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# The Future of Anachronism

## Todd Haynes and the Magnificent Andersons

*Elena Gorfinkel*

Speaking nostalgically, it is our grandfathers and grandmothers in general that we regret, not just their aesthetic response and opportunities to enjoy a perished art of the theater, but also their clothes, their relative moral simplicity, and above all the dignity, along with charming quaintness, which their traditional images can inspire in our feelings.

Parker Tyler, "On the Cult of Displaced Laughter"<sup>1</sup>

Parker Tyler's early treatise on the retrospective pleasures of cinematic artifacts, despite its having been written close to 46 years ago, reflects some of the "retro" stylistic tendencies in the recent work of American independent filmmakers, Todd Haynes' *FAR FROM HEAVEN* (USA: 2002), Paul Thomas Anderson's *BOOGIE NIGHTS* (USA: 1997) and Wes Anderson's *THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS* (USA: 2001). For these directors, the "anachronistic" become, subjected to different aesthetic and narrative strategies, in which reference to "outdated" historical periods and objects invites spectators to engage affectively, though not necessarily uncritically, with history. The work of these American art-house auteurs has been spoken of both in terms of a "new sincerity" within vernacular criticism, but also in terms of irony, parody, and pastiche. Jeffrey Sconce, discussing the etiology of the "smart film" of the 1990s, suggests that these filmmakers, through their static tableaux and deadpan presentation, "render the uncomfortable and unspeakable through acute blankness."<sup>2</sup> Although seemingly redolent with such examples of blankness and ironic distance, it will be argued here that the films and the way in which they position the viewer, are actually invested in imagining an audience from the past, in a desire to reinstate a more earnest mode of film reception. Employing a *film historical imaginary*, these directors' aesthetics capitalize on the visibility of anachronism as a means of highlighting the pathos of historical difference. The poignancy of the irrecoverable gap between past and present – between the 1950s, the 1970s and today, and between childhood and adulthood – becomes the subject of these films.

Negotiating cinephile attachments through a re-working of Hollywood's codes of representation, the films under discussion – *FAR FROM HEAVEN*, *BOOGIE NIGHTS*, and *THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS* – point to a particular historical, historiographic, and "retro" sensibility that diverges from the concerns of historical

authenticity or veracity ascribed to the traditional “period film.” Although the three filmmakers are unique in their own respective ways, their films are illustrative of tendencies within American independent cinema towards a flurry of recycles, remakes, and period films set in the recent history of the 1970s and 1980s – in films such as *THE WEDDING SINGER* (USA: Frank Coraci, 1998), 54 (USA: Mark Christopher, 1998), *LAST DAYS OF DISCO* (USA: Whit Stillman, 1998), 200 *CIGARETTES* (USA: Risa Bramon Garcia, 1998), *ALMOST FAMOUS* (USA: Cameron Crowe, 2000), *SUMMER OF SAM* (USA: Spike Lee, 1998), to name a few. Furthermore, the release of the films *DOWN WITH LOVE* (USA: Peyton Reed, 2003), *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* (USA: Jared Hess, 2004), *AUTO FOCUS* (USA: Paul Schrader, 2002), *THE MAN WHO WASN’T THERE* (USA: Joel and Ethan Coen, 2001), *O BROTHER WHERE ART THOU?* (USA: Joel and Ethan Coen, 2000) and *PLEASANTVILLE* (USA: Gary Ross, 1998) attests to a renewed and re-mediated filmmaking practice that creatively uses the film historical past.

## Anachronism After Allusionism

Yet the “filmmaker as practicing cinephile” is, in itself, not a new phenomenon, but one that spans back to the emergence of cineaste culture in the 1960s, in Europe and the United States. Noël Carroll, in his essay on the uses of allusion in films of the 1970s, analyzes the penchant for the citation and appropriation of styles, themes, devices and genres from film history in the work of New Hollywood directors such as Brian DePalma, Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, and Steven Spielberg. Carroll suggests that by the early 1980s, allusion had become a full-blown aesthetic sensibility in the Hollywood cinema. This expressive predilection for quotation and memorialization was, for Carroll, a result of the particular *mélange* of historical forces which defined American cinema in the 1960s: the conditions of film industrial reorganization, the flowering of a vibrant and literate film culture which claimed motion pictures as an art form rather than mass entertainment, the emergence of the auteur theory as a hermeneutic tool in the United States, and the cineaste education of young filmmakers at film schools. Out of this context could emerge Lawrence Kasdan’s *BODY HEAT* (USA: 1981), as Carroll remarks,

