Wes Anderson’s ambivalent film style: the relation between mise-en-scène and emotion

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Wes Anderson’s ambivalent film style: the relation between mise-en-scène and emotion

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ABSTRACT
Through a systematic analysis of his seven live action films (from Bottle Rocket to The Grand Budapest Hotel), this essay investigates the ambivalent features of Wes Anderson’s distinctive mise-en-scène and examines the emotions it evokes. This essay is guided by several research questions: What are the stylistic characteristics of Wes Anderson’s films? How does Wes Anderson’s mise-en-scène create a distinctive emotional appeal? And: How exactly does mise-en-scène work in particular scenes to create specific emotions?

KEYWORDS Wes Anderson; mise-en-scène; style; mood; film emotion

In Narration in the Fiction Film, David Bordwell discusses what he calls the ‘auteur’s trademark’:

The consistency of an authorial signature across an oeuvre constitutes an economically exploitable trademark. The signature depends […] partly upon recognizably recurring devices from one film to another. One could distinguish filmmakers by motifs (Buñuel’s cripples, Fellini’s parades, Bergman’s theater performances) and by camera technique (Truffaut’s pan-and-zoom, Ophuls’s sinuous tracks, Chabrol’s high angles, Antonioni’s long shots). The trademark signature can depend upon narrational qualities as well. […] The authorial trademark requires that the spectator see [each] film as fitting into a body of work. (1985, 211)

Wes Anderson is a well-known auteur who has built his own visually and narratively distinct fictional world. His recent films, in particular, have been critically acclaimed for their cinematic qualities and have proved popular with spectators. More specifically, his films are notable for their characteristic style, which arguably manifests all the qualities Bordwell lists: a consistency of narration, motifs, technique and style. Spectators regularly find in Anderson’s films long tracking shots, symmetrical, frontal and planimetric tableau shots/tableau
vivant, overhead (90°) static bird's-eye view close shots, slow motion shots, handheld camerawork, intertextual references such as a library book, and 60s or 70s pop songs. Even though these characteristics are sometimes shown in other 'quirky' films as well, Wes Anderson is the one who has consistently used these techniques (MacDowell 2010, 6), partly explaining why Anderson's mise-en-scène is so noticeable. In addition, his mise-en-scène creates distinctive emotional effects in spectators. This essay will examine the style of Anderson's films from the perspective of mise-en-scène theory (especially Adrian Martin [2014] and David Bordwell's bull's-eye schema [1989]), and will study their emotional appeal via a cognitive theory of emotions (especially Greg M. Smith's mood cue approach [2003]). While academic study into the style of Anderson's films is growing, research into their emotional appeal (especially the way style generates emotion) is still rare. Nevertheless, Wes Anderson's films are renowned for provoking certain moods, emotions and feelings. Consequently, this essay will focus on the relation between mise-en-scène and emotions in Anderson's seven live action feature-length films. It analyses the techniques and emotions one by one and sequentially, from Bottle Rocket (1996), Rushmore (1998), The Royal Tenenbaums (2001), The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou (2004), The Darjeeling Limited (2007), Moonrise Kingdom (2012) and The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014). This research is guided by a number of questions: What are the stylistic characteristics of Wes Anderson's films? How is Wes Anderson's mise-en-scène designed to create a distinctive emotional appeal? And: How exactly does mise-en-scène work in particular scenes to create specific emotions?

One core characteristic to emerge from this study of Anderson's mise-en-scène and emotional appeal is 'ambivalence'. Anderson's films provoke ambivalent emotions in spectators by setting contradictory devices against each other. Most of his films waver between comedy and tragedy. They are not simple. The ambivalence of Anderson's films can be divided into two contrary categories: one axis is generated by 'distance' and the other is generated by 'attention'. Furthermore, Anderson sometimes returns to the conventional style to elicit the strong emotion from the spectators in the narratively crucial points. In the following pages, various aspects of this ambivalence will be discussed and analysed by focusing on the narratively essential scenes with distinctive style – not only visual style, but also sound design and musical traits.

In the end, the primary aim of this essay is to demonstrate that these contradictory mise-en-scène devices contribute to the ambivalent emotions that Wes Anderson's films create. Although numerous films create ambivalent emotions – so-called 'tragicomedy' or 'bittersweet feelings' – the emotions Anderson's films create seem different, due to their distinctive and exquisite mise-en-scène. This research aims to address those complicated and ambivalent emotions in his films.
**Mise-en-scène: the commentative heuristic and the mannerist aesthetic**

In the commentative heuristic, elements from the nondiegetic realm – such as narrator, camera and director – dominate the characters and/or the diegetic world (Bordwell 1989, 183) (in opposition to the expressivist heuristic, where character and setting dominate over the camera). Likewise, Adrian Martin outlines the characteristics of the ‘broad fit’ and the ‘mannerist’ aesthetic (2014, 97–98). The term ‘commentative’ indicates a mismatch between style and subject, and Martin’s terms identify style as a dominant (and occasionally autonomous) value in a film. A significant portion of Wes Anderson’s films is dominated by a commentative and mannerist aesthetic. The most distinctive aspects of Anderson’s *mise-en-scène* are: long tracking shots, tableau shots, overhead close shots.

**Long tracking shot**

Wes Anderson prefers long tracking shots. Even though there are some variations, this technique can easily be found in all his films. According to Bordwell, long tracking shots became common in the 1930s in relation to a ‘new depth composition’ (1997, 232). Anderson’s long tracking shots are conventionally linked to the main characters. In this shot, when protagonists walk forward, the camera follows them. This is undoubtedly a shot that draws attention to the main character. Another common type in Anderson’s films is a long lateral tracking shot. Yet, depending on the combination with other elements of *mise-en-scène*, the effect of this shot could be different. This shot tends to be utilized in a conventional way with relatively simple *mise-en-scène* in his early films. Here are some examples.

In *Bottle Rocket*, Dignan (Owen Wilson) and Anthony (Luke Wilson) visit Bob’s (Bob Mapplethorpe) house to reconcile after Bob drove away from the motel earlier in the film. All three walk forward across the house talking, and the camera follows in front of them, tracking backwards until Dignan and Bob fight again. This one-minute single-take tracking shot shows the relationship among the three friends visually: Dignan and Anthony are close together, with Bob following them. Simultaneously, their dialogue provokes tension within this unbroken tracking shot.

In *Rushmore*, at the performance of Max’s (Jason Schwartzman) second play (towards the end of the film), Anderson uses a long lateral tracking shot (46 s) to scan the spectators seated in the auditorium. It tracks from left to right, revealing Max’s extended group of friends and relations, ranging from Blume (Bill Murray), a romantic rival and special friend of Max, Max’s father, to school teachers and Kumar (the maintenance man) from Rushmore Academy. During the tracking, an empty chair next to Blume is shown. In the following shot,
Miss Cross (Olivia Williams), Max’s first love, sits there as Max planned. Thus, this deliberately designed tracking shot is not simply describing spectators of Max’s play; instead, it generates crucial meanings about the protagonist and his universe.

From early on in his career, in the 1990s, Anderson preferred both forward and lateral long tracking shots. However, in the 2000s, the style of his tracking shots evolved, becoming more elaborate due to the increasing artificiality and theatricality of his sets, some of which incorporate the ‘dolls house’ or cutaway set. The most iconic moments of his films are linked to a single-take tracking shot, which continues for a long time in order to show a whole of the main set. The reason this style is crucial is that it reveals the core information to understand the characters’ world and emotional states, which the director establishes in a deliberate, artificial manner. Through this tracking shot, spectators have a chance to look at the characters’ relationships, childhood, anxieties and other clues involved in the actions related to the narrative. It is also likely to combine with other techniques like the pan, tilt, zoom or crane shots, creating a large number of dynamic variations. Sometimes the whole scene becomes full of tension, especially when there is no editing. In this situation, all components of mise-en-scène – such as an actor’s position and gestures, costume, set design, props, lighting and audio effects – are revealed in the camera movement within a single shot.

There are several important examples across Wes Anderson’s oeuvre. In The Royal Tenenbaums, in the penultimate scene of ‘chapter eight’, Wes Anderson films the situation after the car crash in front of the Tenenbaums’ house using an extremely long tracking shot (154 s) in combination with crane ups and downs, zoom in and reframing. This shot contains various reactions by most of the characters, including the most significant moment – when Royal (Gene Hackman) and his first son Chas (Ben Stiller) finally reconcile (after two decades of conflict) when Royal gives him a new dog to replace Buckley, the dog killed by the car crash.

