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# The Eternal Child

Wes Anderson's use of Colour

Bachelor's thesis in Film- og videoproduksjon

Supervisor: Sven Østgaard

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Humanities  
Department of Art and Media Studies



Kunnskap for en bedre verden



# **The eternal child: Wes Anderson's use of colour**

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## Introduction

I have always been particularly interested in the aesthetics of film. Perhaps one reason we are drawn to action and fantasy at an early age rather than dramas and slow burners are because the visually striking pictures are much more digestible and easy to follow for a low-attention span teenager. That is not to say that the stories themselves are not important here—after all, we are attracted to worlds that take us out of our own reality—but it is the visual spectacle of explosions, knights, monsters and vivid colours that truly encapsulates what it means to “escape”.

Eventually, those earlier drab dramas and slow burn thrillers started gaining more appeal; but so did intelligent comedies, historical dramas and adventure movies set closer to our own reality than away from it. Among these films I stumbled over a curiosity called *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, a 2014 film by Wes Anderson. This was a kind of film I had never seen before. A sort of strangeness permeated the whole experience that I could not quite identify, but the characters felt stiff, somehow; the camera work seemed to trap them inside little boxes as if they were acting inside the limited space of a theatre stage; and the atmosphere and colours were fairytale-like. I identified a certain playfulness in the style of the film which, as time went on and I examined more of Wes’ filmography, seemed to be prevalent in other of his works as well, and I got curious about what exactly was going on. As such, after doing some light research and seeing a couple of video essays on YouTube I decided to make him my chosen *auteur* to discuss in this thesis. For this, I will predominantly use Gestner and Staiger’s *Authorship and Film* (2013) to back up that Anderson indeed has a signature style. Moreover, since *auteur* theory aims to examine a director’s own motives more than a film’s style itself, I need to isolate *the reason* for Anderson’s stylistic choices. I have chosen to focus on his use of colour, with Bruce Block’s *The Visual Story* (2021) as a useful tool kit for colour science in film. I will ask the following question: Why does Wes Anderson use these colours so obviously where other directors do not, and what does he want to accomplish with them? Furthermore, I will pose the hypothesis that Anderson’s films have a nostalgic, childlike mood, and that colour specifically is used to signal this. As such, the films I will focus on the most are *Bottle Rocket* (1996), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) and *The French Dispatch* (2021). What exactly causes a film to be “Wes Anderson-y”?

## What is an auteur?

Before we understand what makes Anderson an auteur we must first understand what film auteur theory is and how it came to be. As David Gerstner (2013) discusses in *Authorship and Film*, the roots of a free playing space in which a director could express themselves fully started with “a group of young *cinéastes*” in postwar France, spearheaded by François Truffaut, among others (p. 6). The banality of continuing a narrative style of filmmaking primarily based in literature became a mindset that Alexandre Astruc wanted to attack through his 1948 article, *La caméra-stylo* (The “camera-pen”), and it became suggested that film perhaps was an expressive art form in itself—no longer should it be restricted by direct translation from the pen and paper (p. 6). Truffaut wanted filmmakers to rid themselves of their dependency on literacy, as the visual *mise-en-scène*—the culmination of a film’s setting, costume and makeup, lighting and staging—should instead be their primary point of guidance. In other words, he wanted to embrace visual storytelling instead of literal.

*The attention to mise-en-scène ... is probably the most important positive contribution of auteurism to the development of a precise and detailed film criticism, engaging with the specific mechanisms of visual discourse, freeing it from literary models, and from the liberal commitments which were prepared to validate films on the basis of their themes alone. (Caughie, in Gerstner, 2013, p. 7)*

The French magazine of the 1950s, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, attracted new film critics and *cinéastes* that shared sentiment for the auteur approach, and many would go on to make films themselves (Gerstner, 2013, p. 7). In the US, the opportunity to make an impression outside of the studio environment of Hollywood was seen as daunting, especially considering the way American film critics tended to value the star actor, writer or producer over the director. Film critic Andrew Sarris was quick to challenge this notion and wanted to highlight the director as having “creative agency in the industrial arts” (Gerstner, 2013, p. 8). The discussion around creative agency is central to the auteur theory. Wes Anderson has been open about using early French cinema as inspiration, particularly for his newest film, *The French Dispatch*. In an

interview with *The New Yorker*, which the film's main newspaper is also based around, he says the following:

*France, more or less, is where the cinema starts. Other than America, the country whose movies have meant the most to me is France. ... We sort of steal from Godard, Vigo, Truffaut, Tati, Clouzot, Duvivier, Jacques Becker. French noir movies, like "Le Trou" and "Grisbi" and "The Murderer Lives at Number 21." We were stealing things very openly, so you really can kind of pinpoint something and find out exactly where it came from. (Morrison, 2021)*