It’s an old story. Or, to be more exact, it’s an old movie – shades of *THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE* (USA: 1946) and *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* (USA: 1944). And yet of course it’s a new movie.... Nor does *BODY HEAT* merely rework an old plot. It tries to evoke the old films, films of the forties that the plot was a part of. *BODY HEAT*’s costumes are contemporary, but of a nostalgic variety that lets us – no, asks us – to see the film as a shifting figure, shifting between past and present.... We understand

BODY HEAT's plot complications because we know its sources – in fact, because through its heavy handed allusions, we've been told its sources. Without this knowledge, without these references, would BODY HEAT make much sense?<sup>3</sup>

It is particularly in the use of allusion to create a bridge between the past and the present through the act of reworking and restaging film history, that it becomes evident that Haynes, P.T. Anderson, and Wes Anderson are heirs to the appropriative tradition which Carroll diagrams in his essay, and that Fredric Jameson would one year later come to term, within a rather different exegetic context, the "nostalgia film."<sup>4</sup> And it is hardly surprising that the work of the 1970s "movie brats" has been incorporated and itself quoted by the new breed of young directors, in a feat of historical and generational assimilation. Altman, Scorsese, DePalma, Coppola and others appear as guiding presences in the work of these independent directors now operating on the edges of mainstream Hollywood.

But while there is indeed a use of allusion in the work of the younger 1990s group, it seems necessary to understand how the films of Haynes and the Andersons move beyond the recycling devices of 1970s New Hollywood. Rather than a seamless allusion which showcases professional virtuosity and technical skill, which Carroll claims was an industrial impetus for the 1970s directors,<sup>5</sup> Haynes and the Andersons utilize allusion, but also eclipse it, in their preference for a kind of overt aesthetic and temporal disjunction, creating an intended rift within the constitutive aspects of their filmic worlds. The viewer always inevitably becomes aware of his or her own position, caught between different periods, in a region of illegible temporality and mobile film historical space.

In all three cases, these films are *about* anachronism as much as they *use* anachronism as an aesthetic resource. Haynes and the Andersons employ overtly "outmoded" or obsolete elements within their mise-en-scène and narrative. In *FAR FROM HEAVEN*, it is a simulation of 1950s melodrama, with oversaturated jewel tones coordinated among décor, costume, props and lighting, hyperbolically blowing autumn leaves, windswept scarves, and the stock small talk of the petty middle class. *BOOGIE NIGHTS* showcases the delusionally cheery and naïve milieu of late 1970s Californian pornography. The film overlaps the leftover traces of the sexual revolution with the insurgent beats of disco, the texture of shag rugs, sparkling swimming pools, cocaine parties and rollerskates. In *THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS*, the Tenenbaums appear as a throwback storybook clan of the J.D. Salinger, John Irving, and Charles Addams variety in a mythically timeless New York. Their discordant family genealogy is mapped by each anomalous member, each an anachronism unto him- or herself: Richie the tennis champion, Chas the real estate and accounting whiz, Margot the award-winning teen playwright, Etheline the archaeologist, Raleigh the neurotic neurologist, Eli the drug-addicted cowboy novelist, and Royal the brashly acerbic, absentee patri-

arch and disbarred litigator. The film's references escape their origin, alluding to its cinematic influences – from Orson Welles to Woody Allen – yet simultaneously creating a resoundingly literary narrative universe. In their renegotiation of generic expectations – particularly melodrama – these filmmakers demand an affectionate return to historical objects or moments, through the artifacts, images and sounds of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Like allusionism, anachronism is prone to a measure of taxonomy, and here in order to make sense of the usefulness of the concept in thinking about Haynes, P.T. Anderson, and Wes Anderson, we should pause to assess some historical approaches to the subject. Within a contemporary vernacular and in its commonplace meaning, to mark something, a cultural object or figure, as anachronistic is to suggest that it is out of place, misplaced from another time. It is often seen as a slight – anachronism is after all understood as a type of mistake in the practice of historical representation.<sup>6</sup> Varieties of anachronism and their classification in history and literature abound; they have been divided according to their level of historical veracity, iterative intention, and textual result.

