

# Study of Wes Anderson's Film Tragedy from the Perspective of Tragic Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** The research object of this paper is Wes Anderson, an American independent director and author-director. Wes Anderson and his films are unique, because his films have not only won numerous artistic awards, but also have considerable commercial value. The purpose of this article is to analyze the underlying content of the movie. This article takes the film narrative, theme and visual impression as the starting point, and analyzes the director's films, and then summarizes how Wes Anderson's films operate from the perspective of tragic aesthetics. This article uses case analysis and interdisciplinary research methods to study Wes Anderson's movies and the philosophies they contain, try to sort out the tragic aesthetic characteristics shared in his films. The paper finally summarizes the characteristics of Wes Anderson's film aesthetics and the theoretical sources of film philosophy. Wes Anderson carefully designed every detail of the film to make the audience clearly feel a sense of alienation, but also to immerse the audience into them. Wes Anderson calls his movies "very personal" because he integrates his unique insights into the philosophy of life into his works and deconstructs life from a unique perspective, allowing the audience to experience a unique style of film.

**Keywords:** Wes Anderson, Postmodernism, Tragic Aesthetics.

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## 1. Introduction

In July 2023, a unique movie caused huge discussion after its release. Because of the special plot and performance form, movie reviews have also shown serious polarization. This movie is "Barbie" directed by American female director Greta Gerwig. The movie tells the story of Neverland, showing a world full of character IP. Among them, the eye-catching color scheme of the movie and the postmodernist theme and game feel make people easily think of another director--good at using fairy tale colors and always integrates postmodernist style into his movies--Wes Anderson.

Wes Anderson was born in Texas, USA, in 1969. As a result of the economic recession of the 1960s and the search for college audiences, Hollywood became increasingly interested in studying the storytelling techniques developed in European art films. A good antidote to the decline of Hollywood movies seems to be to focus on the creation of atmosphere, characterization and ambiguous and complex psychological revelation. Wes Anderson began his career as a director in the 1990s. During his formative years, cinema was no longer limited to "classic Hollywood" narratives and the norms of pure business models. Starting from his first feature film "Bottle Rocket," Wes Anderson's creations have been filled with a series of issues that postmodernism focuses on, such as individuals, growth, and confusion. In subsequent films, the "Wes Anderson aesthetic" was established with unique use of color and intriguing lens scheduling. It is worth mentioning that as a Hollywood director, Wes Anderson did not completely inherit the commercial nature of Hollywood movies. On the contrary, what can be appreciated in his movies is more of the artistry of European movies. At the same time, he has also well integrated the advantages of Hollywood directors-commercial and story-telling-into his works. As a result, many filmmakers and critics have analyzed and studied Wes Anderson, the "special" director.

Mark Browning (2011) first analyzed Wes Anderson's six

movies (Bottle Rocket, Rushmore, The Royal Tenenbaums, The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou, The Darjeeling Limited, Fantastic Mr. Fox) one by one. Wes Anderson's personal style is analyzed through the lens of race and class [1]. Finally, the use of lens forms such as Wes Anderson's closed composition and overhead shots is analyzed. Browning believes that in Anderson's films, style is substance, and the superficial comic superficiality is what truly provides depth.

Erin Ann Myers (2012) analyzed the female characters in three Wes Anderson films (Rushmore (1996), The Royal Tenenbaums (2001) and The Life Aquatic (2004)) and concluded that: Women are incredibly intelligent, beautiful, strong yet damaged individuals who influence men and themselves to achieve self-actualization and acceptance of themselves and others [2].

LR Hrycaj (2013) believes that Anderson's films use music in several different ways, but that there are three specific uses that contribute to his overall authorial signature: songs associated with montage sequences, songs used to accompany slow-motion sequence scenes, and original scores and songs emanating from musical devices [3]. The music used in Anderson's films is an important part of his overall authorial signature.

Through the analysis of different Wes Anderson films - more from a narrative perspective - Whitney Crothers Deeley then summarized the "narrative in memory" contained in Wes Anderson's films (LW Lies, 2017) [4].

The above-mentioned works' analysis of Wes Anderson undoubtedly analyzes his unique personal film style from the position of an auteur or independent director. It is true that we cannot deny Wes Anderson's uniqueness in Hollywood and his contribution to the development of cinema as an auteur and independent director. But when we study Wes Anderson and his films, we must not only discuss the significance and value of auteur directors and independent directors, but also study the Hollywood commerciality in the films. Because this is also one of the important features that make up "Wes

Anderson's aesthetics".