In her chapter "authorship approaches", Janet Staiger discusses seven approaches to authorship studies. Ultimately, we find a clear distinction in the author's agency between the *origin* and the *personality* approach:

*In authorship as origin, the author is conceptualized as a free agent, the message is a direct expression of the author's agency, and production is untroubled philosophically or linguistically—although rational individuals might debate interpretation. (Staiger, 2013, p. 30)*

Here, the author has all power over themselves, their actions and their works. However, in authorship as *personality*, this free agent is now replaced by the author's personality affecting their work subconsciously. Furthermore *signature* explores how the unintentional features produced by the author help create coherence between the individual works, as they leave trademarks that repeat over and over (Staiger, 2013). If we attempt to place these approaches within the context of Wes Anderson to argue for his auteurism we find that his films indeed do share similar traits which may be called a signature of sorts. To what extent these are intentional or conscious choices seem in the instance of personality authorship to be solely decided by whether or not they reflect his innermost being, and if they do they are considered to be purely accidental as his individuality has automated the process. This seems to directly contradict the agency that *origin* gives him, but also creates a more natural transition to *signature* since the latter presupposes a *lack* of agency. Anderson himself has stated that, "There's some degree to which whatever is coming to my

imagination is inspired by my background and my own psychology. Without me controlling it or choosing to, I'm in the movies." (Studiobinder, 2019).

These approaches, and what agency actually means, can all be discussed forever in circles, but the important thing to draw from them is that Wes Anderson has made choices in his films—consciously or not—that repeat and create patterns. Through this it is fair to conclude that he is an auteur and it can be interesting to examine which of these patterns have been especially prominent in his films.

### **Anderson's quirks**

Anderson relies on a few signature moves to tell his stories. Among them are planimetric composition, where "characters usually occupy and move through flat planes within the scene that run parallel to the background." and compass point editing, where "the camera only really faces in 4 directions." (Flight 2020, 4:50; 5:40) These features are connected, as Flight mentions that the latter "isn't really a technique so much as a necessity in order to maintain planimetric composition in an environment with 4 walls." I will not elaborate much on these in this text, but I do find them a natural stepping stone toward colour, as they compose the image in such a way that the colour palette may be highlighted. Take *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, for example: In isolating stills from the film we find that the compository nature of each shot make them look almost like paintings. The framing of the red background wall of the concierge booth within what looks to be beige marble, together with the stark purple uniforms of the concierge and lobby boy, would not work as efficiently had it not been for the squares and straight lines formed by the planimetric composition of the image.

Wes Anderson seems to be embracing the unnaturalness of these looks, as "flat compositions usually look and feel constructed. A flat composition feels self-conscious." (Flight, 2020, 6:30) Anderson himself has said, "For me often what might take somebody else out of it [the film] is what I think is just the most beautiful thing." (Flight, 2020, 8:50)



Fig. 1: In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), the straight lines caused by planimetric composition of the beige marble, combined with the bright tones of red and purple help to make the characters stand out from their environment.

