

Inheritance and Innovation in Wes Anderson's Works from the Perspective of Auteur Theory: A Case Study of The French Dispatch

Yingjie Liu^{1,a,*}

¹Tongji University, 4800 Cao'an Road, Jiading District, Shanghai, China

a. 1714305869@qq.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: Wes Anderson, a renowned American independent filmmaker, is often associated with bold use of color, symmetrical composition, flattened visual expression, and unconventional narrative structures, showcasing a distinctive personal style and a strong directorial control over his works, earning him the title of an "auteur" director. This paper aims to analyze Anderson's aesthetic style and thematic expressions from the perspective of Auteur Theory, employing methods such as investigative, literary, and comparative research. After examining *The French Dispatch*, Anderson's final released film, the study concludes that while inheriting the director's consistent stylistic features, the film also demonstrates innovation and breakthroughs, highlighting his broader artistic pursuits.

Keywords: *The French Dispatch*, Auteur Theory, Wes Anderson, Style

1. Introduction

Auteur Theory, proposed by François Truffaut during the French New Wave movement, advocates for the decisive role of the director in filmmaking, opposes commercial tendencies in cinema, emphasizes artistic expression, [1] and encourages traditional breakthroughs and personal style. From the perspective of Auteur Theory, a film is entirely shaped by the director, and the displayed style and themes are closely tied to the director's life experiences. Therefore, similarities can often be identified among films of an "auteur" director. However, with the continuous evolution of directors' ideologies and their increasing mastery of filmmaking, new trends emerge.

Wes Anderson, born in Texas in 1969, is considered an "auteur" director due to his distinctive personal style and almost complete directorial control over his films. His unique style and thematic expressions are evident in several films such as *Rushmore*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. His most recent release, *The French Dispatch* (2021), vividly showcases his personal touch. Despite mixed reviews, the film clearly exhibits Anderson's more distinctive and extreme artistic style and consistently maintained thematic depth, revealing his broader artistic pursuits and aspirations. Previous studies on Anderson's Auteur Theory have generally focused on the consistency of style across all his works, while research on *The French Dispatch* has typically concentrated on the film itself or how it reflects Anderson's personal style, with limited attention given to the innovation and breakthroughs in his works resulting from personal ideological changes and developments. Therefore, this paper selects Wes Anderson as the subject of Auteur Theory analysis,

using *The French Dispatch* as a case study. By researching and comparing the film with his extensive body of previous works, the paper aims to identify similarities and differences in aesthetic style and thematic expressions. It seeks to answer questions such as the unique qualities of this film compared to the director's other works, what artistic vision the director reflects, and whether the film implies new directions distinct from Anderson's previous films, exploring Wes Anderson's consistent style and thematic evolution in *The French Dispatch* from the perspective of Auteur Theory.

2. Aesthetic Inheritance and Innovation

Under the influence of a family-oriented atmosphere, Wes Anderson has been engaged in art-related work since the beginning of his career. Initially involved in advertising and music video production, the high demands for color and composition in these fields significantly enhanced Anderson's skills. Simultaneously, he was influenced by animated film director Bill Melendez, known for the "Snoopy" series, [2] and the emphasis on flattened postmodernism. This influence led Anderson to pursue an aesthetic style resembling animation—unreal and flattened. *The French Dispatch* perfectly embodies Anderson's aesthetic pursuit, while making corresponding innovative changes in form, pushing this style to the extreme.

2.1. Use of Color

Anderson's affinity for using highly saturated colors first became apparent in "Rushmore." The application of color in his films began to serve as a unique expression of his style. Anderson intentionally emphasizes the presence of colors, such as the emphasis on orange in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, blue in *The Life Aquatic*, and pink in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. In *The French Dispatch*, this color style persists with vibrant reds, oranges, and bright yellows recurring. Even when depicting nighttime scenes, Anderson opts for highly saturated monochromatic colors, particularly emphasizing a rich blue, creating a powerful visual impact. However, in this film, Anderson does not excessively use high-saturation colors. Instead, he focuses on the low-saturation Munsell color system and innovatively incorporates black-and-white tones. This approach completely breaks away from the conventional setting of using a unified color tone throughout a film and utilizing color to convey emotions. For example, in *Concrete Masterpiece*, as the female prison guard guides the artist out and closes the door, the scene transitions from black-and-white to color, conveying a sense of exploration. In *The Private Dining Room of the Police Commissioner*, as the young boy expresses curiosity about the eye color of the showgirl outside the wardrobe, the scene switches directly from black-and-white to color, revealing the woman's incredibly blue eyes in the center of the screen. These color transitions occur repeatedly, boldly enriching the visuals without appearing chaotic, leaving a profound impression on the audience and showcasing Anderson's mastery of color.

2.2. Composition and Cinematography

In terms of composition, symmetrical and enclosed compositions are common techniques employed by Wes Anderson. In *Rushmore*, the use of symmetrical composition is relatively basic, involving positioning one character in the center of the frame and multiple characters sitting on either side. In later films, Anderson's techniques mature, and he masters methods such as breaking up the frame with text, repeating elements, and integrating with spatial structures to eliminate the monotony of the frame [3]. For instance, in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, he uses repeated images of four turkeys to deepen symmetry. In "Moonrise Kingdom," tents and patterns on the tents form symmetry with the central character. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the prisoners seated neatly behind Gustave create a clever symmetrical composition. Additionally, enclosed compositions are also prevalent in Anderson's works. In *Isle of Dogs*, a cage frames the central dog named "Chief." In *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, a sewer

manhole encloses the fox family. In "*The Grand Budapest Hotel*," a coffin frames the reclining Madame D. This composition highlights the visual subject, eliminates the extension of space beyond the frame, and directs the audience's gaze to the center of the frame, providing a clear and objective viewing perspective.