This article will no longer devote heavy ink to the clichéd color analysis of Wes Anderson's films. Considering that Wes Anderson has participated in screenwriting work in every film, this article aims to start from the issue of tragic aesthetics without excluding the commercial attributes of his films, and explore the themes, narratives and audio-visual language behind his films. convey the inner reflection and spiritual core. The aim is to deeply explore how Wes Anderson is like a magic hand, perfectly integrating innocence and tragedy, commerciality and artistry, and allowing these extremely stylized elements to serve his creations stably for a long time.

## 2. Theme Level - Psychological Projection

Theme is often the part that most determines the style, direction and presentation of an artwork. The reason why Wes Anderson is called an auteur is inseparable from his participation in screenwriting. It is precisely because of this that the themes of Anderson's series of films have been imprinted with a unique personal label. Although the narrative methods of each film are different, the theme seems to be "the same road." And it is not difficult to see the self-reflection contained in Wes Anderson's expression of these themes.

### 2.1. Lack of Family

Almost every Wes Anderson movie (including "Isle of Dogs" and "Fantastic Mr. Fox") has a similar premise. For example, in *Rushmore*, the protagonist Max Fischer is a child of a single-parent family and lives with his barber father. In *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the Tenenbaums are divorced, and the children have lived with their mother since childhood. Even their neighbors have always wanted to be a member of the Tenenbaum family, and even sent their transcripts and achievements to their mother as a way to reach the call for family affection. In *The Darjeeling Limited*, three children want to travel across Darjeeling to find their long-lost mother who has become a nun... Even in the animated movie *Isle of Dogs*, the protagonist Kobayashi Atari lost his parents and was urbanized since childhood. Long adoption (probably just a political casualty of Mayor Kobayashi). In fact, it is not difficult to understand why Wes Anderson has a soft spot for this setting.

Anderson's father was a real estate agent and archaeologist, and his mother worked in advertising and public relations. The second of three boys, his parents divorced when he was eight. Later, he called his parents' divorce the most painful thing growing up. We can conclude that the lack of family in Anderson's films is actually a psychological projection [5]. Because Anderson's characters (both minors and adults) have a certain sense of tragedy. So Anderson goes directly to the source - the influence of the original family - to make the tragedy exist and establish.

### 2.2. Group Psychological Dynamic Field

In Anderson's films, family is missing. However, there is often another existence similar to the family structure - the group. For example, the small group of "outlaw thieves" in *Bottle Rocket*, the documentary shooting group in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, the magazine club and various other groups in *The French Dispatch*, the Boy Scout group in *Moonrise Kingdom*, and the protagonist Fischer in *Rushmore Center group*.

*Rushmore* is adapted and filmed based on the high school life experiences of Anderson and Owen, and was filmed at Anderson's alma mater. We can intuitively feel Anderson's love for group life through the protagonist Fischer. Fischer actively participated in and founded various club activities, but was expelled for failing cultural classes and transferred to a public school. In this public school, Fischer also participated in various social group activities and formed a great drama club.

Anderson also admitted that he likes group life and teamwork, which allows him to get more valuable things. This psychological power field is also a reflection of Anderson's psychological projection [6]. Like Fischer, due to the lack of family, he needs to prove his abilities through constant group activities, and he also needs the strength given by the group. When family relationships are disharmonious, it is easy for minors to doubt the connections and relationships between people. But the existence of groups makes up for children's biased social cognition to a certain extent.

### 2.3. The Search for Self-identity

In Anderson's works, the protagonist's character arc is realized through the transformation of finally coming to terms with himself after going through the pains of growing up. They are often incompatible with the environment at first. When they try to change the status quo or find what they want and love, they often fall into a period of confusion full of self-doubt. For example, Fischer, the three brothers in *The Darjeeling Limited*, Suzy and Sam in *Moonrise Kingdom*, the three siblings in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, etc.

Weiss certainly experienced growing pains while growing up. Before he officially became a film director, his initial ideal was to be a writer. When I was in college, I majored in philosophy, which seemed to have nothing to do with film. The debut film *Bottle Rocket* was rejected by the Sundance Film Festival and failed at the box office after its release, with a total box office of only \$400,000 on a budget of \$5 million. But in the following years, the film became a hit, and even Martin Scorsese, who had already achieved considerable success at the time, named the film one of his ten favorite films of the 1990s.

