

Notes on Quirky



Buzzword or sensibility?

The word 'quirky' has become unavoidable in virtually all the discourses surrounding a certain kind of recent American movie. For instance, from the world of marketing: the Region 2 DVD cover of Hal Hartley's *The Unbelievable Truth* (1989) describes the film as a 'quirky, offbeat love story', whilst *The Squid and The Whale's* (2005) blurb tells us it is 'quirky, wisely written'. Meanwhile, in fan discussions, an *Amazon.com* review from a user called 'K. Harris' dubs *Little Miss Sunshine* (2005) a 'quirky indie comedy' ('Customer Review', 2006: 1), and 'adambatman82' on the *Empire* magazine's online forum advises another user that, 'If you want to explore quirky comedy drama properly I would fully recommend *Me, You and Everyone We Know* (2005) ... *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007) and any Jim Jarmusch' ('Recommendations', 2009: 1). Within the realm of journalistic film criticism: the website *All Movie Guide* calls *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) 'a quirky, offbeat comedy' (Tobey, 2005: 1), *The Radio Times* identifies *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) as one of many other 'quirky American comedies' (Hughes, 2004: 1), and *The Sun* describes *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* (2004) as a 'quirky new comedy' ('Must-Sea', 2008: 1). In the broadsheets: *The New York Times*' Janet Maslin labels *Being John Malkovich* (1999) the 'exhilaratingly quirky first feature by Spike Jonze' (1999: 1), in *The Guardian* Peter Bogdanovich similarly describes Wes Anderson as a 'quirky and original director' (2002: 1), and for Stephen Applebaum in *The Independent*, '[w]atching one of Michel Gondry's films can be a surreal, quirky and idiosyncratic experience' (2009: 1). From the field of film studies: Yannis Tzioumakis tells us in *American Independent Cinema: an Introduction* that from the mid-90s, '[s]upported by an increasingly expansive institutional apparatus ... low budget, edgier, offbeat and quirky pictures were ... in a position to find a large enough audience to return substantial profits' (2006: 282), while Geoff King also uses the word three times over the space of two pages in *American Independent Cinema* to describe the narrative, visual style, and characters of *Bottle Rocket* (1996) (2005: 135-6). As for the filmmakers: Mike Mills, director of *Thumbsucker*

(2005), complains that his movie was 'just lumped into this quirky independent box' (Wyse, 2005: 1), and Jim Jarmusch, confronted with the term by an interviewer, exclaims, 'Man, is that the only adjective they know? ... It's like every time I make a goddamn movie, the word 'quirky' is hauled out ... Now I see it's being applied to Wes Anderson, too. All of a sudden, his films are quirky ... It's just so goddamn lazy' (O'Hagan, 2005: 1).¹

A lazy word it may be, but – whether used for approbation or (increasingly) abuse – it now seems virtually inescapable. An explanation for its prevalence might be that, since on one level the term is merely a vague avatar of difference, it can be exploited to any number of ends. For example, for marketing purposes 'quirky' suggests a film to be a unique, and therefore desirable, product – though simultaneously not *so* unique as to discourage those who might be repelled by descriptions such as 'strange', or 'avant-garde'. For critics, the word conveniently allows them to express both a film's distance from one assumed 'norm', and its relationship with another set of aesthetic conventions. Finally, as some audience research into 'indie' film tentatively implies, a term like 'quirky' may help provide fans with 'a sense of belonging to a particular kind of interpretative community' (King, 2009: 31), specifically one that is 'at or beyond the margins' (Barker, 2008: 1).

If 'quirky' were purely a catch-all word denoting any deviation from an equally ill-defined abstraction called 'the Hollywood mainstream' it would barely be worth consideration. However, while it certainly *can* be used as merely the 'tedious buzzword' ('Fall', 2009: 1) some have accused it of being, this article will argue that it may also in fact be the best shorthand we have to describe a demonstrable trend that emerged in American cinema during the 90s and 00s, and which has so far received little attention from film studies. In order to make my case I will henceforth be using the term to refer to one relatively distinct strand of the contemporary American film landscape: specifically, the particular kinds of comedies and comedy-dramas conjured up by the names referred to in my opening paragraph.² I will argue that such films share a number of conventions, and that these conventions – which

may be used in greater or lesser numbers, and with greater or lesser degrees of emphasis – together contribute to what I am choosing to call the quirky *sensibility*.