Within literary history, scholar Thomas Greene organizes five types of anachronism according to both level of authorial intent in the making of the mistakes and their textual result. For Greene, a “naïve” anachronism claims no access to control of the history in question, an “abusive” anachronism involves a refusal to engage historically, a “serendipitous” anachronism entails well meaning mistakes but those which are nonetheless beneficial, a “creative” anachronism is transgressive, historically loyal and has cultural/political goals, and a “pathetic/tragic” anachronism is defined by an estrangement from history, which is mired in decline.<sup>7</sup>

Greene ascribes to the anachronism moral, behavioral and characterological descriptions. The anachronist takes on a relation to “proper” history, a relationship which must either be excused, justified or condemned. Considerations of anachronistic elements in cinema have become common in the past twenty five years of scholarship on history in, and of, cinema, as the disciplines of history and film studies have long debated the accuracy of historical representations in popular films. However, assessments of facticity and the burdens of filming history are less pertinent here than a concern with the ways in which anachronism as a concept and mode of aesthetic recognition becomes a direct means of dialoguing with popular cultural memories of the historical past. There is both a historicist and fabulist strain in the creative marshalling of anachronism in these works, one which hinges on sly misuses and creative revisions of historical and film historical referents.

## Implausible and Impossible: Revising 1950s Melodrama

Todd Haynes' *FAR FROM HEAVEN*, perhaps the most "loyal" adaptation of a historical period as pictured and remembered within a film historical genre, continues the project of historiographic fiction pursued in his earlier film *VELVET GOLDMINE* (USA: 1998). The latter film, in its fictionalization of 1970s glam rock, attests to the director's interest in both past eras of popular cultural production, and the connotative associations these moments call up for spectators. But what makes *FAR FROM HEAVEN* anachronistic can be read on two registers, first in terms of its much discussed adaptation of and homage to Douglas Sirk's melodramas of the 1950s. On this level, the film appears as though it is a time machine, shuttling us backwards in time from the present into the social and aesthetic conditions of studio Hollywood in the 1950s. On the second register, *FAR FROM HEAVEN* engages cinephile knowledge, positioned as a contemporary allegory of race, sexuality, and the social regulation of the private sphere. The pleasure of the film rests in the retrospective knowledge that the viewer holds, and in an acknowledgment of the violation the anachronistic text enacts on its classical Hollywood forebears.

Haynes diverts his film from pure remake into "creative anachronism," infusing concerns of race, homosexuality and female agency into the saturated visual frame of 1950s melodrama. The film presents a narrative of marital decline, motored by the admission of homosexuality by a middle-class businessman (Frank Whitaker/Dennis Quaid), which spurs on a nascent romance between his shaken suburban wife (Cathy Whitaker/Julianne Moore) and her African-American gardener (Raymond Deagan/Dennis Haysbert). The repressive contexts of 1950s small town Americana are infused with an inductive melancholy, as the bitter-sweet denouements of Sirk's tragic narratives – in films like *ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS* (USA: 1955), *MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION* (USA: 1954), and *IMITATION OF LIFE* (USA: 1959) – precede and frame the unraveling of Cathy and Raymond's romance.

Engaging the audience on the level of reception, and following in the footsteps set by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose Sirk-inspired film *ANGST ESSEN SEELE AUF* (Germany: 1973, *ALI: FEAR EATS THE SOUL*) serves as yet another intertext to *FAR FROM HEAVEN*, Haynes' cinephile devotion binds the viewer into a retrospective dialogue with the Sirkian audience. Acting, performance, sound, camera movement and mise-en-scène are exceedingly studied and self-consciously artificial, lending what some reviewers ascribe to Haynes as his "academic" mimesis of Sirk. Neither parody nor "blankly ironic," Haynes' total re-creation of the narrative and emotional universe of the 1950s family melodrama assembles the excessive signs of a lost Hollywood moment for a present-day

historicist purpose. In his sense of responsibility to the film historical conventions which he mimics and transgresses, Haynes can be seen to be operating in the mode of anachronism Thomas Greene deems “creative,” and his project is a labor of a political and historiographic nature. It points to the limitations and ellipses within past representations, precisely through the very mimesis of these now obsolete techniques of cinematic storytelling, in a format J. Hoberman wittily referred to as “filmed film criticism.”<sup>8</sup>