Therefore, starting from his second work *Rushmore*, Wes Anderson gradually established his own unique film aesthetics, and has an irreplaceable position and style in Hollywood.

To sum up, the lack of family, the desire for community and the search for self-identity all intuitively show us the common tragic core in life. In particular, family conflicts and confusion about self-awareness are pains that almost everyone must experience. Although this is only an indispensable part of growth, in the context of postmodernism, these themes seem to have a different tragic aesthetic color.

## 3. Narrative Level - Deconstruction of Social Tragedy

When analyzing Wes Anderson's movies, in addition to the unique color palette, the comedy style (nonsensical black humor) is also often mentioned[7]. Wes Anderson, who graduated with a major in philosophy, knows the core of life and human nature, but he still injects a lot of funny and childlike elements into his movies. Wes Anderson once said: "I think everything is imperfect and pretending to be deep is what ignorant young people like to do." "I hope to construct

another reality, a place that the audience hopes to experience but has never entered. "Judging from the underlying philosophy of Wes Anderson's works, he packs the tragic core of life into the comedy packaging of "dry humor" and perfectly blends it together, transforming imperfect life into a Presented in a playful manner.

### 3.1. Character's Silence

Both of Wes Anderson's animated films use the form of stop-motion animation, but in fact, in his feature films, there are also a lot of stop-motion - the silence of the characters. Take *The French Dispatch*, for example. In the story of *The Cycling Reporter*, the director presents the contrast between the past and the future of various places in Boring Town. The characters in the entire picture are silent, and it looks like they are taking a group photo, but the director uses the characters' inconspicuous subtle movements and the corners of their clothes blown by the wind to tell the audience, don't blink, this is a video. In prison, when Moses was participating in a pottery and basketry interest class, other prisoners who were "audiences" were also silent when he introduced himself and made pottery. Later, when the director used a horizontal panning shot to show that Moses' paintings were exhibited at the Salon, the Royal Exposition, and the International Pavilion, he also used the form of freeze-frame (the characters were silent). Of course, these are not the only places in *The French Dispatch* where characters' silence is used, and Wes Anderson is not the only one who uses this setting in this movie. In fact, the silence of the characters can be said to be another symbolic mark of Wes Anderson's films.

Silent characters in movies are often expressionless, mechanical, and calm, which will give the audience a feeling that is very different from real life. Based on the ideas of existentialism, black humor was born in the 1970s. Black humor is absurd, perverted, and morbid, a comedy that juxtaposes pain and laughter, absurd facts and disproportionately calm reactions, cruelty and tenderness. Just like in *Boring Town*, the director combined the absurd facts and figures of 8.25 corpses being salvaged from the river every week, coupled with the reporter's calm narration and the actors' numb salvage actions, to appropriately express the chaotic and calm atmosphere of the town. . It is clear that the silent characters in the town are absurd, morbid, and out of step with real life.

Anderson uses "black humor" in his movies to create absurd and terrifying worlds, exposing and ironizing the absurdity, madness and ugliness of the real world.

### 3.2. The Alienated "Moonrise Kingdom"

Every world shown to us in Wes Anderson's films is incompatible with real life and alienated from our lives. Especially the hotel in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the elopement island in *Moonrise Kingdom*, the boring town in *The French Dispatch*, and the desert town in *Asteroid City*, the director directly moved the physical space away from us. Real life world.

In the movie *Moonrise Kingdom*, a 12-year-old couple eloped to their own "Love Island". The words 12 years old, couple, and elopement are inconsistent with or even contrary to our current life values, but they exist in Anderson's movies. Not only do they exist, they are also beautiful. Although absurd, it conveys a truth to the audience: Do not use an adult perspective to shackle children's emotions. They are independent individuals equal to adults. The adults in the film

are experiencing extramarital affairs, while the inexperienced children are doing their best for a pure love and elope to an uninhabited island. In sociological concepts, physical space is often endowed with social meanings, such as the expression of power, culture, and social class. So on this small island they call *Moonrise Kingdom*, they are just two people in love, regardless of age or social values.

The physical space settings in Wes Anderson's movies are always like a secluded and independent "different world". In this different world, there is no class, and all absurdities are established. Obviously, Wes Anderson has used his series of films to build his own spiritual world one after another "Moonrise Kingdom" far away from the real society. It is not only a "Moonrise Kingdom" for the 12-year-old couple, but also a "Moonrise Kingdom" for the director himself. ". The era when Wes Anderson grew up was deeply influenced by postmodernism. The anti-tradition, deconstruction of real life and acceptance of alienated society that we see in his works all reflect the characteristics of postmodernism.