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou. When oceanographer and documentarian Zissou (Bill Murray) introduces his ship the Belafonte, a long tracking shot is employed to film it in a cross-sectional view. Even though there is one editing point, the whole tracking scene mixed with crane shots and zooms lasts 73 s. While the camera moves from one ‘cell’ to another, the artificiality of the ship set becomes prominent, interfering with the spectator’s immersion in the scene. This doll house-like set consists of diverse function rooms – sauna, science lab, kitchen, research library, editing room, observation bubble, storage, etc. – and Zissou’s staff are placed with neatly organized props in each ‘cell’. In one cell, spectators see the process of documentary production (recording and editing in the editing room). And they will see this process recurring throughout the story. In other words, this scene embodies in compressed form Zissou’s dream and lifetime devotion to his work.
**The Darjeeling Limited.** Three brothers – Francis (Owen Wilson), Peter (Adrien Brody) and Jack (Jason Schwartzman) – travel across India by train to find their mother. When they find her, she suggests communicating without language. This scene was shot in a long circular pan (39 s) among them with a song ‘Play with Fire’ by The Rolling Stones. Under the same music, this scene leads to another remarkably unique ‘montage’ of disparate events constructed by a long lateral tracking shot (65 s). Seemingly, this montage looks like a moving train; however, it shows heterogeneous characters in different times and spaces one by one – such as the Indian boys, Peter’s pregnant wife, Francis’s secretary, Jack’s ex-girlfriend and so on. This unusual ‘tracking montage’ shot seems to imply numerous meanings. People in this shot are related to the protagonists in different levels. Nevertheless, they belong to one shot, each of them stays in their own space, separately reflecting the various relationships with three brothers. For instance, spectators can not only see Francis’s secretary sitting on a plane in one carriage, but also subsequently see Jack’s ex-girlfriend in the hotel room watching TV in another carriage. Anderson creates distance by exposing the structure of the train set as the tracking camera transitions from one space to the other. Clearly, this sequence shot follows a mannerist aesthetic; nevertheless, emotions can be attributed to the relationships among the characters and the lyrical music.

**Moonrise Kingdom.** The opening sequence begins with tracking shots outside and inside the house of Suzy Bishop (Kara Hayward), in combination with panning shots. In each shot, the camera movement changes direction: lateral tracking from left to right, lateral tracking right to left, moving up (crane shot), tracking forward, panning around a room. While the camera roams smoothly over each part of Suzy’s house, it shows in detail her world and the relationships among her family members. When the camera tracks, spectators have a chance to look through Suzy’s belongings, such as her left-handed scissors, a record player, binoculars, books, bags and a kitten. In addition, Suzy’s family members – mother, father, three brothers and Suzy herself – are isolated in their own spaces. In addition, each tracking shot stops on Suzy’s blank face staring directly at the camera with binoculars (all of these characteristics are visible in Figure 1). Despite such artificial *mise-en-scène* (neatly organized staging plus measured and calculated camera movement), the specific information revealed during the tracking shot could be a first step for spectators to understand and empathize with the protagonist. (Later, we will examine how this opening sets a mood.)

**The Grand Budapest Hotel.** While running away from the police, M. Gustave (Ralph Fiennes) and Zero (Tony Revolori) take a train. Yet, when the train is filmed using a long lateral tracking shot, neither of them is there. During this shot, armed guards in the snow-covered station are observed through the window frame, and the whereabouts of the two protagonists is provided by Mr Moustafás (F. Murray Abraham) voice-over narration. When the camera finally
stops in front of Henckels (Edward Norton), he detects the smell of perfume, *L’Air de Panache*, which is the critical clue. It seems, therefore, that this long tracking shot functions to emphasize this clue. One interesting point here is that Anderson does not exclusively use the information-condensed tracking shot any more. Even if he still employs a number of tracking shots in this film, they are on the whole combined with different angles or edits. Arguably, this variation shows that Anderson's *mise-en-scène* has transformed into the ‘broad fit aesthetic’.

These examples reveal a tendency towards using a commentative or camera-dominant style rather than an expressivist or character-dominant style. Spectators who watch Anderson's films would recognize the director’s trademark easily. But despite his distinctive *mise-en-scène*, this type of shot still functions within the narrative, so these shots are not purely commentative or mannerist. Simultaneously, the way Anderson stages them ‘exceeds’ their purely narrative role. This is one aspect of Anderson’s ambivalent style.

**Tableaux shots**

Another distinguishable trait of Wes Anderson’s *mise-en-scène* is the tableau shot, or tableau vivant. The primary characteristic of this shot is that the characters face forward and stare directly towards the camera in a frozen pose. For instance, when Max’s theatre group is introduced in *Rushmore*, every member including Max stares at the camera in unison without motion, as in a photo. Similarly, everybody including Zissou on the yellow submarine is looking at the camera squarely and motionlessly in *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* as if they are still lives. Moreover, this shot is often created using symmetrical or centred composition. This aesthetic – based on frontality, meticulousness, neatness and geometrical accuracy – makes Anderson’s visual style distinctive and noticeable. It is similar to the artificial and theatrical tracking shots discussed...
above. MacDowell has pointed out that this ‘presentational’ style of tableau shots means ‘acknowledgement of the audience’, i.e. ‘self-consciousness’ (2010, 6). According to him, it encourages spectators to recognize the existence of the camera as well as the film’s artificiality. However, although this tableau shot is evidence of the ‘commentative heuristic’ and ‘mannerist’ aesthetic, it also implicitly encourages viewers to think and feel something about the absurd position of the characters, props and other settings.

Also, tableau shots are occasionally combined in a montage sequence. In this case, a distinguishable insert title, which introduces a character or explains the situation, is added. In addition, the position of this insert title is an integral part of the shot’s design. Music is another crucial point in this montage sequence, evident right from his early films to the recent ones. From those elements, it is revealed that the director governs the whole mise-en-scène as a ‘commentator’.

These mise-en-scène traits can be found in all of Anderson’s films. Early on in Rushmore, Max’s extracurricular activities – a total of 17: French club president, stamp & coin club vice-president, astronomy society founder, beekeepers president, Yankee racers founder, play director, etc. – are introduced one by one in a montage sequence. Each shot is composed as a tableau, with a distinctive insert title accompanied by the strong beat of ‘Making Time’ by The Creation. In this tableau, Max is usually at the centre staring the front camera directly with frozen pose and the other characters and props are set up neatly and symmetrically.

The Royal Tenenbaums. A long montage sequence occurs at the early part to introduce the main characters, complete with narrator’s commentary, insert title and theme music. It is separated into two parts: the former (prologue) represents childhood and the latter (cast of characters and chapter one) adulthood 22 years later. In this context, several shots are tableau shots. These shots create an unnatural atmosphere due to the stillness and deadpan expression of the characters and the calculated composition of the mise-en-scène.

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou. Towards the end of the film, Zissou and nearly all other characters in the film explore the depths of the sea riding a yellow submarine to search the jaguar shark. The characters are filmed in a tableau vivant. In this scene, Zissou is behind the wheel at the centre of the frame and the others around him facing forward. This silent moment lasts several seconds, until Zissou turns on the music labelled ‘Ned’s theme’.

The Darjeeling Limited. Several tableau shots are used in this film, including shots of brothers Francis, Peter and Jack sitting together facing the camera, and the moment when they attend an Indian boy’s funeral, after he drowned. While the cremation continues near the river, a number of villagers and three brothers stand still to mourn his death. There is no music, no dialogue, only silence, with characters arrayed neatly and motionlessly. These tableau shots in the funeral scene encourage spectators to concentrate on the moment, although the tableaux also tend to distance spectators from the action.
Adrian Martin (2014, 34–35) examines Jean-Luc Godard’s tableaux while discussing the director’s various interventions, which he labels as modernist. According to Martin, Godard’s tableau shots function in two different ways: either as ‘cool demonstrations’ or ‘comedic turns’. These comments might be applied to Wes Anderson’s tableaux as well. First of all, the ‘comedic turns’ are found in the montage sequence of *Rushmore* mentioned earlier. This comedic effect is created via the absurdity between the protagonist’s sincerity (with a deadpan expression) and the exaggerated situation such as his 17 extracurricular activities, presented in successive tableau shots. Another example is the montage sequence of Etheline’s (Anjelica Huston) suitors in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, which are humorous due to the absurdity and tension between the suitors’ serious face and their exaggerated background description. Moreover, a sort of ‘suddenness’ and ‘stillness’ are inclined to amplify the chasm between two different attributions.