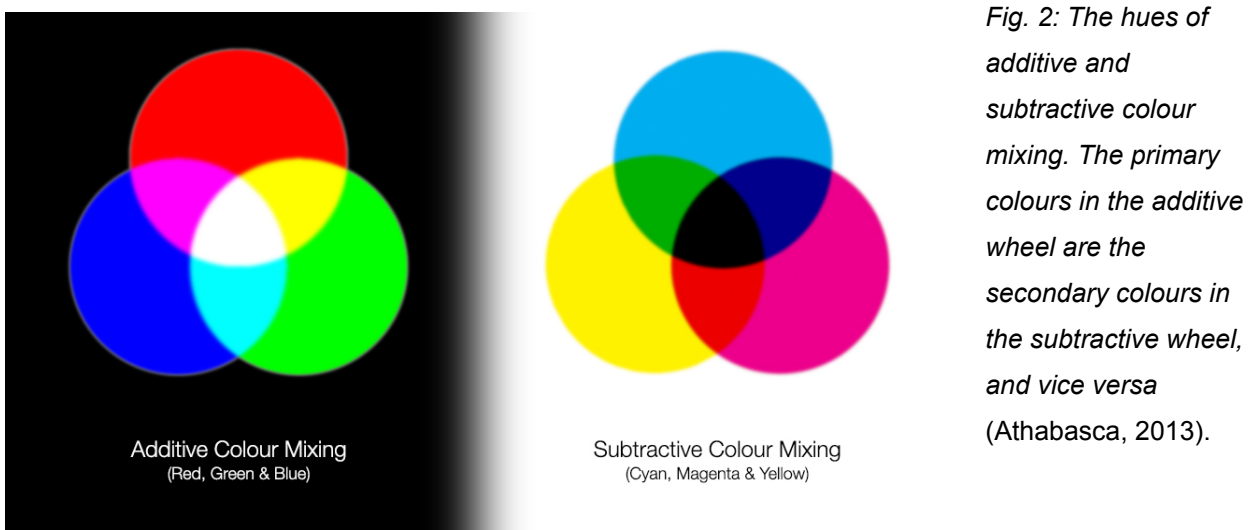
In his video essay, *Why Do Wes Anderson Movies Look Like That?*, Thomas Flight argues that Wes' style is not just inherently unique to him, but also intentionally obvious. Where other filmmakers might hide certain traits such as composition and colour in order to provide a sense of naturalism to the viewer—although carefully calculated—Anderson makes bold choices to step away from naturalism. One example that Flight gives is from a discussion Anderson had with his agent over the opening and closing curtains of *Rushmore* (1998). In this, the director recalls he wanted the curtains to be there, despite his agent arguing that the audience would be taken out of the realism of the story (Flight, 2020, 8:40). Similarly, the dolly shot panning from left to right in the shootout scene in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*—ironically non-planimetric in its skewed angle composition—has the camera wobble slightly as the wheels of the dolly rig hit the tiny imperfections in the rails. Dmitri's walk as he hunts down Agatha follows a similar style, contrasting the smooth motion that a gimbal setup would result in. It seems as though these aberrations are a clear break from the professional filmmaking rules utilised today, as if Anderson attempts to mirror a simpler, more relaxed style. In a behind the scenes-video from *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, there seems to be an almost spontaneous playfulness to his decisions and handling of the crew and talent, seemingly striving to make his work environment, although professional, informal and comfortable (Đolo, 2020). One could attribute Anderson's pictures to be of a "dollhouse quality" (Provost, 2021)—miniature models, straight angles and constructed sets dominate the mise-en-scène—with the colours he uses in his films helping to strengthen the unnaturalness of that quality.



## Colour theory

It is well known that colours affect us, and there is a reason why people have been using them for different purposes for a long time. In filmmaking, they are clear signifiers of mood and tone. I am going to examine some of Anderson's films to see how he uses colour. Firstly, however, it is worth examining colour science. Since there is not just red, green and blue, but also considerable amounts of pink, light blue, orange and yellow *tones*, we are required to examine the context these colours exist in. Two basic colour systems are used to organize and mix colour: The additive system and the subtractive system. In the former, the primary colours red, blue and green are combined so that their wavelengths overlap (Block, 2021, p. 146). If the colours each are added in the same amount, the result is white light. On the other hand, combining just two of the primary colours together creates secondary colours: Red and green becomes yellow, green and blue becomes cyan, and red and blue becomes magenta. This colour wheel becomes relevant later when talking about how Anderson uses *complementary* colours.

While the additive system focuses on combining wavelengths the subtractive system focuses on removing them. This colour wheel includes the aforementioned colours of yellow, cyan and magenta. While combining the additive primary colours together creates white, combining the subtractive primary colours creates black.



*Fig. 2: The hues of additive and subtractive colour mixing. The primary colours in the additive wheel are the secondary colours in the subtractive wheel, and vice versa (Athabasca, 2013).*

