

I'm Trying to Love Wes Anderson, That Miniaturist Puppet-Master

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If you were to survey people who pay attention to movies -- to go door-to-door with a clipboard, a sharpened No. 2 pencil, and a sheaf of forms with the word SURVEY printed in clean block letters across the top, later to be tabulated on a vintage Underwood adding machine -- you might find that the number who want to love Wes Anderson's work is greater than the number of those who actually do. Unlike so many movies today, all of Anderson's, including his latest, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, feel touched by human hands. His ascent in pop culture has coincided roughly with the renewed popularity of hand-knitting as a hobby; like a grandma-made sweater, Anderson's pictures are put together stitch by meticulous stitch; they're all knobbly with love.

When we're feeling blockbuster-superheroed out, a Wes Anderson movie promises something that's less and yet more: a retreat into a world of phonographs and nearly worn-out Stones LPs, a place where people dress for dinner, a house or a boat or a fox warren where everyone has a job to do and some feelings to feel. If you feel stressed out by the impersonal nature of modern life, Anderson is, in theory, the easiest filmmaker in the world to love.

So why can't I, a person who loves many of the same things Anderson loves, love Wes Anderson? To be even more specific, why do I love only the stop-motion animation marvel *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, commonly known as "the Wes Anderson movie for people who hate Wes Anderson movies"? Anderson makes some moviegoers swoon and others groan; discounting the Venn diagram center of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, there's no wishy-washy in-between. And that in itself makes him fascinating: Wrestling with what

you don't love in a filmmaker can be more illuminating than singing the praises of one you do.

I find it easy enough to accept the heartfelt nature of Anderson's 2012 *Moonrise Kingdom*, in which two little New Englandy misfits, a boy and a girl, run away together and stage their own version (sans sex) of *The Blue Lagoon*: The bigger world, the world of grown-ups, can't understand them, but maybe nature can. Why not pack up the old Thermos bottle and escape, hand-in-hand? Anderson does seem to work from the heart. Several of his films are set in motion by an irrevocable loss: In both *Rushmore* and



The Darjeeling Limited, a parent has died, and a child -- or a trio of children -- just can't get over it. Even when loss isn't a grand motivating factor in Anderson land, it can still be a shadowy, potent force: Ben Stiller's surly financier in *The Royal Tenenbaums* has lost his wife and doesn't know how to grieve. In *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, Bill Murray's Jacques Cousteau-like sea explorer has lost his best friend and colleague (Seymour Cassel), and vows revenge on the shark that killed him. As overly precious as his movies may be, Anderson is hardly blind to overwhelming human emotions. Grief freezes us, and to live,

we've got to crack through that numbness.

Anderson's latest, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, deals with loss in a more general, overarching way. The movie opens in the present, as an elderly writer (Tom Wilkinson) reflects on his youth, recalling his 1968 stay at a once-glorious hotel located in the fictional Central European Republic of Zubrowka ("once the seat of an empire," a title card tells us). The younger version of that writer, played by Jude Law, meets a mysterious hotel guest (or might he be the owner?) played by F. Murray Abraham, who regales him with stories of the hotel's prewar glory days. Before the fascist forces of evil rose to power and ruined everything -- Anderson's faux Nazis are paranoia-inducing thugs whose symbol is a double-zigzag instead of a swastika -- life at the hotel was filled with glamour, excitement, and good manners, all personified by its suave concierge and in-house gigolo, M. Gustave (Ralph Fiennes). This genteel but exciting world was too good to last, and its great symbol, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, has also fallen into a state of careworn shabbiness dusted with nostalgia.

The Grand Budapest Hotel is the most elegiac of all Anderson's movies, and the most exquisitely detailed -- this is a world of filigreed archways and medallion-patterned carpets, of train compartments paneled in rich woods and little cakes iced with the colors of springtime. Technically, the movie is probably the crowning achievement in Anderson's HO-scale world, a mass of painstaking details that whisper a sigh of sadness for the loss of the old ways.

But can you mourn a lost world if you can't even breathe? Some people may feel cozy and coddled while they're watching a Wes Anderson movie, but I always feel that I've entered the airless interior of a panorama egg, and someone has closed the latch from the outside. That's especially true of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, its visual splendor notwithstanding. One of the chief characters, a junior hotel employee played by a young actor named Tony Revolori, wears a cap embroidered with the words "LOBBY BOY" in slightly wonky letters. It's the slight wobbliness of the stitching that's so annoying, a homespun touch that was clearly intentional, an adorable little curlicue of self-conscious Andersonian quaintness. That character's love interest, a baker played by Saoirse Ronan, bears a birthmark in the shape of Mexico on her cheek. There's no hidden meaning there -- that purplish splotch is just a cute, random shape, a bit of whimsy designed to make us say, "Aha!" or perhaps "Oho!" Anderson fans may find that degree of calculation delightful. The rest of us are left whacking our palms against our foreheads, wondering how on Earth he gets away with it.