On the other hand, tableau shots in Anderson’s films fundamentally seem to be ‘cool demonstrations’; they arouse a sort of ‘alienation effect’ because of the unnatural pose of the characters and their position in the frame. Unlike Godard’s iconic tableaux in *Vivre sa vie* (1962), Anderson’s tableaux have little political meaning or intention. Yet, there is still a common theme, of isolation. Within the tableau shot, characters are isolated, even when they are in groups. At the same time, the very techniques that generate distance – such as frontality, symmetry, neatness and silence – encourage spectators to pay attention to the scene and engage with the character’s situation. Thus, there is a subtle tension or ambivalence in these scenes.

However, the most noteworthy fact is that Anderson’s recent films produced in the 2010s reflect both aspects of the tableaux (‘comedic turns’ and ‘cool demonstrations’) more clearly than his earlier films. For example, in *Moonrise Kingdom*, when the two runaway children, Sam (Jared Gilman) and Suzy, are discovered in their yellow tent on the beach, all the people who find them – Suzy’s parents, three brothers, captain Sharp, Scout master Ward and other Scout members – are neatly arranged in a static pose. Clearly, this tableau shot is arranged for comedic effect. Meanwhile, there are a few moments when Sam and Suzy face one another and stare at each other without speaking or moving (and are filmed using 180° cutting): in the middle of the field after escaping, and in the ‘Mile 3.25 Tidal Inlet’ (so called ‘Moonrise Kingdom’) just before jumping into the water. Using this *mise-en-scène*, Anderson captures and preserves this decisive moment of two young lovers.

A notable tableau shot in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is used when M. Gustave recites a letter to his colleagues in jail. In this cutaway, M. Gustave is framed at the centre of the shot, with prisoners and guards arrayed evenly on either side, all facing the camera (Figure 2). This tableau shot provokes laughter because of the absurdity between seriousness and awkward composition within the exaggeratedly poetic context.
At the same time, there is another iconic moment with a tableau vivant in the climax of this film. It is M. Gustave’s death. During the train journey, he loses his life protecting Zero from the fascist soldiers. Anderson does not show his death directly. Instead, he presents a tableau shot in which members of the Grand Budapest Hotel staff stand still looking outward in silence. In this group photo, spectators can see the living M. Gustave at the centre of the frame, despite information from the voice-over narration that he was killed. As a ‘cool demonstration’, Anderson makes the protagonist and his past glories eternal with this remarkable tableau shot.

**Overhead close shot**

Ninety degree bird’s-eye view close (and usually static) shots are regularly found across Wes Anderson’s oeuvre. Anderson has utilized this shot for filming both characters and props. For example, in *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, the overhead close shot of a character is used only once in the whole film, when Zissou falls down the stairs in Ping island. Conversely, there are numerous overhead close shots focusing on objects: an old fan’s film posters, Ned’s ring, Zissou’s and Ned’s letters, the postcard written by Jane, mating sugar crabs, Team Zissou’s watch-duty schedule, Zissou’s journal about the jaguar shark and so on. This overhead close shot provides a vantage point to get the maximum information as well as the objectively clearest visual scope. In addition, as with other artificial traits of Anderson’s *mise-en-scène*, the elaborately organized composition of this shot encourages spectators to focus on the object *per se*. When the object is linked to the character’s emotional state, the bird’s-eye view close shot directly from above seems to function effectively to express emotion. Moreover, these emotional objects are frequently literary – such as a novel, letter or poetry; sometimes, the written words are recited by the character, usually without music. Coordinated with the character’s voice, the meaning
of this literary object is amplified. Hence, spectators can concentrate on both information of the object and feeling of the protagonist. This characteristic becomes sharpened and stylized technically in Anderson's more recent films.

There are numerous examples in each film where this shot is linked to character emotion. In *Bottle Rocket*, after Bob drives away at night, Anthony and Dignan go to a cafeteria. While Dignan denounces Bob's behaviour, Anthony is distracted by drawing something on lime-green paper: Inez (the maid at the motel and Anthony's love interest). In the bird's-eye view from above, a simple drawing is clearly shown (Figure 3). In this drawing, Inez rides a little horse and there are sparks around her. Anthony's fantasized sketch is important in this narrative moment, not only because it implies he is no longer interested in Dignan's robbery plans; it also expresses his emotional state.

*Rushmore.* Max finds a handwritten note in Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Philippe Diole's book *Diving for Sunken Treasure*. This handwriting is shown in close shots, first with a wave-like sound effect. And then, when Max goes to the library to search the person who wrote the note, a list of the book's borrowers is shown with the overhead close shot. Subsequently, a memo written about Miss Cross held by Max is shown in the overhead close shot again. Later, Wes Anderson uses another overhead close shot related to this book to show the nameplate of Miss Cross's deceased husband in the front of the book. These bird's-eye view close shots emphasize the narratively essential clues that imply an emotional relationship developing between Max and Miss Cross.

*The Royal Tenenbaums.* In the early part of this film, young Margot's altered glove is shown in the overhead close shot during the montage sequence. In this shot, the ring finger part of this pink glove is disconnected. Later, through the flashback (when she found her real family), it turns out that Margot's biological father cut her finger with an axe by mistake. This overhead close shot symbolizes Margot's emotional state: it clearly reveals that she feels she does not belong to either her real family or her adopted family.

![Figure 3. Anthony’s drawing in the overhead close shot.](image)
The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou. There are two letters: one from young Ned to Zissou and one from Zissou to young Ned. Both letters are presented in an insert cut with a bird’s-eye view close-up from above, read out by the one who wrote it, without any sound effects. At first, Ned shows Zissou the letter from him that he has kept for 17 years. At this stage, Zissou appears not to remember it. Yet, later Zissou shows Ned the letter from young Ned which he has kept for 17 years as well. After this moment, Ned loses his life caused by the helicopter crash. Also, Anderson films Ned’s Zissou Society ring twice with the overhead close shot. These striking shots symbolize the relationship between Ned and Zissou.

The Darjeeling Limited. During the train trip with his two brothers across India, Jack takes a bottle of perfume (Boltaire #6) out of the suitcase he inherited from his deceased father. The perfume is filmed from a bird’s-eye view close shot from above. For Jack, this perfume means a failed relationship with his ex-girlfriend; eventually, he smashes the bottle. In addition, this perfume also implies Jack’s failed relationship with his deceased father. In a flashback, Jack takes his newly released book out of his father’s suitcase. Jack dedicated this book to his father, who died before seeing it. Spectators can see clearly the same perfume design on the book cover in the overhead close shot.

Moonrise Kingdom. Suzy Bishop, a troubled child isolated from her family and friends, runs away with Sam. She takes with her ‘impractical’ belongings – such as a suitcase full of fantasy fiction, left-handed scissors and a portable record player – all of which are emphasized via overhead close shots. In particular, the fantasy books Suzy stole from the library (She says, ‘I think I just took them to have a secret to keep’) are crucial narratively and emotionally. In the fantasy world of her books, Suzy can escape her troubled everyday existence and be an adventurous heroine. Wes Anderson mentioned Suzy’s books in an interview with Film4: ‘I’m sort of thinking more and more that the movie should really be one of her books, kind of, and […] the movie is the sort of story that the two characters in it would want to read’ (Anderson 2012a). Furthermore, he explained the meaning of the fantasy books in an interview in The Guardian: ‘when you’re 11 or 12 years old, you can get so swept up in a book that you start to believe that the fantasy is reality. I think when you have a giant crush when you’re in fifth grade, it becomes your whole world. It’s like being underwater; everything is different’ (Anderson 2012b). In fact, Anderson emphasizes the books through not only the overhead close shot, but also in several scenes where Suzy reads from them.

The Grand Budapest Hotel. As a film partially anchored in the mystery genre, objects which provoke high tension or fear – such as dead bodies of Madame D and Serge X, Deputy Kovacs’ severed fingers, Jopling’s desk with photos – are often revealed in overhead close shots. Sometimes, other elements of mise-en-scène, such as underlit rooms and minor-key music, create a mysterious atmosphere. Yet, the colourful ‘Mendl’s Courtesan au Chocolat’ not only
presents a valuable lead in solving the case; it also signifies an emotional connection among the main characters. In particular, Anderson highlights Mendl's patisserie twice via the overhead close shots related to the jail scene. By sharing this luxury item with other cellmates, M. Gustave has a chance to escape from the jail. Also, it is a symbol of the emotional bond among M. Gustave, Zero and Agatha (Saoirse Ronan).