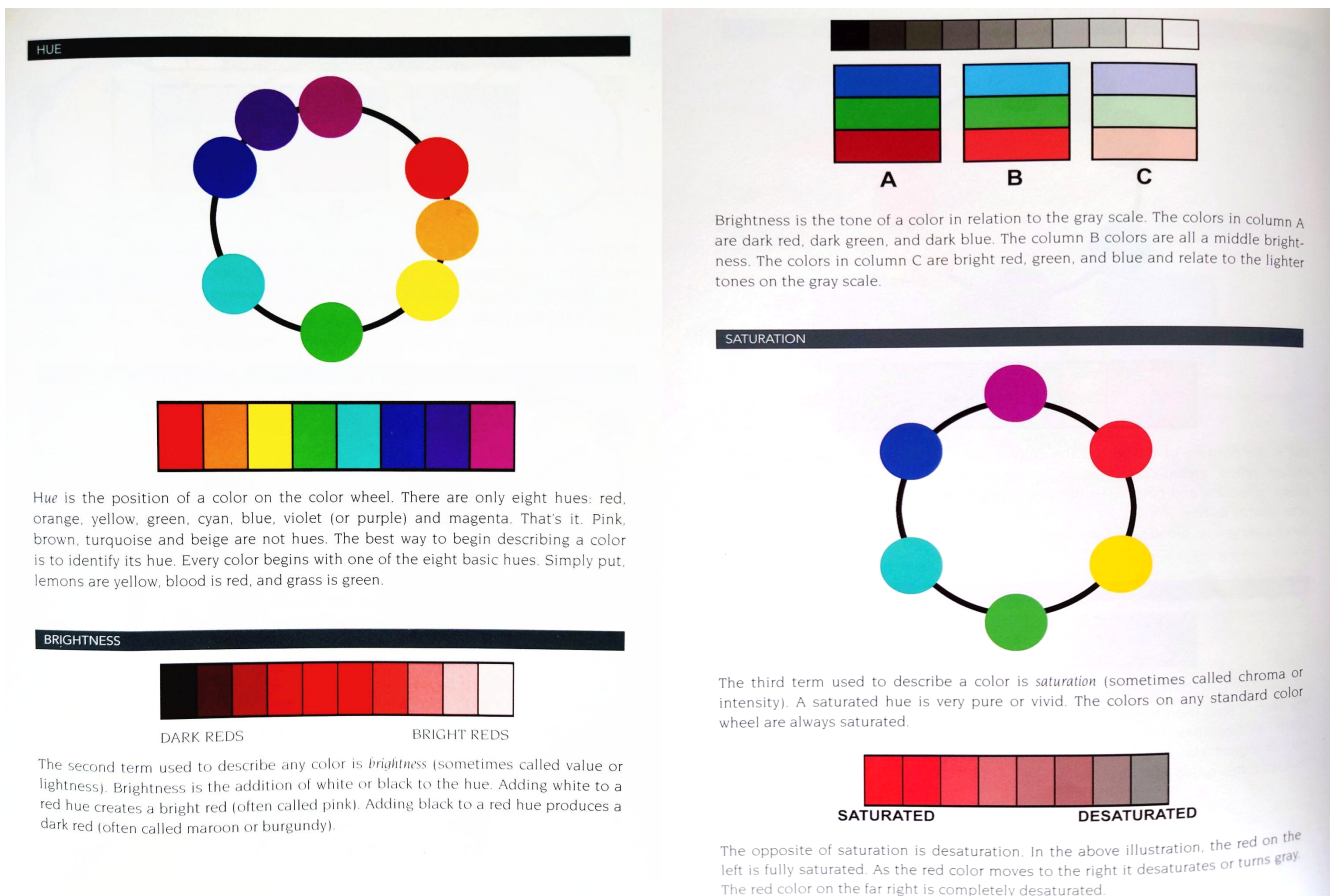


Fig. 3: Hue, brightness and saturation visualised through colour wheels and ranges (Block, 2021).

Since Wes Anderson often plays with different kinds of *hue*, *brightness* and *saturation*, it is worth noting that these terms are direct modifiers of the colours already produced by the colour wheels.

Interestingly enough, his trusted cinematographer, Robert Yeoman, tends to prioritise an even, naturalist look to lighting, which is often ideal for comedies and sitcoms because it gives the characters room to move (Provost, 2021). It breaks with the otherwise non-naturalistic look of Anderson, but works well for the mood he is trying to convey. This approach also helps highlight and/or hide certain colours, as I will discuss later through something called incident control.

*The French Dispatch* (2021) is perhaps the accumulation of all of Anderson's choices, and he is careful to stylize every individual story in the film to fit their narrative. Thomas Flight (2022) says the following:



*Fig. 4: The set design interiors of The French Dispatch (2021) heavily lean on yellow, green and orange tones which are evenly lit to highlight the colours.*

*The film, stylistically, is an expression of the unique voices of each writer and their playfulness with style and tone ... almost as if the film exists in the mind of the writers writing the story or in Anderson as he reads them. And so the film visually comes to life ... [and] it brings the prose it mimics to life in a way that reflects the joy of poetic license (Flight, 2022, 9:30).*

Being an *auteur* is not simply limited to film. It is the act of displaying unique creative agency in the context of an art form. In *The French Dispatch*, Anderson pays homage to the authors of *The New Yorker* by clearly drawing inspiration from their individual writing styles and isolating these in his characters, and also by embracing his own stylistic choices and encompassing each story within a veil of “Anderson-ism”, for lack of a better term.

*The Grand Budapest Hotel*, too, mimics certain time periods by use of colour and aspect ratio, and switches between them as the story moves from one place to the next. In its episodic nature it is quite similar to his latest film, and they both use different aspect ratios and colours to signal the given time period. For example, the scenes set in the 1980s are shot in 1.85:1 with a neutral colour palette, the 1960s in the wider anamorphic 2.4:1 with earthy oranges and greens, and the 1930s in the tighter Academy format of 1.37:1 with bright reds, pastel pinks and light blues. “As the prestige [of the hotel] faded, so did the colours.” (Studiobinder, 2021, 5:05).