One scene directly alludes to Douglas Sirk’s racially charged melodrama *IMITATION OF LIFE*, in which Lora (Lana Turner) is surprised that her black housekeeper Annie (Juanita Moore) had any friends, and implicitly a life outside of her household obligations to Lora. Haynes restages a similar encounter between Cathy Whitaker and her black maid Sybil. Asking her maid whether she knows of any church groups or civic organizations to which she could donate old clothes, Sybil names two, saying “I always seem to be signing up for something.” Cathy responds with some surprise, exclaiming, “I think that’s marvelous, that you find the time, with all that you do for us.” As Cathy rushes out the door, two NAACP organizers are standing on the steps and ask her to sign in support of the organization; Cathy, in a hurry, ironically makes Sybil sign her name for her.

While echoing Sirk, Haynes’ film ups the ante in a kind of filmic superimposition, where the connotations of one film are overlaid with the new. Cathy Whitaker’s stirrings of romantic feeling for Raymond complicate the alignment of her comments to Sybil with that of Lora’s (Lana Turner) in *IMITATION OF LIFE*. The kind of film historical reflexivity at work in this scene, as the NAACP comes to the door, depends on the privileges afforded by hindsight. The directness with which the film deals with race and homosexuality distances the film from pure remake or homage status. The inclusion of such themes enacts the counterfactual “what if?” scenario so prevalent in the ancillary fantasy processes of spectatorship. The historical possibility of the NAACP – as well as the historical possibility of gay identity – is inserted into the film historical, Sirkian text. What if the NAACP came to the door in *IMITATION OF LIFE*? Or, what if a character came out of the closet in a 1950s family melodrama? This sort of presentation, as an opening into a film historical imaginary, *inserts the historically and socially possible into the film historically impossible*.

A similar tenor is struck when Cathy, under the pressure of prying eyes and vicious gossip in her fragile bourgeois world, must end her relationship with Raymond; Cathy’s words have a double-edged meaning, as she tells Raymond that “it isn’t plausible for me to be friends with you.” The word *plausible* itself gains a bittersweet, poignant edge – as it can both refer to the conditions of possibility and visibility of interracial love in the film’s narrative space, as well as referring outwards to the film historical context, in our knowledge of the

under-representation of interracial relationships in the Hollywood movies of the 1950s. And it is hard to forget that "plausibility" is inevitably associated with a popular vernacular around realism, through which moviegoers talk of the "credible" and the "believable" in filmic representations.

Haynes' anachronistic and cinephile fiction locates the affective pull of his story in the deep conflict and ambivalence attributed to the paucity of social choices available to Cathy, Raymond and Frank. This ambivalence is enriched by the retrospective knowledge and shuttling of the audience between the imagined Sirkian reception paradigm, of an audience in the 1950s, and the contemporary context of film reception. What is "outdated," yet most deeply felt as the pain of the film, is the brutal force of repressive, racist and sexist social opinion, a place where history circumscribes limits on the possible and the nearly impossible. As film critic Steve Erickson suggests, "not only are the taboos of Sirk's times outdated, so is the appalled hush that accompanied them."<sup>9</sup> Such taboos in the Hollywood cinema were matched and enforced with a restrictive Production Code, which produced a certain set of cinematic conventions of the said and the unsaid. Haynes lovingly and meticulously adheres to both the social and the cinematic codes of the time. He states, "I've always had a hard time depicting the experience of radical revolt from culture, truly transgressive experience... In a way I'm more comfortable showing the limits that make that kind of response possible."<sup>10</sup>

Working with and through these self-imposed generic limits, while pushing the representations of social limits, in the present, Haynes is able to reconstruct and create a space of film historical identification that exists by virtue of our contemporary moment and our emotional relay from "now" to "then." Affect is channeled through the conjuring of a gap between contemporary and past social attitudes, and the manifestations of those attitudes through the inarticulateness of characters' speech and gestures in the cinema. The exacting price of racism and exclusion is most violently rendered through the exile of Raymond Deagan from Hartford to Baltimore and the foreclosure on his romance with Cathy. The bitter cruelty of the Sirkian oeuvre becomes mutually constitutive with the cruelty of an intransigent social order, of a time that remains rigid in its unwillingness to accept racial and sexual difference. Yet the syncretic temporal and historical experience of watching *FAR FROM HEAVEN* facilitates a kind of spectatorial imagining, as the audience is constantly oscillating between the film's diegesis and its extra-diegetic contexts. As one critic suggests of the bitter pleasures offered by the setting and execution of Haynes' period homage.