When it comes to the overhead close shots of characters, this type of shot is used sparingly. Nevertheless, Anderson has a tendency to employ this specific shot at the decisive moment within the narrative, from Bottle Rocket onwards. This 90° bird’s-eye view close shot provides a vantage point to observe the character’s face in detail, as with a normal close shot. However, the overhead close shot also presents spectators with an unfamiliar perspective on a character. This type of shot generates ambivalent emotion towards the characters: on the one hand, spectators can feel intimacy by the close shot, but on the other hand, they can feel distance by the 90° bird’s eye position. The use of this shot related to a character’s emotions within the plot points is discussed again towards the end of this essay.

In summary, the three kinds of distinctive mise-en-scène techniques in Wes Anderson’s films analysed above have ambivalence in common: i.e. the noticeable style not only generates ‘distance’ but also draws the spectator’s attention to the style. The style of the shot tends to be disconnected from previous and subsequent shots due to their artificial attributions. Also, this trait is apparent throughout all of Wes Anderson’s films. In this vein, his mise-en-scène may partially be ‘mannerist’ in Adrian Martin’s terms; however, at the same time, considering the fact that it tends to function within the narrative, it also seems to lie on the ‘broad fit’ aesthetic area. Either way, it is a camera-dominant style rather than a character-dominant style. As Gibbs states, ‘Mise-en-scène can form the basis of an argument about authorship because if one recognizes the expressive value of the mise-en-scène then the director must logically be the artist responsible’ (2002, 61–62).

**Mood setting**

What aspects of Wes Anderson’s mise-en-scène elicit spectator emotions? MacDowell points out that ‘emotion in an artificial landscape is crucial for thinking about Anderson’s work’ (2012, 15), for this trait is likely to undercut feelings towards characters by making spectators focus on the artificial aesthetic. Nevertheless, it is clear that Anderson sets a specific mood by elaborately planting emotional cues within the artificial, layered and director-governed mise-en-scène. According to Greg M. Smith (2003, 44), the orientation of emotion in a film’s opening scenes is essential, for it tends to be maintained throughout the whole film once it is set up. In this vein, it is important to analyse the emotional structure in the early part of Anderson’s films. Emotional cues – actors’ posture, costumes, props, set, lighting, colour and music – not only establish a film’s entire mood, but also reflect the protagonists’ universe. Here are some examples.
Bottle Rocket. The opening scene begins with Anthony leaving the mental hospital, observed by Dignan through binoculars. Later, this is repeated when Dignan snoops around Hinckley cold storage before the last heist. The binoculars symbolize the world as Dignan sees it: a skewed rose-tinted image. (The symbolism of the binoculars is more strongly marked in Moonrise Kingdom.) This is also evident in Dignan’s 75-year plan, written in childlike handwriting in crayon. Anderson films Dignan’s plan in an overhead close shot. Both the preposterous plan and binoculars reveal Dignan’s naïve perception of and attitude towards reality.

The first project they embark on is to rob Anthony’s house. This whole sequence proceeds in a very cheerful and dynamic mood using handheld shots and the song ‘7 & 7 Is’ by the band Love. During the burglary, items stolen (earrings and a coin collection) are filmed in overhead close shots. Later, the earrings provoke a quarrel between the two friends. Anthony gets angry at Dignan for stealing his mother’s earrings which he gave her as a birthday present, but simultaneously, it reveals the reason why they did not rob Dignan’s home: Dignan’s poverty. The latter implies Anthony’s happy childhood and relative comfort in contrast to Dignan’s. These scenes, appearing in the early part of this film, may be funny and exciting, but they are also tinged with dark emotions such as melancholy and sadness. As MacDowell (2010, 3) points out, Bottle Rocket is a ‘kind of awkward emotional comedy’ due to the main characters’ passion and earnestness. Thus, spectators could feel uncomfortable while laughing. This tendency continues across the whole film.

Rushmore. The very first image we see is Blume’s family portrait against theatre drapes. For Devin Orgeron (2007, 7), this painting seems ‘deeply ironic’; yet, at the same time, it is also a dense emotion cue that reflects Blume’s emotional state. It is shown again when Blume throws a birthday party for his twin sons. While the twins are opening the gifts and his wife is seducing a young guy, Blume is seen with a deadpan expression smoking and throwing golf balls one by one into the pool. On the soundtrack The Kinks’ ‘Nothing in This World’ emphasizes the melancholic mood. At this moment, the family portrait suddenly appears as a cutaway. This painting is a remarkable emotion cue; spectators could observe Blume’s feeling despite his blank face. All members of this family are in the same frame, but each occupies their own separate space.

Max’s world is also disclosed early in this film. His eccentric, precocious, pretentious personality, revealed in the montage sequence analysed earlier, is contrasted with his poor academic performance and impending expulsion, revealed in the following scene, in his meeting with the principal Dr Guggenheim (Brian Cox). From this scene, spectators find out how Max entered Rushmore with a scholarship thanks to his mother who recognized Max’s talent as a playwright. This clue is revisited visually when Max writes a play next to the cemetery where his mother’s grave is located; an embossed message on the typewriter cover is shown: ‘Bravo, Max. Love, Mom’. In spite of the distancing mise-en-scène such
as deadpan acting, tableaux and meticulous framing, these emotion cues convey Max's deep sorrow and inner loneliness. For him, a play is the most powerful way he can come to terms with reality.

*The Royal Tenenbaums.* For Gibbs (2002, 69), *mise-en-scène* is deeply related to character. The early part of this film is full of elaborately constructed emotion cues that signify the private emotions, memories and relationships of characters. Even small *mise-en-scène* details are connected to each other. Despite all the distancing devices, like meticulous and neatly organized compositions constructed around frontality, symmetry, centred position, deadpan expression, noticeable camera shots, etc., a strong mood is created by numerous emotion cues.

For example, in the first montage that introduces the three Tenenbaum children, each room reflects each character exactly. Young Chas' room looks like an office. Young Margot's room expresses her secretive trait with several signs like 'Do Not Disturb,' 'Do Not Enter' and 'Keep Door Closed.' Young Richie's room is coloured sky-blue with childlike drawings. Meanwhile, during this montage sequence, on the soundtrack is the melody of 'Hey Jude' (cover version); in spite of a third-person narrator (Alec Baldwin)'s commentary, this music generates strongly nostalgic mood.

One important point here is that this first montage leads to the next introduction montage: 22 years later. Now, the Tenenbaums are not geniuses anymore, yet they are still obsessed with their past. Most emotion cues described above are revisited repeatedly. For example, Margot and Richie wear the same type of clothes from their childhood. Chas is an exception: he wears a red tracksuit and is frequently filmed with a handheld camera, reflecting his unstable emotions. Furthermore, a number of emotionally crucial objects planted in the *mise-en-scène* early on tend to be consistently revisited with variation as the story develops: they evoke bittersweet feelings of nostalgia and pathos, reflecting not only the painful relationship among family members but also lost childhood. For instance, Richie's portraits of Margot and The Rolling Stones' album *Between the Buttons*, which young Margot used to listen to, symbolize the special relationship between Margot and Richie. Also, according to Winters (2012, 52–53), in this sequence, George Enescu's *Cello Sonata No. 1 in F minor* acts as another emotion cue, for it is recreated with various instruments reflecting individual characters. This tendency continues across the remaining part of this film.

*The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou.* There are numerous devices reinforcing distance in this film. The reflexive process of filmmaking (of Zissou's team making a documentary) disturbs spectators' emotional immersion towards the main characters. Firstly, Zissou creates distance via his deadpan expression and awkward posture as a presenter/narrator in his documentary. Nevertheless, simultaneously a number of emotional cues offset this distancing effect – the 'fluorescence snappers,' for example. In the early part of the film, these fish are described as extremely rare creatures. But, they are also linked to Esteban's
death. (The appearance of these fish signifies the presence of the jaguar shark that killed Esteban.) These fluorescent snappers emerge again when Zissou and Ned are flying a helicopter. As soon as Zissou says that the appearance of the fish is a good sign (for the jaguar shark he is hunting must be close), their helicopter crashes into the sea, leading to Ned’s death. This time, the fish are connected to Ned’s death. Lastly, when Zissou and his team are in the submarine, again fluorescence snappers pass by, evoking two deaths just before the jaguar shark appears in front of them. Although these animated fish are unrealistic, they still function as an emotion cue to remind spectators of tragic deaths and the main character’s painful feelings.