The Palette: 1945 to 1960



The Palette: 1960 to 1980



Fig. 5 and 6: There is a hopefulness in the colour use in the postwar era, with brighter colours and organic shapes, in the materials of linoleum, stainless steel, plywood and plastics. Compare this to the “decadent, lavish designs” of the 1960-1980 and bold, abstract patterns on materials like lucite, metal, wood, wicker and rattan (Barnett, “Paint Color”). The paper offices in *The French Dispatch* (2021) have tones of the former, while the TV-show where Roebuck Wright is interviewed seems to mimic the latter.

In a conversation, one of my professors suggested to me that Anderson’s colours are “unfashionable”. Contrasting the standard toned-down and realistic-looking color use in dramas, or the intense teals and oranges you often find in modern action films (Google “teal and orange movies” to see what I mean), the often pastel colour spectrum Anderson uses is clearly highly intentional—especially his alteration of brightness and saturation in the hues of yellow, red and blue. The colour palette of his films is one trick to make them stand out visually from the crowd of “fashionable” films. If we take a look at the indoor scenes of *The French Dispatch*, the yellow tones of the walls, chairs and clothing are not particularly pleasing to the eye: It is almost like they exist to present the viewer to a workplace not only of a different time, but perhaps even a different time where such colours were somehow *pleasant*. Anderson cites the film to take place “during those fifty years” that the fictional magazine was operating, from 1925 to 1975 (Morrison, 2021), so perhaps in the historical context of a fictional French town they do make sense to exist.

## **Red and yellow: Bottle Rocket and beyond**

Even from the very beginning, colour has been boldly present to some extent in all of Wes Anderson's filmography—perhaps not necessarily for the same motivations he started showing later on, but still obvious as visual focal points. Auteur-wise, it can be interesting to examine how this has changed from his first film to his most recent. *Bottle Rocket* (1996) is Anderson's first feature film, starring the likes of Owen and Luke Wilson (who would go on to star in future films of his as well). A first impression suggests that the straight angles, stiff characters and heavy use of profile shots Anderson has become known for are nowhere to be seen here. Despite this, the thing that *did* catch my eye was a rather heavy emphasis on the colour red, as it was abundantly present in some form or another—granted, not as obvious as the pastel pink pastry boxes and bloody carpets and concierge booth in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, but nevertheless apparent. Anthony's and Inez' sweaters are both bright red, and so are the leather on chairs, gas station signs and the doors of the motel. Furthermore, the dark reds and browns from wooden building materials and metal look very much to be intentionally chosen to fit with this colour profile.

After the narrative turning point fight where Anthony and Dignan part ways, shades of green and yellow become more apparent, almost washing out the few examples of red entirely. Dignan's bleak yellow jumpsuit is in style with the the garbage bin behind him (perhaps a cheeky comparison?), and as the two pull up to an abandoned factory to meet the character known as Mr. Henry, the muscle car, as well as the tow truck and the gates of the buildings are all green. It is difficult to believe these features are accidental, as the rest of the scene is only dressed in the dull greys and beiges of the brick walls and road, which make the greens stand out further. What do these colours represent?

As Mary Risk writes for Studiobinder, colours elicit psychological reactions, draw focus to details, set tone, represent character traits and highlight story arcs (Risk 2020). If we use the "cheat sheet" about colour psychology supplied in the same article, we find a few ideas that fall in line with the way Anderson used colour in *Bottle Rocket*. We can interpret red as signaling love and passion, while Dignan's yellow jumpsuit showcases his insecurity and somewhat naive personality, and the greens that start encompassing them as Mr. Henry takes them in—essentially he is using the two friends for his own gain—is a foreboding of corruption and danger. It is

first when green is introduced heavily that the friends start their journey toward what will later be a failed heist, culminating in Dignan's arrest and incarceration.

Flight (2018) argues that Anderson's films often center around characters with a certain obsession; from M. Gustave H.'s obsession with running *The Grand Budapest Hotel* or Chas Tenenbaum's obsession with safety. "All of these characters find their seed in Dignan's obsession with a life of petty crime. Each of these characters represent a formal dedication to something that doesn't usually require that kind of dedication." (Flight, 2018, 5:10). The obsession-associated yellow colour of his jumpsuit might suggest the same, if we are reaching for straws (Studiobinder, 2020). In any case, Anderson's characters tend to be caricatures in their behaviour.

It is worth examining the idea that Wes Anderson does *not* use colour in the traditional sense. As such, traditional ideas of what colour means must be reevaluated in the context of his cinematic style and storytelling. As TomDevoto (2021) writes, "happy" or optimistic colours such as oranges, yellows, pinks and even reds tend to be present in Anderson's films where the protagonist actually undergoes intense emotional struggle.