Those pleasures are associated with a past as alluring as it is ultimately unreachable: the mythic 50s of precisely this kind of psychological melodrama, an era that... starts as a historical period... and turns into a region outside time, an operatic space where emotions, hemmed in, finally prove irrepressible.<sup>11</sup>



FAR FROM HEAVEN'S willful anachronism, its condition as a film that appears out of place and out of time, makes its narrative impact somehow carry more of an affective charge. The intense artificiality of the mise-en-scène and the heightened constrictions on content in effect engine an earnestly emotional response, from an audience that recognizes the limits and myopias of the cultural past as seen through the fractured mirror of film history.

## The Pathos of Obsolescence

The melancholia underlying the genre of the family melodrama also gets reinstated through a longing for a lost film historical moment in the work of Paul Thomas Anderson. The historiographic predilections of *BOOGIE NIGHTS* illustrate some of its affectionate appropriation of 1970s film culture. *BOOGIE NIGHTS* presents itself as a period film that unceremoniously unveils the misunderstood milieu of American pornographic filmmaking in 1970s California. Fictionalizing porn figures such as John Holmes – who Mark Wahlberg (former pop star Marky Mark) dramatizes as Dirk Diggler – Anderson recasts the impulses of the porn industry into a melodramatic narrative of belonging, class aspiration, stardom, and the much longed for “American Dream.” The film emerges to resemble a reworked combination of *GOODFELLAS* (USA: Martin Scorsese, 1990) and *NASHVILLE* (USA: Robert Altman, 1975) for the vintage porn set. Serving to banalize the purveyors of the obscene, Anderson inverts the presumed sordidness of pornography into a sensibility of innocuous naiveté. Howard Hampton, writing in *Film Comment* suggests the extent to which the film operates as a throwback to the ideological currents of classical Hollywood.

Instead of chaotic perversity lurking beneath society's respectable facades, Anderson gives us a sex industry where outward sleaze masks a secret lust for normality and convention. *BOOGIE NIGHTS* shares with its characters a yearning for the incestual-family trappings of post-Victorian hypocrisy.... Timid anti-Puritan pretensions aside, *BOOGIE NIGHTS*' satire turns out to be more old-fashioned than Hawks.<sup>12</sup>

The tenuousness of the film's narrative universe depends on the audience's knowledge of the fate of the porn industry and its rerouting from celluloid to video format. As a result, *Boogie Nights* possesses an overwhelming fixation with the “dated” status of 1970s porn; it is its very outmoded quality that imbues the film with bittersweet melancholia and wistful tragedy, as the obsolescence of porn on film becomes an allegory for various characters' mistakes, delusions and frailties. The characters are already relics in the late 1970s, as Anderson compresses the aspirations of early 1970s porno chic with the disco

depredations of the late 1970s. Jack Horner's (Burt Reynolds) elaborate longings, to make narrative films which compel the viewer to stay even after they've jerked off to the sex scenes is itself an anachronism from the early 1970s. Circa 1972, in the era of *DEEP THROAT* (USA: Gerard Damiano, 1972), the dream of making narrative features with explicit sex was still a potentiality, not yet closed off by definitions of obscenity that deferred to states' rights, when legal clamp-downs on traveling prints sent a chill through the industry and deferred its more lofty hopes of cross-over cinematic appeal.

In *BOOGIE NIGHTS*, anachronism, obsolescence, and failure get thematized in the emergence of video, and the extinction of porn on film. Both Jack Horner's desire to make "legitimate" films and his refusal to change with the times also marks him as a casualty of historical and industrial change, and it is a judgment the audience recognizes in advance of the film's ending. Horner's character perhaps mirrors Thomas Greene's figure who emblemizes the "pathetic/tragic" anachronism – as Horner is visibly alienated by the porn industry's insistence on technological "progress."