Another noteworthy scene in the early part of this film is the moment Zissou learns that Ned might be his son, whereupon he traverses the ship alone heading to the prow, a moment full of emotion cues. While Zissou’s movement is shown by a long lateral tracking shot, David Bowie’s ‘Life On Mars’ is heard on the soundtrack, reaching the climax when Zissou blows cigarette smoke on the prow in a medium long shot with slow motion. All the small lights both decorating the ship and on the coastline set a strong sentimental mood as well. Despite Zissou’s blank face, spectators sense his inward agitation in combination with various emotion cues. This moment seems particularly essential considering the connection with the main theme of this film. The dominant mood regarding the relationship between Zissou and Ned is built into this early scene and it traverses the whole story with variations.

The Darjeeling Limited. The main mood of this film is triggered when Peter runs after a train and successfully boards it. This early scene is constructed via a lateral tracking shot, slow motion and the song ‘This Time Tomorrow’ by The Kinks on the soundtrack. Peter carries large ochre-coloured suitcases engraved with his dead father’s initials, J.L.W., and these suitcases are very important as an emotion cue. Three brothers carry a number of same-styled suitcases all the time during their journey, even though transporting them around India is a burden. It means they are still mourning their father’s death. These suitcases are filmed with various mise-en-scène strategies – from the tracking shot with slow motion, overhead close shots, to the neatly organized compositions reminding three brothers of their grief over their father’s death. However, in the last scene, they discard all the suitcases in order to board another train, signifying the start of a new journey no longer weighed down by sorrow for their father. Interestingly, the way this scene is filmed – three brothers run after a train in a lateral tracking shot in slow motion accompanied by the Kinks’ song ‘Powerman’ – repeats with variation the same pattern of the opening, with Peter boarding the train. This final scene causes strong emotions and echoes the earlier scene, which has already established the film’s dominant mood. Anderson has developed a formula: he selectively draws upon conventional mise-en-scène techniques such as slow motion, long tracking shots and old pop songs to maximize the emotional appeal at crucial points in the plot.
Another primary emotion cue which provokes strong feelings is close shots of medicines, such as tranquilizers, muscle relaxer and painkillers. In the opening scenes, the three brothers share and take their medicine in the dining section on the train. After this scene, the brothers take the medicine frequently, until they confront the Indian boy’s death in a small town. These medicines are often emphasized in close shots calculatedly displayed in the train, reflecting the protagonists’ painful emotions. The medicine symbolizes that each of them is still vulnerable and suffering from their emotional reaction to their father’s death. Thus, they momentarily try to ease or forget their sorrow via medicine; however, eventually it is overcome through another death on their journey. To sum up, despite the distancing effect by meticulous and noticeable mise-en-scène arrangements, strong pathos evoked by these objects as emotion cues dominates the entire mood.

*Moonrise Kingdom.* As pointed out above, this film starts with long tracking shots showing Suzy’s universe through her belongings and relationships. This opening sequence also sets the mood of the film, especially when considering other components of mise-en-scène. As Smith argues (2003, 48), emotional cues create the appropriate mood when they are coordinated. The point here is the ambivalent mood generated by the mise-en-scène. The elaborate camera movements (tracking shots and crane shots) in the opening scene of *Moonrise Kingdom* always stop on Suzy, who often looks straight into the camera with binoculars. Suzy’s posture and blank face generate distance by means of artificiality. Above all, a long backward tracking shot in the last part of this opening scene is noteworthy. In this shot, every member of the family is in the same frame; however, each of them remains in their separate space (see Figure 1 above). The track back ends on Suzy looking at the camera frontally with her binoculars. According to Gibbs, ‘space is a vital expressive element at a film-maker’s disposal’ (2002, 17–18). He highlights how the method of blocking works dramatically to express the complicated relationship between characters. Likewise, from the relationships revealed in this shot, spectators can infer the protagonist’s emotional state. Even though the representation is artificial and calculated, the dominant mood built up in this mise-en-scène seems to be pathos. This unnatural position makes spectators focus on the character who is looking outside, detached from her own family, thereby generating empathy with Suzy’s feelings of loneliness and sadness. As the story progresses, this mood and feeling are reinforced through variations, and is revisited once again in the last scene.

Music is another interesting choice. In this film, Anderson uses classical music for children rather than 60–70s pop songs he preferred before, a sign of change in terms of the evolution of his style. Benjamin Britten’s *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra*, played on a record within the diegesis in the opening sequence is crucial, since the composition of the music corresponds precisely to other elements of mise-en-scène. In this music, a young narrator on the record explains how the orchestra works. He points out that the orchestra
is divided into ‘four different families’ (the young presenter here uses the term ‘family’): woodwind, brass, string and percussion. On the record, each part of the orchestra plays the same theme, but separately. In parallel fashion, the camera movement also shows the family members one by one occupying their own spaces in the house. Both the music and camera movement signify isolation of the family members.

*The Grand Budapest Hotel.* In the early part of this film, a number of elements of *mise-en-scène* allude to significant information about the protagonist’s emotional state, in spite of the artificial, distancing features such as a doll house-like set, a framing story structure and voice-over narration. For instance, when M. Gustave first appears, spectators only see his silent silhouette from the back. Soon afterwards, his blank face is shown in a close-up profile shot. Music begins and he turns on the light after traversing the room. This is an artificially controlled scene suggestive of a theatrical stage which may provoke an ‘alienation effect’; at the same time, the scene is full of emotion cues, which suggest the protagonist’s melancholy. Despite all the elaborate visuals and comedic actions, spectators could notice the true feeling of M. Gustave through this scene.

While the Grand Budapest Hotel is introduced via Mr Moustafa’s voice-over narration and a montage sequence, the scene where M. Gustave takes his dinner alone in his room is shown. Unlike the others, it is dark in tone, implying the character’s inner state. In this scene, a line of perfume bottles (*L’Air de Panache*) are placed in the foreground, and M. Gustave is shown with a blank expression eating a frugal meal in his underwear. The music is quiet and the light is dim. Although short, this scene reveals primary information about the character from the narrative level to the emotional level. For one thing, *L’Air de Panache* is very crucial object in this film (for it functions not only as a symbol of M. Gustave’s vanity, but also as a prominent clue to develop the story). Furthermore, this perfume reflects a bond between M. Gustave and Zero (the young Mr Moustafa) after they start to share it.

The train scenes are also meaningful in this film for setting the mood. In the first train scene, armed soldiers boarded the train and questioned the passengers. M. Gustave protected Zero and luckily they managed to survive the crisis. This scene has a light atmosphere complete with comical gestures and music. However, when it is repeated with variation at the climax, the mood totally changes. This time, it is shown in black and white with ambient music. There have been flurries of snow. The actors’ facial expression is sincere. During the conversation, the protagonists are shown in close-ups. Every element of *mise-en-scène* here foreshadows the tragic ending by setting the gloomy mood. At the same time, there are several devices which generate distance. The protagonists’ faces are half hidden in profile, and are revealed only through the frame of the train window. This scene not only suggests ambivalence, but also indicates that style has evolved in Anderson’s *mise-en-scène*. In fact, it appears that Anderson starts to change some aspects of his *mise-en-scène* from the
films produced in the 2010s. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, he only employed the music composed especially for this film. In addition, as mentioned above, theatrical lighting effects are reinforced as well, fixed shots combined with editing are preferred, rather than long tracking shots. It seems that Anderson’s film style continues to evolve towards a more refined and stable aesthetic within the ‘broad-fit aesthetic’.

To sum up, like all the examples analysed above, it appears that Wes Anderson employs a two-track approach to the *mise-en-scène* in his work in terms of emotions. On the one hand, artificial visuals and techniques cause distance; on the other hand, emotion cues especially planted in the early part of the narrative function to establish the dominant mood. Consequently, spectators are not only invited into a fictional unrealistic world, but also to the melancholic mood evoked by emotion cues across the Anderson’s ambivalent strands of *mise-en-scène*.

**Empathy and the decisive moment: slow motion, handheld camera and the close shot**

Derek Hill (2008, 87) notes that most protagonists in Anderson’s films are unhappy despite their privileged background and upper middle class status. Even though details might be different depending on the situation, Anderson’s main characters are lonely, sad and unhappy. How are their feelings embodied in the *mise-en-scène* at the emotional climax of each film? Anderson has a tendency to return to conventional techniques when he represents the protagonist’s strong emotions in the emotionally climactic scene to elicit the empathy from spectators to the full; i.e. there are decisive moments where Anderson temporarily puts aside his artificial distancing style and focuses on the character’s emotions *per se*. Grodal (2009, 193) argues that, fundamentally, spectators are interested in characters rather than other information or camera shots provided by the film. Also, Gibbs (2002, 19–20) outlines the situation where contradictory techniques are employed in a film. He argues that a distancing effect by one device can be offset by opposite devices like close shots. Selective utilization of conventional Hollywood *mise-en-scène* can therefore work as an effective stylistic choice or strategy, for it straightforwardly appeals to spectators’ empathetic engagement with characters. Plantinga (1999, 252–253) points out that the scene of empathy tends to be saved for the film’s most decisive moment.