If we take *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004) as an example, Steve is grieving the loss of a dear friend who was eaten by a shark. Although adventurous, he constantly doubts himself and struggles with a non-reciprocal love interest in the reporter, Jane. Even so, the colour palette of the film is often bathed in sunny yellows, baby blue diving suits and of course, the red beanies of the crew. Anderson frequently uses red to display pain and anguish. Vaughn Vreeland (2015) writes that one of Wes' inspirations for his themes of social structure is his own childhood. He attributes the characteristics of Royal and Etheline Tenenbaum in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) to his own absent father and archeologist mother. As many of his male characters struggle with some sort of lack of fatherly affection, Vreeland suggests the color red might be connected with longing and emotional immaturity, exemplifying this in Chas Tenenbaum's red tracksuit, Max's red hat in *Rushmore* (1998), or the red automobile that is the only genuine connection between the brothers and their father in *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) (Vreeland, 2015, pp. 40-41). All of these characters have troubled relationships to their fathers.





Fig. 7: Chas Tenenbaum's red tracksuit blends with the tone of the chairs and walls, complementing the almost teal blue in Ethelene and Margot's clothing. Fig. 8: Zissou and his crew are dressed in baby blue, with bright red hats serving as complementary colours, and the yellow submarine adding further contrast.

### **Affection: The Royal Tenenbaums and The Grand Budapest Hotel**

Although *Bottle Rocket* certainly has some recognizable quirks, comparing it to his newest release, *The French Dispatch* (2021) it is clear that Anderson's style as an auteur has solidified through later works. Colour-wise we do perhaps see the clearest early live action examples in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) heavily features the colour yellow, but being a stop motion animated feature it is already naturally placed outside of reality. As such, I will not be discussing it in the context of Anderson's live action which moreso emphasises an uncanny reality than a pure fantasy. The same can be said of *Isle of Dogs* (2018).

The French Dispatch might be “the Most Wes Anderson Movie Wes Anderson Has Ever Made” (Willmore, 2021), but seen in the context of the troubled family one could argue that *The Royal Tenenbaums* is his most personal film.

Compared to his later works, the film is not the most ambitious in terms of colour, but a few scenes do stand out in using them to signal mood. A little over halfway in the film, the whimsical nature of the storytelling changes in mood, as Richie attempts suicide. He fails, and the family dynamic around him immediately shifts from carelessness to urgency. Sometime later, he visits his adopted sister, Margot, in the bright yellow confines of his childhood tent, and they share a bittersweet moment of affection with one another. Another film which follows a similar mood shift is *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Although the basic premise of the film follows head concierge, M. Gustave H. and his lobby boy helper, Zero, as they try to escape with their lives from a wealthy and envious family, the pastel palette and unusual camera angles undermine the seriousness of the situation. However, after Zero helps a tired and dirty Gustave to escape his prison cell but is scolded for not bringing perfume, the former is forced to explain his war refugee background. As Gustave realises how wrong he was to chastise the boy for something so trivial, he begins crying and apologises.

During both films, Margot and Richie, and Gustave and Zero, have become close companions. Although the nature of their relationships are different, this is a point in the films where they realise how much they mean to one another. Margot has, in a failed quest to find herself and escape from the dysfunctional family, not given Richie the attention he deserved, although she always cared for him deeply. Similarly, Gustave has taken Zeros companionship for granted, but realises at this point that he has become not just a helper, but a dear friend. As a final binding matter, both Richie and Zero reply to their offenders with “it’s not your fault.”

The scenes also differ in colour use from the rest of the films. Although the scene’s complementary yellow and blue in *The Royal Tenenbaums* is more obvious than the low-saturated earthy colours in the one from *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the addition of reds and pink in the rest of the films seems to suggest a livelier mood has now become more serious. We also have to consider colour tone, or brightness. One scene is indoors and one is outdoors, but both utilise *motivated lighting* from a diegetic light source to highlight the characters. In the case of Margot and Richie, the



tent is brightly lit although the sources that motivate the light seem to only be a couple of small lamps. Here, the slightly ethereal escapist room of the tent becomes highlighted as a safe space from the grim world that surround Margot and Richie. In identifying colour significance, it is here helpful to note how external light affects colour. As mentioned earlier most of Anderson's films use a rather flat lighting in order to give the talent freedom to move. However, the *tonal range*—the covered spectrum of the gray scale—remains high in contrast since the colours of the set design and costumes stand out from one another (Block, 2021, pp. 128-131). In short, the gray scale of Wes Anderson's movies are mostly covered by the art department, with colour and contrast drawing the viewer's attention to which parts of the image that should be in focus. In the aforementioned scene with Margot and Richie, while the room around the tent uses *incident* lighting to reorganize the otherwise bright red aesthetic, the tent itself is lit evenly—*reflective*—so that the art direction can control the complementary colour space of yellow and blue (Block, 2021, p. 131).