On the narrative level, the film engenders a sense of pathos for the banal everyday dreams of the members of Horner's porn commune – for example the African-American porn actor Buck Swope's (Don Cheadle) insistent desire to dress like a cowboy and open a hi-fi stereo store, in Julianne Moore's character's wishful assignation of herself as a mother figure to the errant flock of porn children, and in Dirk Diggler's working-class aspirations for fame and greatness. On the level of *mise-en-scène*, pathos is not too far from nostalgia, in the fetishization of historical objects and signs. Consider for example the tracking shot through Dirk Diggler's new house once he has hit the big time as a porn star – the indulgence in *décor* and 1970s fashion, the *outré* wall hangings, burnt ochre and rust color schemes of his bachelor pad – seem to directly address the audience's and author's historical knowledge, their retro-kitsch sensibilities, their cultural memories of the recent past, as well as their screen memories of New Hollywood style. Anderson, in *MAGNOLIA* (USA: 1999) and *BOOGIE NIGHTS*, appropriates and recycles certain narrative devices from his New Hollywood predecessors. From Altman, Anderson borrows the ambling, disconnected storylines and the use of elaborate ensemble casts. And from Scorsese one can see some cinematographic techniques – spatially mobile tracking and dolly shots, long following shots, such as the homage to the Copacabana scene in *GOODFELLAS*, echoed in the camera movements through Diggler's new house.

The use of sound in *BOOGIE NIGHTS* also plays into the larger anachronistic strategy, in the sampling of pop songs of the 1970s and 1980s, and the express associations they invoke in popular memory. As Kelly Ritter compellingly argues, *BOOGIE NIGHTS* is an instantiation of the musical genre, reconstructed for the 1990s, in which popular music orchestrates the affective landscape of An-

derson's 1970s. In the film, Ritter claims, "there is no attempt to make a spectator feel visually part of the action; rather, one is a historical observer, watching time and lives go by quite separately."<sup>13</sup> While the visual presentation of the film connotes an element of historical distance, the use of popular songs of the period, such as *Boogie Shoes* and *Jesse's Girl*, create a conflict with the manifest and relatively detached images. Ritter argues that this tension refutes and demythologizes the historical associations of the musical with a "utopian sensibility." The deployment of music in Anderson's film complicates the audience's desire to seamlessly enter the diegesis, a spectatorial mode often encouraged by the song-and-dance conventions of the traditional Hollywood musical.

In an anachronistic violation which both puzzled and outraged critics, P.T. Anderson's follow-up film *MAGNOLIA*, in its nod to the classical musical, toys with the possibility of reinstating this utopian mode. The *SHORT CUTS*-style narrative, that follows a group of disconnected characters through a night of their lives in Los Angeles, offers a cathartic scene in which all of the disparate characters, in separate locations in the diegesis, begin to sing along in unison with an extra-diegetic song, Aimee Mann's *Wise Up*. The scene's intentional rupture of filmic space, in its commingling of extra-diegetic and diegetic worlds, becomes a very confrontational mode of address to its audience. This anomalous moment in the film, precedes another pronounced instance of frame-breaking, when a torrent of frogs falls on the dark town, in a hyperbolically biblical moment of magical realism. Anderson's willingness to privilege disjunction and disruption over seamless flow of narrative has been branded pretentious and self-congratulatory. However, one could argue that the sing-along effect invites the audience towards a measure of self-reflexivity but also back into a mode of affective absorption, almost as a function of their incredulity. Desiring an audience-text relation from the historical past by appropriating the means of the musical genre, *MAGNOLIA* stages a performance of synchronicity between disconnected characters. This performed synchronicity between characters paradoxically threatens to disrupt narrative cohesion and continuity, as the overarching melodramatic realism of the film is made suddenly "implausible." Through the orchestrated sing-along, the characters and the film acknowledge and direct their attention outwards to the extra-diegetic – a space which is usually the exclusive domain of the audience, and implicitly the filmmaker. Thus, in both this example from *MAGNOLIA* and in *BOOGIE NIGHTS* as a whole, Anderson utilizes anachronistic forms and themes in order to renegotiate a relationship to his audience – forcing the 1990s viewer to reconsider their own historical positioning in relation to film history and popular cultural memory.