Wes Anderson uses three key traits to elicit empathy: slow motion, handheld camera and close shots, including overhead close shots. Orgeron defines slow motion as ‘a formal mechanism that elongates the moment’ (2007, 6). Sound design tends to play an important emotional role in slow-motion scenes. As Buckland (2012, 3) points out, in Anderson’s films, a slow-motion sequence is often combined with a song, which helps to build the tone and character expression. Boschi and McNelis (2012, 37) argue that a short dramatic silence
is employed just before the song begins in order to create a synergy effect. Secondly, a handheld camera is used at the emotionally climactic moments in Anderson’s films; it is a signifier of ‘realism’ (MacDowell 2012, 16), a common technique that expresses a reality effect. Hill notes that ‘[a]s much as Anderson has become a master of the elaborate, multi-layered mise-en-scène, he also astutely understands the moment to drop back, allowing his character to feel the brunt of their sorrow without excessive ornamentation’ (2008, 105). In other words, Anderson uses handheld shots to deal with strong emotions in a more ‘realistic’ less ornamental way. In particular, this technique is linked to the moments of death in his later works. Thirdly, close shots of a character’s face is another common technique to induce empathy from spectators. As Plantinga (1999, 244) emphasizes, generally close shots of the main character’s emotional face tend to be shown much longer than others to stimulate an empathetic reaction from spectators. Wes Anderson is no exception; he often uses close shots of the protagonist’s face and their duration is generally longer than other shots. A notable feature is that Anderson also uses modified close shots, i.e., 90° bird eye’s view close shots for the narratively and emotionally climactic points which I call ‘the moment of accepting the truth.’ As Anderson’s trademark, this shot was already been examined earlier in relation to objects; here, it will be discussed ahead in terms of the character’s face. According to Plantinga, the coordination among diverse audiovisual elements in the mise-en-scène promotes spectator’s empathy with regard to ‘cross-modal congruence’ (1999, 254).

**Slow motion**

As Plantinga remarks, scenes of empathy tend to appear at the points that ‘the character deserves our empathy’ (1999, 252–253), usually after going through a life-and-death ordeal. It can be located in any part of the narrative, but is often located at the end of the film. This tendency is also observed in Wes Anderson’s works, especially in regards to slow motion. All his live action films, except The Grand Budapest Hotel, have slow-motion scenes (occasionally located at the end of the film), sometimes connected to memories. For example, the scene of reunion between Margot and Richie in The Royal Tenenbaums, filmed in slow motion with close shots and a dolly-in, and accompanied by Nico’s melifluous song ‘These Days’, evokes the special relationship and emotional bond sustained from childhood between the two protagonists. Similarly, the scene of the three brothers walking to attend the Indian boy’s funeral in The Darjeeling Limited is filmed in slow motion in association with a very long lateral tracking shot accompanied by The Kinks’ lyrical song ‘Strangers.’ This scene leads to a flashback to the three brothers going to their father’s funeral one year earlier. However, most cases of slow motion at the end of Anderson’s films signify reconciliation and a ‘happy ending’ despite a pervasive feeling of pathos (Orgeron 2007, 7). Here are several examples.


_Bottle Rocket._ After the last burglary failed, Anthony and Bob visit Dignan in prison. During their conversation, Dignan says ‘we did it though, didn't we?’ and they smile ironically. When Dignan returns to his cell, he is filmed in slow motion, with a close-up of his face and his point-of-view of Anthony and Bob. The melancholic music accompanying this scene is also played in ‘the moment of accepting the truth’ scene, the moment the car breaks down and Dignan realizes that they are broke and stranded. Orgeron (2007, 6) mentions that it reminds spectators of Dignan’s desire to belong to something. Due to Dignan’s ironical line, this slow-motion scene generates a bittersweet feeling.

_Rushmore._ At the end of Max’s play ‘Heaven and Hell’, everybody associated with Max celebrate his success. The range of relationships is wide: from the people who truly care for Max to the people who were in conflict with him. The film ends with dancing, accompanied by The Faces’ ‘Ooh La La’. Even though Max’s love for Miss Cross has not come true, they dance together holding hands, filmed in slow motion. Steven Rybin writes in relation to this slow-motion shot that it ‘not only serves as a nostalgic punctuation mark to their shared pasts but also as a sign that these two reconciled friends will continue to live creatively with one another in the future’ (2014, 45). This ending strongly appeals to spectators’ emotion.

_The Royal Tenenbaums._ The film ends in a cemetery. After Royal’s sudden death, every member of his family comes together at his funeral. As they leave Royal’s tomb one by one, the shot shifts to slow motion accompanied by Van Morrison’s ‘Everyone’, reflecting the reconciliation of this family. It is the sad moment mourning Royal’s death, with alienated family members gathering together. In this context, this sad ending filmed in slow motion might also be seen as a ‘happy ending’.

_The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou._ In the film’s final scene, Zissou sits on the steps of the theatre where his documentary is screening. He gives Werner (Klaus’ nephew) Ned’s ring. Anderson shows Zissou’s blank face in a close shot. Doors open and people spill out the theatre. Zissou stands up, gives Werner a ride on his shoulders, and walks down a series of steps, accompanied by David Bowie’s high-pitched song ‘Queen Bitch’. While walking down the steps, the pacing of the movement slows down. This slow motion scene with an upbeat song reflects one of the film’s themes: in spite of Ned’s death, the adventure must go on. The film’s ending provokes mixed feelings.

_The Darjeeling Limited._ As discussed earlier, the closing repeats the opening, with variation. In both scenes, slow motion with a long lateral tracking shot is used. One difference is that while Peter runs after the train alone in the opening with his dead father’s suitcases, three brothers run after the train together in the closing with the same suitcases. Eventually, they give up these suitcases and successfully board the train. In addition, lilting songs by The Kinks unite both scenes: ‘This Time Tomorrow’ in the film’s opening, ‘Powerman’ in the final scene. Reflecting the opening, this last slow motion seems to draw strong
emotions from the spectators. Although the film generates pathos for the three brothers, nevertheless, it seems to imply that they finally overcome their painful emotions and can start a new journey together.

*Moonrise Kingdom.* In the scene where Sam and Suzy are ‘married’, their walk out of a chapel hand in hand is filmed in slow motion. ‘The Heroic Weather-Conditions of the Universe, Part 4–6’, part of theme music composed by Alexandre Desplat, accompanies this scene. This slow-motion effect continues until the young couple board a boat to escape. Similar to the other slow motion shots in Anderson’s oeuvre, it amplifies a climactic moment in the narrative. For young lovers, this ceremony means not only marriage *per se*, but also a new journey. Their grave faces and Desplat’s majestic music incites a spectacular mood.

There are no slow motion shots in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

**Handheld shots**

The use of handheld camera shots in Wes Anderson’s films becomes more restrained as his career progresses. In his early films such as *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore*, Anderson used this technique often to express not only a protagonist’s psychological states but also to generate dynamic energy. But, since the 2000s, handheld shots are used only in a few key scenes, usually linked to death (or quasi-death). Derek Hill points out that in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* and *The Darjeeling Limited*, ‘death frequently becomes the catalyst for Anderson’s characters to realize (if only for a moment) their own insignificance within a life worth living’ (2008, 104). Likewise, the handheld shots in the decisive scene, especially tragic moments, are likely to cause more shock and strong emotions for the spectators compared to other artificial and stylized *mise-en-scène*. Furthermore, this scene, rarely accompanied by music, tends to make spectators concentrate on the moment. Here are some examples.

*Bottle Rocket.* There are numerous handheld scenes in this film. In this early work, Anderson’s distinctive visual style is still developing. However, handheld shots are utilized quite effectively in crucial moments, such as the robbery scenes (especially Anthony’s house), the bookstore and Hinckley cold storage. These scenes not only contribute to generating a tense atmosphere; they also express the main character’s unstable emotional state. In all three robbery scenes, dynamic styled music such as ‘2000 Man’ by The Rolling Stones is used as well.