Fig. 9: The tent scene in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) is evenly lit to highlight the yellow tent fabric, the blue globe and Margot's striped blue dress.

However, Gustave and Zero appear to be lit by a single light bulb<sup>2</sup> as the tonal range around them remains in the darker part of the grey scale. Compared to the tent in *The Royal Tenenbaums* it has a desaturated, darker look. Even so, the blue hue of Zero's

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<sup>2</sup> External lights on the actors help reveal them and create what Block (2021) calls *coincidence of tone*—a backlight further separates Gustave's hat and Zero's shoulder from the background.



*Fig. 10: Gustave and Zero stand outside the prison, with desaturated but warm tones of yellow and brown encapsulating them.*

stripes and the stone wall behind them stand in complementary contrast to the warmer piles of hay and the brown wooden door—it is almost as if a faint tint of pink can be seen in parts of the image.

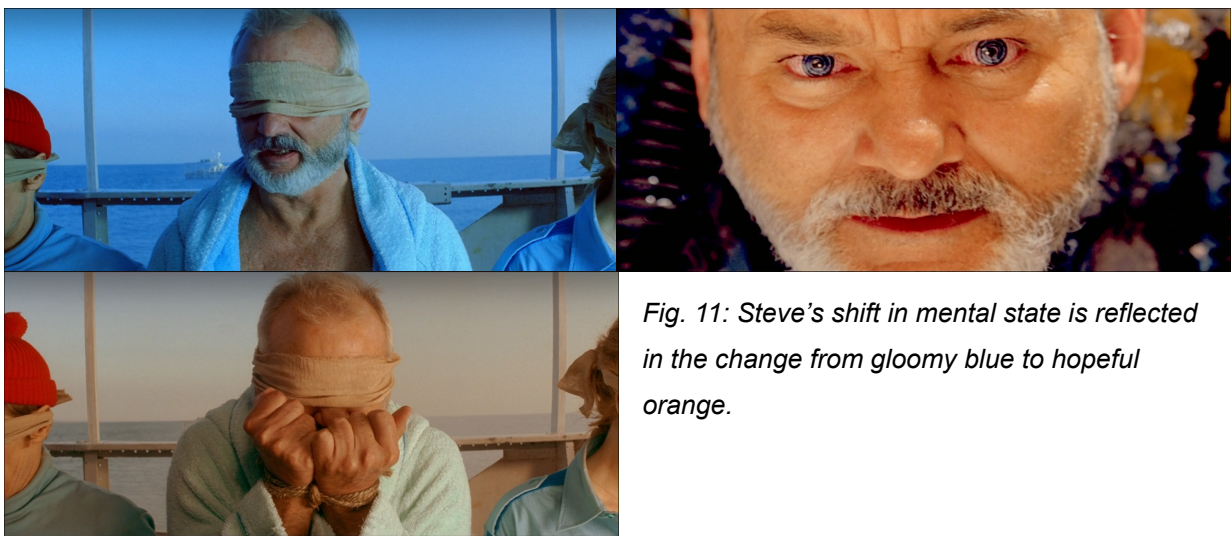
In both cases of films, lighting and colour help isolate the subjects from their environments. Anderson is telling the audience to focus, as if to indicate that these are the moments we should cherish—perhaps it is his idea of moments he did not have with his family as a child, or perhaps that assumption is groundless. Either way, colours signal emotion. Whether they are used for pain, joy or melancholy, Wes uses them systematically as builders of similar moods from film to film, although his interpretation of the chosen mood might be different from another filmmaker.

### **Colour as signifier of mood**

The element of the dramatic mood shift is one which recurs in Anderson's movies, and one which is especially marked by colour. Although witty in style, there are always darker undertones to his stories of loneliness, belonging, depression and even death. He says, "You know, all the movies that I've made have been movies that aren't entirely comedies. Halfway through the movie, there's a shift, and it turns into something darker, I guess." (Studiobinder, 2019).

Quite literally, red is often used to highlight physical damage through blood. Alistair gets shot in *Life Aquatic*, and the rain drenches him in his own blood, starkly

contrasting his white shirt. Similarly, Richie Tenenbaum's blood is highlighted, not only against his white shirt, but against the cold, blue hue of the scene, only interrupted by faint glimmers of warm yellow which Richie associates with his falcon, Mordecai, his dad in the dining room, his childhood, his mother, and Margot. In a similar fashion, Zissou imagines the situation he is in through quick cutaways to the other crew members; to a distorted version of himself where his eyes look to be in a trance and we hear electrical currents around him; to him breaking loose of his "chains" and chasing away the pirates. The two parts of the scene are divided by filters of cold blue and warm yellow and orange.



