Matt Kelly

Elizabeth Boyle

English 131

24 April 2016

The Grand Budapest Hotel

Wes Anderson is undoubtedly one of the most polarizing directors in our modern film industry. One can be either vastly in love with his style or despise every decision he makes, there’s not a great deal of room in between. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is one of the most heatedly debated films of the last few years. Winning several academy awards, it clearly reached out to a great audience, but there are many who believe it won those awards undeservedly so. Critics disparage Anderson frequently, stating that he prioritizes his admittedly auteurist approach over the all important concept of story, however that simply isn’t at all the case. While his choices as a director do not fall under the category of mainstream Hollywood media, they do operate to empower his story in ways most other directors choose not to use. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel,* these choices truly bring the story to life, and without them the film would be portrayed in a completely different tone, and changing the tone of a film ultimately changes the film altogether.

As a character, Gustave’s fastidiousness embodies the spirit of Wes Anderson. There are many ways Anderson could have chosen to depict Gustave: he could have introduced him with a dark backstory, he could have brought him out with blaring trumpets and a grandiose tap number, or he could have shown a clear and decisive mission on his mind. However, Anderson did not do any of those things. As Eric Levitz states in his article *Up in the old hotel: The hidden meaning of Wes Anderson’s nostalgia,* “Gustave’s meticulous craft as concierge is rendered through each of the director’s meticulously crafted shots. More tellingly, Anderson’s film evinces a concierge’s concern for maximizing the pleasure of his audience’s stay.” Anderson’s decision to tell Gustave’s journey through precisely measured shots, extraordinarily calculated whip pans, and rapid banter-like dialogue was made in order to not only to complement but also to parallel Gustave’s persona. Whether it’s giving inspirational sermons during his employees’ meals, catering to the needs (particular sexual ones) of elderly women, or even speaking to the efficiency of the hotel’s employees during his court hearing, one can always count on Monsieur Gustave to do his duty, and to do it diligently. Anderson effectively outlines Gustave’s diligence through diligence of his own in directing. During his shots, Wes Anderson made sure that the camera was placed and measured with a tape measure to ensure he could have it perfectly located in respect to the character as well as the environment. Every camera pan is repeated dozens of times until its timing and execution are perfected. Computer-generated imagery, better known as CGI is totally discluded from the film. The shots of the hotel are actually a nine-foot model. Each shot in the train was produced by the set designer – no real trains were used in production (Dunne). Anderson believed that by keeping the film utterly analog, the film would improve the production value. level of assiduity effectively outlines Gustave, and brings *The Grand Budapest Hotel* to another level.

It seems the farther that directors delve into achieving this seemingly always aloof concept of “the film look,” the more they associate that desired look with a wider and wider screen. This widescreen effect is known as its aspect ratio, or the dimensional ratio between a frame’s length and its width. Using different aspect ratios can change the type of letterbox that appears around the screen. Wes Anderson decided to use four different types of aspect ratios that change throughout the film, including the now infamous 4:3, a now conceivably outdated ratio. Many directors shy away from using letterboxes like this it puts the two letterboxes on either side of the frame, rather than the top and the bottom as we’re used to nowadays with widescreen television. Anderson utilized this technique not in an attempt to simply “stylize” his film, but to portray different timelines within the story. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is a frame story – a story within a story (within a story within a story, to be precise) – and each story is told in a different part of the 20th century. “Anderson frames the encounter between Abraham and Law within the horizontally long ‘letterbox’ aspect ratio familiar to moviegoers since the invention of CinemaScope. But the scenes from the 1930s are all in the format of the pre-CinemaScope era, with more height than width. Thus we watch this tale of long-gone Austro-Hungarian elegance on a cinematic canvas that is itself an artifact of nostalgia” (Alleva). Most directors appeal to nothing slimmer than a 16:9 ratio, as anything less than that can give an insinuation of old, outdating cinematography. However, Anderson utilizes that nod effectively to help portray the story as an “artifact of nostalgia” as well as to make clearer which layer of the timeline the story is currently in. A seemingly odd decision at first, but one Anderson ultimately decided would help to communicate his story better.

An oft noted criticism of Anderson’s style is in his almost stereotypical use of symmetry in his shots. We’ve come to a consensus in taking the “rule of thirds” to law. That is, the subject of an image must be aligned along the axes when a frame is split into thirds both vertically and horizontally. The theory is that giving lead room for the subject in both directions allows the image to have more dynamism, particularly if balanced with a counterpoint on the opposing side of the frame. It supposedly “guides” your eyes along the picture, and creates a more active interaction with the viewer. While in many ways this technique and its effects are incredibly valid, showing use in just about every visual medium, it is not a rule that is absolute and all telling. It’s a rule that is meant to be understood so that one may be cognoscente of the effect upon breaking it. Anderson clearly understands the ramifications of his selection of symmetrical shots. In employing much of this extravagant hotel through a symmetrical perspective, our eyes are more attracted to areas of contrast due to the fact that our attention is much less “guided” in comparison to an off-balanced composition. This can efficaciously highlight what the director intends the audience to focus on. Anderson did not choose to use these symmetrically shots so frequently in order to boast a series of very impressive looking shots, as many critics will accuse, but rather he chose to include them to emphasize crucial aspects of a composition.