*Rushmore.* A large number of handheld shots are used in this film. Those employed to film the decisive moment are noteworthy. When Max visits Rushmore to see Miss Cross after being expelled, she strongly refuses his advances. The tense conflict between them in her classroom is filmed with a handheld camera, without music. The handheld shots reveal the raw emotions of both characters. Moments later, Max has a fistfight with his nemesis, Magnus,
which is also filmed with a handheld camera. These two scenes are crucial both narratively and emotionally in the way they directly lead to Max’s ‘moment of accepting the truth’ (discussed ahead).

*The Royal Tenenbaums*. There are two handheld scenes used in the decisive moments related to death. One is Richie’s suicidal attempt scene and the other is Eli’s car crash and the following chase. The former starts with a close shot of Richie. When he finds out about Margot’s past relationships, he attempts suicide in the bathroom. This scene is filmed with a bluish lighting and Elliott Smith’s plangent song ‘Needle in the Hay’ expressing Richie’s devastation. After he slits his wrists, Dudley opens the door and sees Richie sprawled out on the floor. The handheld shot is filmed as Dudley’s point of view. He screams, but there is no sound in this scene. As Boschi and McNelis (2012, 38) have pointed out, ‘dramatic silence’ sometimes works together with handheld shots in the decisive moment to elicit strong emotions, mostly pathos, from spectators. This scene also leads to ‘the moment of accepting the truth’ for both Margot and Richie.

Anderson uses a shaky handheld shot when Eli’s car crashes into the Tenenbaums’ house. He drives under the influence of drugs, and his face is painted red, making him look grotesque, reflecting his wrecked body and mind. This car crash almost kills Chas’ two sons and kills their dog, Buckley. Soon afterwards, Chas chases Eli, shot with a handheld camera accompanied by strong drum beats. This scene, effectively expressing the two characters’ emotional states, straightforwardly leads to another ‘moment of accepting the truth’ as well.

*The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. The most climactic moment in this film is Ned’s death. When Zissou and Ned fly by helicopter, they crash into the ocean as soon as the ‘fluorescence snappers’ appear. This scene is composed of rapidly edited handheld shots that express urgency. As with Richie’s suicidal attempt in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, there are numerous flash-cuts. Subsequently, the two men float on the sea for a while and Ned dies. This scene is shown with the handheld camera on the water in the same eye-level with two protagonists. As MacDowell (2012, 16) points out, it looks like part of a documentary due to the typical features like ‘the blood on the camera’ and ‘the water lapping at the bottom of the frame’. Spectators could see the splash of water/blood on the camera lens directly like a real situation. In addition, there is no accompanying music. *Mise-en-scène* in this scene gives the spectators a sense of realism, and this conventional and frank style seems to provoke stronger emotions than an artificially constructed mannerist scene.

*The Darjeeling Limited*. When the three brothers try to save the Indian boys from drowning, handheld shots are used with tense music. Like the scene of Ned’s death mentioned above, it is also filmed with the camera positioned at water level, with water splashing and lapping over the lens. During this scene, a supporting rope breaks, and Peter and an Indian boy fall into the water. Soon, all the sound becomes muted like a vacuum except a ‘heartbeat’ sound
effect. Peter eventually emerges from the water bathed in blood, with the dead Indian boy in his arms. This moment causes strong emotions related to the sudden and merciless death. The handheld camera is effective in expressing this decisive moment.

*Moonrise Kingdom.* The decisive moment the handheld camera is utilized in this film is when Sam lunges at Redford. When Sam returns to the camp to get Suzy’s binoculars, he confronts Redford who has been bullying him (he also takes the binoculars). During the confrontation, there is a heartbeat sound effect, which becomes stronger and finally stops. At this moment, similar to the example in *Rushmore*, their fight is filmed handheld. The rough movement of the camera continues as Sam runs away. It not only expresses the protagonist's emotional state, but also directly leads to the narrative’s final act. Again, handheld shots here seem to be the typical but effective choice coordinated with this highly elated atmosphere.

*The Grand Budapest Hotel.* There are no handheld shots in this film, just as there are no slow-motion shots. A noteworthy point here is that this film shows a number of variations in *mise-en-scène* in respect to the evolution of Wes Anderson's style. On the one hand, in general, it looks like Anderson's style has become more stable. For one thing, it is often found in this film that actors are depicted in various static shots edited together, rather than via camera movement. The main set (the Grand Budapest Hotel) is also shown in detail through diverse static shots by editing instead of long tracking shots in the opening scene. The music composed by Alexandre Desplat supports this tendency as well. On the other hand, in regards to emotions, Anderson's *mise-en-scène* tends to be restrained within a mannerist aesthetic by reinforcing the artificiality. Anderson uses a tableau shot (M. Gustave’s death) and dramatic lighting effect (M. Mustafa’s tears) instead of handheld shot or slow motion in the climactic scene of this film. Due to the strong artificiality, the character's emotion itself looks restrained. This tendency seems much clearer compared to previous films. However, despite all the evolutionary stylistic changes, Anderson still employs conventions to elicit empathy from spectators at the film's emotional peak. The examples will be looked into in the next section.

**Close shots and the ‘moment of accepting the truth’**

The close shot is one of the most common strategies to elicit strong emotions. Plantinga (1999, 239) stresses facial close-ups and point-of-view shots as typical forms to attract emotions from the spectators in the scene of empathy in terms of ‘character engagement’. And Wes Anderson has used close shots for the climactic moments. For instance, spectators clearly could see Zissou’s sad face near to tears in a close shot when he faces the jaguar shark in the last part of *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*. In *The Darjeeling Limited*, spectators observe Peter's emotions clearly through his facial close shot when he sheds secret tears...
in the toilet of the train while reading Jack’s writing about their deceased father. This straightforward and long (16 s) shot shows Peter’s sorrow. Meanwhile, Mr Moustafa sheds tears while thinking of his love for Agatha in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. This scene is crucial in terms of the evolution of Anderson’s style, because it shows an ambivalent manner. On the one hand, Wes Anderson employs the mannerist aesthetic partially using theatrically styled lighting and voice-over narration; when the camera cuts to Mr Moustafa’s facial close shot, illumination is increased and the author’s voice-over narration explains his feeling (‘He was crying’). These noticeable devices may cause distance to the spectators by focusing on the style *per se*. On the other hand, this crying protagonist filmed in a close shot makes spectators feel strong empathy toward his emotional state. Applying a ‘point-of-view structure’ to this scene combined with long duration (20 s) composed of close shots of faces seems enough to elicit empathy from the spectators as well. In this context, lighting and voice-over narration encourage spectators to concentrate on the protagonist’s emotion rather than cause distance. When it comes to the evolution of his style, Anderson may establish the more subtle and complicated *mise-en-scène* by adding the ambivalent elements based on a typical emotional shot.

However, the most important point here is the overhead close shot focusing on the character’s face, i.e. ‘the moment of accepting the truth’. As explained earlier, this distinctive shot tends to be used to film a decisive moment in a character’s life. It is a shot that maximizes spectator empathy, and has been used consistently from *Bottle Rocket* onwards. Generally, the main characters of Wes Anderson’s films are inclined to hide their real feelings and problems by pretending they are fine. Yet, at the decisive moment, the protagonist suddenly faces the real situation and accepts the truth – usually when they are prostrate on the floor. This particular position reveals the hopeless and helpless state of the characters. Anderson catches this emotionally crucial moment via a close shot filmed from a 90° bird eye’s view. Here are some examples.

*Bottle Rocket*. When the car breaks down in the middle of nowhere, Dignan realizes that they are broke and stranded. He lies down on the grass and his face is shown in the overhead close shot (Figure 4). For the first time, Dignan stops pretending and reveals his true feelings – his inferiority complex, jealousy and frustration towards Anthony. Anthony tries to comfort him, but Dignan, brandishing a screwdriver, strikes him in the face. This is the decisive moment when their friendship breaks up.

*Rushmore*. As described before, Max fights with Magnus after arguing with Miss Cross. Max is beaten senseless. When Max opens his eyes in the overhead close shot (Figure 5), his best friend, Dirk, abandons him due to his previous lies he has told. This is a crucial moment, when Max finally accepts the grim reality: he was expelled from Rushmore, Miss Cross rejected him, and his best friend walked away. Through this shot, spectators perceive the protagonist’s helpless and hopeless emotional state.
Another decisive moment in this film is also shown when Blume meets Max at the barbershop owned by Max’s father. Blume lies down on the barber’s chair to get a haircut. Spectators clearly can see his gloomy expression in his face with the overhead close shot. This shot implies that he admits the truth: not only the broken relationships, but also painful feelings from them.