In terms of cinematography, Wes Anderson frequently employs frontal shots, accompanying them with panning shots to create a flat visual sense. This method, which completely ignores depth of field and spatial perspective, presents all complex objects in a flattened and cut-out manner, restricting the audience's view. It imparts a strong sense of unreality to the storytelling.

The French Dispatch continues Anderson's stylistic characteristics in composition and cinematography. For example, in the chapter The Concrete Masterpiece, the scene where the artist and the businessman who wants to purchase his work sit and converse in the prison room is a concentrated representation of both symmetrical and enclosed compositions. The left-right symmetry of the two figures brings balance to the frame, symbolizing an equilibrium in their identities and positions. The prison room's door serves as a visual frame, emphasizing the visual subject and eliminating the extension of space beyond the frame. In the opening scene where the editor hangs up the magazine promotion at the newsstand, a panning shot from the front with only a change in lens focus completely avoids perspective, creating a sense of detachment and absurdity. However, at the same time, due to Anderson's extreme pursuit of flatness, he even uses animation directly in the last chapter of the film to depict the police chase, breaking free from the constraints of a single form. This not only enhances the sense of unreality but also signifies a bolder and more extreme direction in his aesthetic style, demonstrating his stronger aesthetic ambition.

3. Inheritance and Breakthroughs in Content Expression

3.1. Narrative Structure

In his previous films, Wes Anderson demonstrated a love for episodic linear storytelling, [4] a preference inseparable from his avid reading habits. The narrative style of *The Royal Tenenbaums* emulates that of episodic novels, while *The Grand Budapest Hotel* utilizes a multi-layered nested structure, clearly accomplishing the storytelling between characters and from characters to the audience through "word of mouth." However, in *The French Dispatch*, Anderson not only continues his inheritance of episodic storytelling but also achieves a breakthrough. Innovatively, he uses the three columns of the magazine—Art, Politics/Poetry, and Food—as narrative vessels to tell three entirely unrelated stories, presenting a completely parallel yet independent narrative structure. Simultaneously, outside of this main narrative line, there is a parallel storyline narrating the real-life events of the magazine editor's death leading to the magazine's closure. These dual narratives run concurrently, ensuring that while presenting the worlds of the stories within the magazine articles, the audience can always perceive the existence of a "storyteller," creating a sense of detachment. The fragmented yet uncluttered narrative breaks traditional artistic expression constraints and embodies Anderson's anti-traditional thinking influenced by the "New Wave Film Movement." [5]

3.2. Thematic Depth

Sarris once said in *Notes on the Auteur Theory*, "Only filmmakers who reach the essence can be called authors." Wes Anderson's films possess the attributes of "auteur" films due to the continuous development and exploration of thematic depth. Influenced by the New Wave Film Movement, Anderson tends to focus on the destinies of marginalized individuals, attempting to find reflections within them. Simultaneously, his experience of parental divorce in childhood has led to a persistent confusion about youth, growth, and family relationships. Consequently, he often projects his life experiences onto his films, shaping characters experiencing adolescent confusion. For example,

Bottle Rocket addresses unemployed youth, *Rushmore* explores precocious yet socially awkward teenagers, *The Royal Tenenbaums* depicts three genius youths growing up in a family lacking warmth and affection, and *Moonrise Kingdom* delves into teenagers grappling with early love anxiety. Consistent throughout is his examination of issues within American middle-class families and the different challenges faced by parents and children in such households. [6] However, starting with *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, Anderson shifts his focus to adults caught in the currents of the times, revealing his awareness of the crisis of modernity. He presents a nostalgic view of the era and its spirit. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, through the life experiences of two generations of bellboys, he expresses nostalgia for ancient Europe, the vanishing humanitarian spirit, and aristocratic values. *The French Dispatch* inherits and deepens this critique of modernity, narrating absurd and bizarre stories told by magazine editors: an artist convicted of intentional murder falls in love with a prison guard and starts creating contemporary art that nobody understands, a politically neutral political commentator falls in love with a student leader while covering a local student uprising, a gangster's driver, who doesn't like carrots, narrowly escapes police poisoning and embarks on a wild car escape in a small town. Through dark humor and absurdity, the film portrays an escape from an orderly society, an escape from the reality of reality, achieving rebellion. Through the editor's demise and the magazine's closure, it expresses nostalgia and lament for an era when paper media and press freedom are facing extinction, and for a traditional Europe devoid of romance and poeticism. In terms of themes, Wes Anderson's works are always filled with a firm inclination toward the latter in the constant choices between the new and old, maturity and innocence, embodying a shift towards a broader perspective in spiritual depth.

4. Conclusion

Influenced by the New French Wave Film Movement, Wes Anderson's films exhibit a distinctive personal style and directorial imprint, reflecting his life experiences and ideological stance of anti-tradition and rebellion. Proficient in the use of bold colors, well-organized compositions, and flat cinematography, he dissolves the authenticity of films in the third dimension, breaking free from traditional artistic constraints. Coupled with fragmented episodic storytelling, he constructs a formal aesthetic world brimming with imaginative ideas, serving as a repository for his innocence, nostalgia, and self-expression against reality. *The French Dispatch* continues this expression, revealing bolder and more rebellious aesthetic tendencies and an expanded artistic pursuit.

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