Stephanie Zacharek brings up a valid point in her article, *I’m Trying to Love Wes Anderson, That Miniaturist Puppet Master:* “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?” To where can we differentiate something between being auteurist or contrived? Simply put, it doesn’t have to be one or the other. The beautiful thing about art is as the saying goes: “the beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” If we all saw films in the same way, there would be no reason to appreciate it because someone else has already interpreted it just as you have; it becomes no more than trivial fact. The audience is permitted to see things in different ways and appreciate different aspects. Where one may find Anderson’s clearly unrealistic toboggan chase scene lazy and forced, another may see it as a comedic nod to the film’s general lack of high-stakes action. One may find the romance between Zero and Agatha painfully thrust into the plot, another might find it an emotional respite in an otherwise very fast-paced story. As an audience, we don’t have to appreciate each aspect of the story in a similar manner, however it’s invariably necessary to recognize the intention behind the director’s decisions. With that kept in mind, it proves to be very difficult to impose the common claim that Anderson simply doesn’t value the importance of his story.

Toward the end of the film, just as we come to grips with Gustave being free from prison and essentially inheriting everything he could have dreamed for, Moustafa reveals that Gustave was subsequently shot. Thus Moustafa inherited the hotel directly from Gustave. Moustafa does not intend to shut down the hotel, even though the spirit of the hotel (and financial integrity) died alongside Gustave. No, he keeps the dying hotel up and running as a tribute to Gustave (and of course to his beloved, Agatha), articulated perfectly in the following scene. Moustafa and “the young writer” are seated at the luxurious, albeit completely empty dining hall featured in the hotel. They receive their last drinks and dessert after eating a meal, signifying the story is coming to a close. The camera slowly zooms out from a close up of the food on the table, revealing the two characters sitting symmetrically across the dining table from each other, as well as to introduce the “problem” of the scene. All in one shot, the young writer asked Moustafa what happens next in the story, to which Moustafa answers simply: “in the end they shot him.” Suddenly, the music of the soundtrack stops, ironically signifying a moment of emotional intensity in the story. The camera zooms out to reveal the detailed expanse of the dining hall. A slowly composing wide shot leaves the subjects of the shot very small in the frame, detailing a tone of solemnity likely due to the ability of our eyes to scan the frame, but with little to lock onto. All of these aspects add up to portray a moment of pure vulnerability where Moustafa’s mentor and dear friend was murdered. This entire film we’ve come to know Gustave as a physical embodiment of whom Anderson represents, so why would he kill off our lovable hero? Though difficult to see at first, it’s not about the characters in the film. It’s not about the setting. It’s not about the treasures. It’s about the story. Ultimately Anderson decided that killing off Gustave, in a way killing off himself, would sufficiently develop the story arc.

Wes Anderson is very well known for employing techniques and styles that most major Hollywood directors shy away from. He’s not afraid of using outdated letterboxing, frequently breaking the rule of thirds, avoiding CGI entirely, or killing off a character that presumably had “plot armor.” Many critics might venture to state that in doing this so adamantly, Anderson appropriates a predisposition of style over story. That really couldn’t be any farther from the truth, as Anderson’s idiosyncratic methodology works in tandem with the types of stories he enjoys telling. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is a film that comes to life in the eyes of the audience through its directly correlated compositional style. In this case, it’s a story about the world’s strangest concierge, told by one of the world’s strangest directors.

Alleva, Richard. *Wes goes east: ‘the grand Budapest hotel.’* Commonweal. *Literature Resource Center.* 16 May 2014. Print. 19 April 2016.

Dunne, Carey. *How the Designers Built the World of “The Grand Budapest Hotel” By Hand.* www.fastcodesign.com. *Co Design.* 20 February 2015. Web. 19 April 2016.

Levitz, Eric. *Up in the old hotel: The hidden meaning of Wes Anderson’s nostalgia.* [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com). *Salon.* 2 April 2014. Web. 19 April 2016.

Zacharek, Stephanie. *I’m Trying to Love Wes Anderson, That Miniaturist Puppet Master.* [www.villagevoice.com](http://www.villagevoice.com). *The Village* Voice. 6 March 2014. Web. 19 April 2016.