*Fig. 11: Steve's shift in mental state is reflected in the change from gloomy blue to hopeful orange.*

Red is thus also used to signal emotional damage. Similarly to Zissou's pain over his lost friend that he carries in his red beanie, Chas dresses himself and his sons up in bright red tracksuits in *The Royal Tenenbaums* which is "meant to convey the pain he carries over the lack of relationship he has with his father and the loss of his wife" (DeVoto, 2021). It seems like this theme of absent father figures is a recurring one in Anderson's films. Biography (2018) states that he often misbehaved at school after his parents got divorced.

*... Anderson mused to New York Mag: "I finally realized it's just the opposite of what I really grew up with, and for me there's something exotic about it...I'm drawn to those father-figure characters that are larger-than-life people, and I've sought out mentors who are like that, so I relate to them. But they're not my father." (Biography, 2018)*

In large parts, Wes Anderson's films deal with family as a central topic. *The Royal Tenenbaums* literally centers around a dysfunctional family and how the father, Royal, awkwardly attempts to reunite the family he broke apart in their early formation. *The Life Aquatic*, *The Darjeeling Limited* and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* all deal with sons' relationship to their fathers and the desire to live up to their reputations. As noted earlier with the relationship of Gustave and Zero, it can even be argued that the establishments of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* as well as the newspaper publisher in *The French Dispatch* each become their own houses in which the employees act together as a family. Even *Bottle Rocket*'s Dignan finds a sort of father figure in Mr. Henry, and *Rushmore*'s Max in Herman Blume as he is not particularly close to his own father.

### **The Mendl's box: a frame for immaturity**

*[The man-child] is a figure that features heavily in Anderson's work, endearingly flawed and aesthetically pleasing. Margot Tenenbaum, all fur and kohl and endless issues; the Whitman brothers and their substantial baggage, both physical and metaphorical, aboard The Darjeeling Limited; The Life Aquatic's Steve Zissou, searching for something he cannot find (with a wardrobe that inspired hipsters everywhere) ... (Babb, 2012)*

The "man-child" is perhaps a direct result of Anderson's absent father characters not being there to teach their children what adulthood is supposed to be like (Ironically, his child characters often act like adults and his adult characters act like children). One could make the argument that Anderson is reflecting his own inner childlike playfulness through his characters and filmmaking style. And although witty dialogue, funny picture compositions and jagged dolly movements certainly help infuse his films with this energy, colour might be the simplest way to communicate immaturity. We see this the clearest in the characters' appearances and the environments they exist in. Anderson explains, "The sets and the costumes and all those things, there's a certain exaggeration in all that stuff. And they're almost jokes in the clothes and the mustaches." (Studiobinder, 2019)



*Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) might be Anderson's most childish film in style and theme, not taking into account Roald Dahl's contribution to *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Wes explains the film to be "the autobiography of something that didn't happen", "remember[ing] dreaming it up, dreaming of acting on it as a 12-year-old." (Waxman, 2012). In short, it is a fantasy love story about two kids, and the associated intense emotions one would experience at that age. Its obvious wash of playful yellow hues in its set design and costumes is worth mentioning in this context because it further supports the idea that Wes Anderson's visual auteurist traits lean toward telling stories that, although often serious in narrative, seem lighthearted in style and mood. Furthermore, the dreamy nature of the film seems to be a recurring element in his other films as well, as they depict something that is not quite fantasy, not quite reality, but somewhere in between. Perhaps that is the reason Wes Anderson uses colour as he does, and seen in the context of early French auteur theory his films are a clear embrace of the visual impact only a film can attain, with a signature look that separates the director from his peers.



*Fig. 12: One could use the Mendl's pastry box from The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014) as a metaphor for Anderson's films, as meticulously crafted worlds and characters exist within the symmetrical and aesthetically pleasing confines of his frames, almost in a miniature-like state for the viewer to enjoy.*

## **Conclusion**

Wes Anderson is an auteur. Through his films he has taken a clear stand to separate himself from other filmmakers stylistically, and there is a reason why people often refer to his works as “Wes Anderson-y”. Located within his signature moves, colour has become a dominant tool used to wrap his scenes inside certain time periods, social situations and moods.

A common adjective thrown around to describe Anderson’s films is “nostalgic”. Perhaps his stories are not just an escape from reality, but an escape from adulthood: a longing back to a simpler time; of dreams, silliness and the eternal child. Perhaps Anderson makes these films to escape himself—to imagine a reality which differs from his own, and where the drabness of life’s harsh truths are packed up neatly inside a square pink box and decorated with a baby blue bow tie.

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