## Melancholy Objects, Out of Place

We can see a further dispersal of the function of anachronism into a sustained aesthetic approach which dominates the *mise-en-scène* in the work of Wes Anderson, whose earlier features included *BOTTLE ROCKET* (USA: 1996) and *RUSHMORE* (USA: 1998). Anderson's style appears the most disjunctive in its aesthetic strategies and in its use of cultural objects and historical referents, while extending and expanding some of the impulses of Paul Thomas Anderson's fetishization of historical signs. Wes Anderson's *THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS* produces a literalized storybook world in which a dysfunctional New York family, with three grown-up child geniuses (Gwyneth Paltrow, Ben Stiller, Luke Wilson) and an archaeologist mother (Anjelica Huston), attempts to reconcile with a ne'er-do-well patriarch (Gene Hackman). Again the thematics of failure, within a melodramatic mode, align with a larger anachronistic aesthetic strategy.

The *mise-en-scène*, constituted through static tableaux and the precisely peculiar arrangement of setting and props, privileges flatness and the accumulation of historical objects as signs of melancholia and lost promise. The film is most often lauded as a triumph of art direction and production design. The acknowledgement of Anderson's tactics of aesthetic and stylistic control is often paired with a criticism of his film's lack of character development and narrational depth. In the fashion of a diorama, a dollhouse or an antique store display window, Anderson arrays and fetishistically accumulates disparate historical objects and forces them into one plastic plane and narrative universe.

In a manner similar to *FAR FROM HEAVEN* and *BOOGIE NIGHTS*, the emotional investments and affective energies of the viewer are directed, shunted to the space of the *mise-en-scène* itself. Each filmic element – for example, Chas and his sons' red track suits, the use of titling in the style of 1960s sans serif Bauhaus style typeface, the eclectic furniture, wood tones and pink-walled décor of the Tenenbaum home, the multiple associations of 1960s and 1970s New York, the uses of counterculturally rich songs such as The Beatles' *Hey Jude*, Paul Simon's *Me & Julio Down by the Schoolyard*, and Nico's *These Days* and the literary allusions to the narrative worlds of J.D. Salinger, John Irving, and the *New Yorker Magazine* of the 1940s, as well as the various Hollywood stars employed – all of these referents are drawn attention to as singular and irreconcilable, at the same time that a hermetic and enclosed world is cobbled together from them, in their repetition and accumulation. Each individual object – for example Richie's dated 70s tennis headband – brings the viewer to recollect and discern the location of the object in its original place in the past, within a particular historical period or distinct text. There is a certain desire to relocate these objects back to their

own historical or literary place – to place the trinket back on the shelf where it belongs – at the same time as the element is alienated in its current narrative context.

It is interesting that the narrative itself is shot through with nostalgia and mourning for the days of the Tenenbaum children's glorious childhoods. Ostensibly, the Tenenbaums children grew up in the 1970s, and now 22 years later, we are left with them in a presumably mutual present. However, the film's aesthetic format and *mise-en-scène*, attenuated by the children's refusal to grow up, produces a kind of visual arrested development. Margot perennially wears the same mink coat and heavy eyeliner she has had on since childhood, Richie persists in wearing his tennis clothes even after his tennis career is over, Chas and his sons are always in their red track suits. All return to live in their untouched childhood rooms. The uniformity of their demeanor across time lends the feeling of the "homey, familiar quality of the Sunday funnies,"<sup>14</sup> an abstract sense that aligns the film with the more graphic and flat space of children's drawings, comic strips, and pop-up storybooks. Yet it also creates a sensation of time suspended through the consistent organization of objects in space.