Stylization is one of the great tools of moviemaking -- its broadness can capture nuances that naturalism omits. But what's the tipping point between "stylized" and "mannered"? Is a mannered movie simply a stylized one you don't like? Anderson is notorious for controlling every detail on the set, and even for those of us who don't much like his movies, the level of old-school care he puts into his work counts for something. But is it possible to care too

much about craft, at the expense of risk? Until very recently, seemingly 95 percent of movies, both big-studio films and independents, suffered from overuse of hand-held cameras. It's a trend that's abating, thankfully, but Anderson never fell for it, which should be admirable. But even though Anderson's films -- as shot by his go-to cinematographer, Robert Yeoman -- are beautiful to look at, he could stand to move the camera around a little more: His images are static to the point of passivity. He stares through the lens so intently that we see only what he sees -- he so thoroughly subjects us to his imagination that we barely have to use our own.

Characters in live-action Wes Anderson movies have adventures, yet there's no sense of adventure in them. It's not just that everything we see on-screen has unfolded according to a rigid plan -- Hitchcock, among the most methodical of filmmakers, worked from storyboards, and you can't get much more rigid than that. But Hitchcock's pictures move like panthers, not like machines. Anderson, on the other hand, can't achieve, and perhaps doesn't care about, the illusion of fluidity. Like him, I love tiny things, small things made carefully, and he recognizes that the unapologetic artificiality of a scale model can be more believable than its full-size (or CGI) counterpart.

Perhaps that helps explain my devotion to *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, the most technically obsessive film Anderson has ever made. It is, after all, a movie in which fur-covered puppets on wire armatures have been manipulated to do his bidding, shot by obsessive shot. George Clooney is the voice of Mr. Fox, a poultry thief and family man (or should that be family fox?) who tries to quit his life of crime but just can't manage it. With the help of a group of woodland associates, he breaks into the stores of three greedy farmers. All of Anderson's movies are about community, about being part of some makeshift or real family, but *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is the warmest and richest. When I find my annoyance with Anderson reaching peak levels, I think of the scene in which two little fox cousins who do not get along (voiced by Eric Anderson and Jason Schwartzman) creep from the beds in their cramped, shared bedroom -- they've been bickering and can't get to sleep -- and turn on a tabletop model train. They watch together in silence as it clickety-clacks around its track in the darkness, their annoyance with each other momentarily forgotten. There's no dialogue; the moment doesn't need any.

With *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Anderson put his trademark precision in the service of a story that ultimately feels wild and free. I have no idea how he pulled it off. Some have posited that Anderson is better when he's adapting other people's work, in this case, that of the rambunctious Roald Dahl. I've sometimes wondered if puppets aren't Anderson's ideal actors: They're easier to bend, literally and figuratively, than real-live people.

But in some ways, he has *less* control of them: Human actors are capable of listening to and translating a director's ideas, and their tools -- voice inflections, subtle changes of expression, shifts in posture -- have infinite

gradations. Plus, they're often eager to please the guy they're working for. While puppets can be designed to exact specifications, and posed and moved quite precisely, they're empty vessels. They have no personal experience to draw from, no genetically inherited grace or clumsiness, no acting training or style of their own to fall back on. In that sense, they're the ultimate rebels; they have nothing to lose. Is it possible that *Fantastic Mr. Fox* allowed Anderson to edge closer to human feelings -- his own or universal ones -- because puppets, stubborn constructions that they are, made him work that much harder to figure out how human feelings should look?

How, for example, do you decide which direction the fur on a fox's face should whorl to indicate that he's stressed out or confused? What should his eyes look like when he thinks he's about to lose everything? Of course, in animation, the actors' voices go a long way in shaping individual characters. But those two silent little foxes, their eyes following that train as it goes round and round? Without words, they capture a specific but fleeting nuance of childhood joy and fragility. Anderson surely cares about every character he creates, but in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, he shows true tenderness, divorced from gimmickry, for the first time. It's a kind of earthbound magic.

No matter how little I care for Anderson's other films, the unexpected miracle that is *Fantastic Mr. Fox* means I'll never be able to turn away from him completely. Though when I said earlier that *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is the only Wes Anderson film I love unequivocally, I was exaggerating. His 2007 short, *Hotel Chevalier*, a companion piece to *The Darjeeling Limited*, is pretty close to perfect. In it, a nameless character played by Jason Schwartzman has set up camp in a Paris hotel room. In the short's early minutes, he rings up room service and places an order in stilted, comic-book French, pausing to ask (in English) how to say "grilled cheese." No sooner has he hung up the phone than it rings, and the husky voice he hears through the receiver -- it belongs to Natalie Portman -- thrills and terrifies him. She's near the hotel; she's coming to see him. We have no idea what the deal is with these two. We wait to see whether they'll fall into each other's arms or tear each other apart. Or both.

Hotel Chevalier is only 13 minutes long, but it's as rich as a novel. The atmosphere is controlled -- practically the whole thing takes place in a hotel room and its adjoining balcony -- but Anderson lets danger and mystery in, more so than in any of his other movies. *Hotel Chevalier* is less a pure Wes Anderson film than a zephyr of Truffaut being channeled through Anderson; Schwartzman is his Antoine Doinel, a bundle of nerves in search of love in spite of himself. Anyone who can make a *Hotel Chevalier* must still have some surprises up his sleeve. Someday Wes Anderson might use his technical mastery, his sense of total control, to make a live-action movie that shows how little in life any of us can really control. It will be an adventure; it will be dangerous. And it will breathe.