The indispensable factors that make up social life are ideology and collective unconsciousness, and most of the unavoidable absurdity in life is brought about by them. Wes Anderson understood this clearly and used a narrative method full of nonsensical and black humor to create spaces and societies that seemed incompatible with real life but were reasonable.

## 4. Audiovisual Coding - Exquisite "Formalism"

In a movie, when the flowing water plants are observed, along with wet water and rain, the grass being blown by the wind, and the blazing fire captured in a serene and distant shot, the name associated with Tarkovsky does not seem far behind. Similarly, when a sequence of symmetrical compositions, enclosed frames, lateral shots, overhead shots, and frequent appearances of the protagonist breaking the "fourth wall" are witnessed in a movie, there is no doubt that this masterpiece belongs to Wes Anderson.

### 4.1. Absurd Lens Presentation

Previously, we discussed postmodernism in the themes and narratives of Anderson's films, especially his deconstruction of life. An important part of structuralism is to break the audience's belief and longing for "presence". Looking back at Anderson's films, in fact, they are full of carefully designed and refined visual impressions, and most of them are narrated in the form of opening scenes of dramatic performances. Sudden overhead shots when displaying objects are inconsistent with the human perspective in real life. Similarly, in stage plays, they are inconsistent with the audience's perspective.

This type of overhead shot is often called a God's perspective. The God's perspective is far away from real life and only exists in the director's creative techniques. Anderson's use of overhead shots is to better match the presentation of lens language in his films with the theme and narrative, creating an alienated world that reminds the audience everywhere that this is carefully designed by the director for everyone. A "stage play". In addition to the extensive use of overhead shots, the director also particularly likes horizontal panning shots. For example, in *Moonrise Kingdom*, two people eloped for the first time and agreed to meet in a small field. When the girl was carrying a box to the

appointment, the director followed the girl in a panning shot. The use of horizontal panning lens compresses the depth space and real space of the movie into the space of the stage play. Moreover, the lateral movement of the characters is more in line with the movement of the characters on the stage. It is only horizontal and rarely in depth.

A common topic is the integration and abandonment of film art and theater art. The integration mentioned here refers more to the better integration of narrative art (storytelling) in dramatic art into film creation, making the film more literary and story-telling. And Anderson seems to be a weirdo. In terms of storytelling, audiences cannot easily classify his films as Hollywood-style story films, because most of Anderson's film narratives are nested and discontinuous. Moreover, generally speaking, it is taboo for a movie to "stay away from the audience" because it will make the audience feel "fake".

What's wonderful is that Anderson is committed to packaging his film into a refined formal film that is "away from the audience", but the audience will still be immersed in his film and follow the director's rhythm after receiving this hidden hint. Wander in a deconstructed world.

## 4.2. Tragic Closed Composition

With the development of movies, especially after the 1960s, the expression of movies has become more free. In order to increase the sense of space in the movie screen, open compositions have become more and more popular. But in Anderson's films, he can always emphasize the presence of characters in closed compositions, and at this time the characters will directly "break the fourth wall", forcing the audience to pay attention to their "situation".

Closed composition is just a form of audio-visual language expression. But if the closed composition is placed together with Wes Anderson's aestheticism in the context of postmodernism, especially existentialism, then the tragedy presented in it is worth exploring. Just like what the reporter said in *The French Dispatch*, "All extreme beauty hides the deepest secrets." From the perspective of the film's audio-visual encoding, the characters are locked up, suppressed, and not free. . In addition, the characters in the composition break

the "fourth wall", all of which are the director's emphasis and hints to the audience. The characters do not feel great sadness or joy about the ups and downs of life. They just stare at the audience calmly and calmly accept the absurd facts.

Absurdity and repression often accompany life and are unavoidable. The answer given by Wes Anderson is: experience it. He uses dry humor and deliberately emphasized lens language to tell the audience that no matter how absurd things are, they are just a part of life. The things themselves are not absurd, but life is absurd.

## 5. Conclusion

Wes Anderson strives to package his films into deliberately emphatic aesthetics. His aesthetic form is a fusion of his philosophical views on life and the expression of dramatic art. The theme, narrative and audio-visual language in the movie are well unified. Wes Anderson uses a deliberate sense of absurdity to deconstruct the deep, unobservable absurdity in life. He starts from the relaxed "comedy form" and combines life with Give it a tragic undertone.

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