One such example comes in a crucial moment which breaks the film's mode of visual narration and pace of editing, as Margot Tenenbaum's past dalliances and secret identities are revealed, cued by the opening of her case file at a private detective's office. This fast paced montage sequence is scored to the 1970s Ramones' song *Judy Is a Punk*. One might ask: where is the anachronism located here? It seems that Gwyneth Paltrow is herself the anachronism, connecting through her erotic presence and match-on-action kisses, a series of utterly disconnected scenarios of culturally and socially diverse lovers. Her presence makes the space of the frame look "contemporary" while the relation between each of her partners is based on a principle of utter discontinuity – a Jamaican rasta, a mohawk-wielding punk rocker, a Papua New Guinea tribesman, her book publicity agent, a greaser, a ferry worker, a Parisian lesbian, and her childhood friend, the self-styled urban cowboy Eli Cash. Intruding into each of their discrete spaces in the *mise-en-scène* to form a narrative of an embrace, Margot's presence operates as both anachronistic disjunction and sequential continuity. The Ramones' song, its own singular object, at first seems to stabilize the historical time in the 1970s; the song is further inscribed with a punk gesture as it gets narrationally matched with Margot's first act of rebellion – covert smoking. Yet each subsequent scene further creates a conflict between the historicity of the song, the references supplied by the visual image and the tones of sexual transgression. The Rive Gauche lesbian scene seems to both reference 1960s New Wave cinema and Jacques Tati's *PLAYTIME* (France: 1967), in the reflection of the Eiffel Tower in the glass. Cultural and historical space begins to stand in for time in this hyperbolic narrativization of Margot's sexual history, with the sans

serif type titles indicating Margot's age and her location at each cut. We finally return to the anchor of the present in the final segment with Eli on the train, and to the immediate present, as the file abruptly closes and we are back in the detective's office, where Raleigh St. Clair, Margot's estranged husband states merely, "She smokes."

We might claim that the anachronisms of Wes Anderson are ones of uniting periods and elements which should be separated. On the other hand, this juxtaposition and fetishistic almost collector-oriented accumulation of signs and objects creates a narrative world which becomes in some sense "timeless." New York is constructed as a mythical location, where landmarks are intentionally invisible, where the expanse of the city stretches all the way up to 375th Street and is overrun by innumerable gypsy cabs. The fantasy construction of the storybook reinforces this notion of "timelessness" at the same time that it poses a question to what Anderson's relationship to history might be. Thomas Greene's definitions might pose another question, is this an abusive – ahistorical – or naive – with no historical control – anachronism? Anachronistic detail, while still recognized as such, is repeated and collected visually to the point of a break with a position of historical specificity, as it becomes a fully fledged plastic space of fantasy, placed outside of time because it is irreconcilable with any one moment or period.

Wes Anderson's *THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS* points to one extreme in the deployment of these anachronisms, as manifesting a desire to rework the material remains of the past into a creative fiction, while still retaining the unique pastness of these objects and texts in their circulation, repeated viewings and affective accumulation. Wes Anderson's predilection for objects and settings, for the texture of *mise-en-scène*, resonates with Todd Haynes and P.T. Anderson as well, who are meticulous, and studies in their aesthetics of *décor*, lighting, acting, makeup, and costume. Vivian Sobchack, reflecting on the nature of historical representations in films returns to the affective weight of objects and visual details, as carriers of historical meaning. Sobchack concludes:

They at least, through their material means and the concrete purchase they give us on an absent past, make us care... sometimes the representation of phenomenal "things" like dirt and hair are, *in medias res*, all we have to hold on to – are where our purchase on temporality and its phenomenological possibilities as "history" are solidly grasped and allow us a place, a general premise, a ground (however base) from which to transcend our present and imagine the past as once having "real" existential presence and value.<sup>15</sup>

Although none of the films discussed are traditional historical films, their utilization of material things, within the texture of the *mise-en-scène*, and of film historical referents, gives the audience a sense of the palpability of history, even

if the means through which the directors present that history is rendered through a rather stylized artifice. With narratives built around flawed characters and tropes of failure and loss, the obsolete and the anachronistic become tools for recognizing the meaningful gaps between past and present. What perhaps this sensibility which favors anachronism offers is the cinematic instantiation of a "historiographical consciousness,"<sup>16</sup> not in the service of writing history, but with the aim of using historical signs as a means for creating affecting fictions which can question the past from a new location. The nostalgic or retrospective tone of Todd Haynes, P.T. Anderson, and Wes Anderson's works reflects both a current of sincerity specifically tempered by an ironic detachment. In *THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS*, Eli Cash, the western novelist and Tenenbaum's neighbor, appears on a talk show, in which he is asked whether his new novel *Old Custer* is not in fact written in an "obsolete vernacular." Eli is puzzled and stupefied, yet this scene in a sense names the preoccupations of the film and by extension those of *BOOGIE NIGHTS* and *FAR FROM HEAVEN*; it is a persistent interest in making that which is forgotten, lost or outmoded, speak to us from beyond the grave.

## Notes

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