cinema is meant to be focused and based around intentional aesthetics as well as the music used in film to create the writer's brand, regardless, establishing his true intent was difficult to find, and his work was eventually labeled as an indie and quirky based independent style. When Wes Anderson began filming and producing his first works his fanbase was full of hipster college level film students. This fanbase was full of people who consumed any media that was made with a nostalgic feel and strayed from consumerist corporations that began to take over independent film. Hipster culture is known for and defined by its “postmodern”, and “anti-consumerist tendencies” (Dilley 37). As he began his career in film they were embraced and loved by the hipster community with little to no criticism at all. At first when Wes Anderson began his career in making films they were at “first embraced by the hipster community, and then chastised as too hipster” (Mayshark 118). For them the films began to seem too direct at trying to be quirky and out of touch from the norm, which led to the original community being dispersed as a new accepting community came into the picture. All aspects of quiriness still remain the same in Wes Anderson's films however it has moved towards a mainstream approach. As Wes Anderson grew he began to win awards such as MTV movie award for best new filmmaker, and started to get multiple academy award nominations, which he did not win. This drew a larger crowd now more interested in his work than ever before. The audience for independent films tended to be “mature, urban, college-educated, sophisticated and familiar with conventions of representation and reception in many various media and forms, high and low” (Mayshark 118). As he began to grow his works started to reach families and children, and those that were out of touch in the independent film

realm, quickly becoming family favorites. As indie films began to gain more attention and fans, it became a period of growth that quickly gained interest in big corporate film companies that were interested in pursuing and buying smaller independent film companies that were making profit.

After the large success of small film companies such as the Sundance Film Festival and Miramax films began to become more public, companies such as Disney and 20th Century Fox became more interested in the film style however not exactly because of the style, instead they were more interested in the profit as indie began to make in rise in popularity. As indie style films and independent works began to grow in popularity bigger companies saw an advantage to make a quick buck. Disney and 20th Century Fox started to buy out these small companies knowing that the public had begun to love and support smaller films. “Miramax [a once small and independent film studio] was subsequently taken over by Disney after the spectacular box office success of several of its films, which meant that the entertainment conglomerates like Disney and Fox were now producing films that followed the conventions of “indie” films without actually meaning that the films were economically independent from major film companies” (Dilley 39). As this occurred independent movies began to become more mainstream and were now made by Disney’s and other big corporations with a large team using the stereotypical low budgets of independent “quirky” movies as a way to save money but still make large profits. These films started to be labeled as niche rather than independent and the audience still fell for the false advertising even though they weren’t even being made by the same people with the same amount of artistic effort. It was all going smoothly for these major corporations and they were making great profit until the 2008 financial crisis hit the film industry and the rest

of the United States. The 2008 financial crisis hit everyone hard, including giant companies such as Disney which gave rise to them firing and letting go of most of their workers that had taken place in their “independent” film studios that were just purchased. Disney chief executive even discussed the issue publically in 2008 surrounding the issue of loss in profit stating that, “Consumer confidence is the lowest we’ve seen in over three decades, and even the best product out there is feeling the effect. We are looking for ways to cut costs company wide” (Keating P3). The independent film creators who were just hired and taken under their wing , were then quickly fired and left with nowhere else to go and the idea of indie film within Disney was immediately diminished all within a year. Although Wes Anderson now owns his own production company with Owen Wilson and Luke Wilson called American Imperial Pictures, the mass production of indie films led to the popularity and creations of many more indie films and studios.

Wes Anderson to this day still continues to stand out apart from other competing filmmakers based on style and aesthetics. And his films still continue to be an important part of American Film Culture in general as well as childhood movies that families continue to watch for years. After all, most of them have become cult indie classics for both children and adults. By creating his own style and inspiring others, he has helped in boosting the indie themed movies and independent films to a more publicly viewed eye helping smaller filmmakers gain popularity. Although his style at times may seem repetitive to others and overused it still has made its mark on the culture and significance of independent film in America. Wes Anderson has proved that independent film studios can succeed and outcompete corporations such as Disney style wise, even with a smaller group of workers helping out. He has also proved that smaller self made

businesses can succeed as long as there is a distinct style and quality that makes it stand out as different and enjoyable compared to the rest. His style continues to be loved and hated as he continues to produce new movies and films every few years, and undoubtedly has made an impact on the world of independent film.

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