*The Royal Tenenbaums.* There are three scenes that reveal the decisive moment with an overhead close shot. Firstly, when Margot and Richie meet in their childhood tent after Richie’s suicidal attempt. Richie confesses his love and they confirm their mutual feelings. Subsequently, they lie down together and it is shown in the overhead close shot (Figure 6). Spectators can see not only Richie’s face in detail, but also Margot’s strong emotion in her face ravaged by grief for the first time. Her face is pressing against his in the same frame. Also,
The Rolling Stones’ two gentle songs from *Between the Buttons* – ‘She Smiled Sweetly’ and ‘Ruby Tuesday’ – help to create a strong sense of pathos. As Boschi and McNelis have pointed out, Anderson often chooses ‘folk-inspired Stones’ songs picked for their emotional frailty, temporal pacing and lyrical relevance’ (2012, 30), rather than their typically noted hit songs. In addition, the props and costume reminiscent of their childhood – such as sleeping bag, yellow tent, old phonograph, red hairpin and so on – also build up the melancholic mood.

Secondly, the overhead close shot is used when Chas and Eli lie down on the ground side by side just after a long chase scene, discussed above. For both of them, it seems to be the decisive moment. Chas and Eli have pretended all the time as if they are all right in different ways; however, with this (the car crash and following events) as a momentum they accept the harsh truth that they need ‘help’. Anderson emphasizes their painful emotions using both the overhead close shot and lines (‘I need help’/ ‘So do I’). Through this shot, spectators plainly could see how they are emotionally vulnerable and feel strong empathy for that reason.

Thirdly, Royal’s last moment is noteworthy. Before he dies of a heart attack, Royal lies down on the gurney with an oxygen mask on his face in the ambulance. Anderson shows Royal’s face in the overhead close shot (Figure 7). Chas looks down at him holding his hand; his eyes are filled with tears. Royal smiles faintly in his last moments. In spite of voice-over narration and Nico’s calm song (‘The Fairest of The Seasons’), which might slightly interrupt the spectators’ immersion, it seems the most touching and decisive moment in this film. For the first time, they share the strong family bond as well as end the discord between father and son which continued over two decades. For the dying Royal, this is ‘the moment of accepting the truth’.

![Figure 6. Margot and Richie in the overhead close shot.](image-url)
Towards the end of the film, the moment Zissou lies down on the floor after falling down the stairs at the abandoned hotel on Ping island is filmed in an overhead close shot (Figure 8). Through this shot, spectators notice that he is deeply despondent. Zissou stops pretending and finally accepts reality. He even says: ‘We’ll give them the reality this time. A washed-up old man with no friends, no distribution deal, wife on the rocks, people laughing at him, feeling sorry for himself’. Then, he opens his heart to Ned for the first time calling him ‘my son’. Their emotional expressions are entirely restrained, yet the mise-en-scène (close shot of their faces and gentle music) makes the spectators empathize with the character’s feelings.

*The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou.*
The Darjeeling Limited. In this film, an overhead close shot of an Indian baby is the narratively crucial scene. While staying in the Indian village, Peter stares at an Indian baby in the cradle. Subsequently, he holds the baby in his arms. Although there is no overhead close shot of Peter, this is still the decisive moment for him, because he begins to accept his role as a future father. At the same time, he is prepared to get over his sorrow towards his father's death.

Moonrise Kingdom. In contrast to Anderson's other films, the protagonists (Sam and Suzy) in this film are 12-year-old children. The way Anderson presents their emotions is different from the depiction of the emotions of adult characters. The children tend to be filmed in a sincere manner, whereas adult characters are often filmed in an ironic manner with exaggerated acting. The way Mr Bishop (Suzy’s father) expresses his emotions when Suzy goes missing is to chop down a tree at night (while drinking a bottle of wine).

When Suzy’s parents talk lying in their separate beds, Anderson shows their faces in overhead close shots (see Figure 9, of Mr Bishop). The lighting is dim and there is no music. Fixing their gaze on the ceiling, they admit that they live together without love only for the sake of raising their children. Similar to other examples discussed above, Anderson employs overhead close shots to film this emotional scene.

When it comes to Sam and Suzy, their emotions are shown sincerely via typical *mise-en-scène* techniques, especially the scene where they confirm their mutual love. This scene is, as Bordwell (2014) pointed out in his blog, filmed in the ‘conventional ¾ views of faces and over-the-shoulder angles’. And the conventional camera technique is repeated in their dance sequence on the beach. According to Bordwell, ‘at an emotional peak, Anderson sharply violates the film’s intrinsic norm by bringing in a common technique’ (2014). And that

![Figure 9. Suzy's father in the overhead close shot.](image-url)
is the reason why the ‘moment of accepting the truth’ of the two protagonists could not be found in this film (they do not need it). Instead, Suzy’s parents accept the truth in the overhead close shots.

*The Grand Budapest Hotel.* M. Gustave in bed during a train trip is shown twice in the overhead close shot. At first, M. Gustave and Zero are on the way back with the painting ‘Boy with Apple’. They are situated on a double-deck bed, respectively, in first class of the train. In the overhead close shot (Figure 10), M. Gustave stares up at the ceiling alone with a blank face, which is in sharp contrast to the cheerful mood just shown in the previous shot. The lighting is dark. There is no music but voice-over narration of Mr Moustafa: ‘He never told me where he came from. I never asked who his family had been.’ Through this scene, spectators have a chance to understand and empathize with the character.

On the other hand, there is a variation of the ‘moment of accepting the truth’. After escaping from prison, M. Gustave and Zero take a train. This time, it is third class. They lie down on the bed side by side and have a friendly conversation. Anderson shows both of them in the overhead close shot. It looks like another moment of truth for M. Gustave. In this shot, he is not alone anymore. Through this shot, Anderson implies that not only the relationship, but also the emotional state of M. Gustave has changed.

As mentioned earlier, this overhead close shot seems to elicit spectators’ empathy effectively by focusing on the protagonist’s decisive moment in spite of being an unfamiliar filmic technique. On the other hand, it might be evidence of the ‘new sincerity’ in the context of ‘a sincere heart beating […] combining a slightly detached position of irony with earnest expressions of feeling’ (Rybin 2014, 42).

![Figure 10. M. Gustave.](image)
Conclusion

The primary findings of this essay fall into three parts. Firstly, Anderson’s *mise-en-scène per se* provides contradictory effects: both ‘distance’ and ‘attention’. Even though the distinctive *mise-en-scène* provokes distance, at the same time, it makes spectators concentrate on the characters, especially their emotional states. To be more specific, noticeable camera techniques such as long tracking shots, tableau shots and overhead close shots tend to generate an ‘alienation effect’, creating a mannerist and commentative aesthetic. However, these same traits draw spectators’ attention to the characters and their emotions as well. Thus, ambivalent emotions towards characters are created. Secondly, by the same token, the attributions of ‘irony’ and ‘sincerity’ coexist in the *mise-en-scène* regarding initial mood setting. Yet, in spite of the distance caused by the mannerist aesthetic – such as the characters’ blank face, frame story structure, the voice-over narration and so on – the ‘emotion cues’ planted in the plot points build up a strong mood and evoke spectators’ empathy towards the protagonists. The establishment of a melancholic mood in the film’s opening link up to important plot points as the narrative develops, causing an amplification of emotions. Lastly, Anderson often employs conventional techniques in the ‘decisive moment’ emotionally and narratively, which are an efficient strategy to maximize the spectators’ empathy. At the same time, he shows the character’s facial close shot in the 90° bird eye’s view for the ‘moment of accepting the truth’. This modified close shot is a good example to show Anderson’s ambivalent style, for it creates empathy towards the protagonist just as a conventional facial close shot would, but it also creates distance by filming from an unfamiliar position.

Despite the length of this study, there are several limitations. For one thing, in respect to the evolution of Anderson’s style, more research is needed to chart his evolution film by film. Furthermore, this study has focused on selective parts of *mise-en-scène* such as camera technique, set, props, acting and music; further research will be needed regarding the other aspects of *mise-en-scène*, especially colour and lighting. Nevertheless, this essay has tried to analyse Wes Anderson’s ambivalent *mise-en-scène* concentrating on the emotions through all of his seven live action feature-length films. In addition, considering Anderson’s position as a key proponent of ‘quirky’ cinema, it would be helpful to explore ambivalent emotions provoked by the *mise-en-scène* in other quirky films.

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