Defining such a seemingly intangible thing as a sensibility is difficult. As Susan Sontag put it in her famous ‘Notes on Camp’, ‘a sensibility is almost, *but not quite*, ineffable’ (1969: 267).³ Although there are many potential approaches to such a task, it seems obvious that none should begin in earnest without first having a firm sense of what the quirky looks, sounds, and feels like. If we do not initially decide upon which films *are* quirky, then it cannot be expected that we will analyse, for example, their historical lineage, industrial position, audience, or ideology with any degree of rigour or sensitivity. This article will for the most part offer a preliminary (and necessarily partial) delineation of the quirky that attempts to define it along primarily aesthetic lines. It is my hope that this groundwork will form a starting point from which future enquiry may then expand in different directions.

It should be clear that this project requires that I take an approach to my subject that is attuned both to the particular and the general. As an aesthetic, quirky can only be identified and analysed by engaging at a detailed level with the individual moments and textures of films. However, since I am claiming this trend as relatively widespread, it will also be necessary periodically to move to a broader view that allows me to suggest (without always going into depth) where similar strategies may be found in other movies. A much longer piece would be necessary to prove that all the films mentioned practise the quirky as I am defining it, though it is hoped that in the context of my wider argument they will serve as convincingly suggestive examples.

Problems of definition

What sort of a category is quirky? I have so far called it a sensibility, and this term undoubtedly does catch something particular about it, in part because of its convenient vagueness. Is it possible to be more specific than this? In some ways, I see the problems of categorising quirky as similar to those surrounding *film noir*: we may know it when we see it, but it can become rather difficult to demonstrate its boundaries or constituent parts. Like *film noir*, quirky is not a genre, yet is also consistently drawn to certain genres. Similarly, it may often contain particular kinds of characters and settings, yet this doesn’t seem a necessity. It is associated with certain stylistic conventions, yet is not reducible to them. It may express particular recurrent themes, though – again – this is not essential. As is the case with *noir*, it becomes tempting to reach for indeterminate metaphors such as ‘worldview’ or ‘attitude’ to capture quirky’s essence.

This would suggest that a key factor here is the notoriously tricky concept of *tone*. In his recent work on this subject, Douglas Pye describes tone as being a result of ‘the ways in which the film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs’ (2007: 7). Later in the same study he expands on this definition, stressing ‘the pervasive evaluative and affective orientations implied by the film’ (2007: 76). Both these descriptions can help us to understand the workings of quirky, which seems to me to make its presence felt most clearly in the perspective it takes to its characters, worlds, and conventions, and the corresponding relationship that this perspective encourages between film and viewer. Proceeding from this assumption, this article will first discuss quirky in relation to mode,

style, and thematic preoccupation, before ultimately building towards a definition that stresses the centrality of tone. This progression has been chosen because I believe that the generic, stylistic, and thematic traits shared by many quirky movies are important enough to earn a place in a definition of the sensibility, yet also prove finally subservient to tonal register, since all contribute in different ways to this register’s construction, as I shall attempt to show. This is due to the fact that, as Pye says,

Tone seems intuitively to belong to the ‘how’ of any discourse, the manner in which a story is told or an experience related, yet in analysis it rapidly becomes evident that the distinction between ‘how’ and ‘what’ is unsustainable. The choice of subject matter and all the specific decisions taken in creating every aspect of the fictional world, its characters and events, inevitably have effects on ... tone. (2007: 29)

When discussing mode, style, and theme, then, I will thus in fact also be implicitly discussing matters relevant to tone; my observations regarding these aspects of the films will be important to bear in mind while progressing from topic to topic.

It should be said that I am not interested in proposing a box that one film or another may simply fit into or not, but rather a sliding scale of representational possibilities. While this article will set out a number of conventions that I see as strongly tied to the quirky, there seems no reason to suggest that a film need employ every one of them in order for us to recognise it as sharing in the sensibility. It may use many, which would place it towards one end of the spectrum, or it may use merely one, which will place it towards the other. Incidentally, it should be noted that, although the films singled out for close analysis in this article (*Punch-Drunk Love*, *The Royal Tenenbaums* [2001], *The Science of Sleep* [2006], and *Adaptation* [2002]) sit nearer to what I consider the centre of the scale, those mentioned in passing may indicate quirky’s limits.

Quirky and Comedy

In a scene from *Punch-Drunk Love*, Barry Egan (Adam Sandler), the lonely and put-upon brother of seven overbearing sisters, stands in a hallway in front of Walter (Robert Smigel), the husband of one of his siblings. In low tones, he apologises to Walter for having just smashed all the windows in his dining room in an absurd overreaction to his sisters’ childish teasing. This act has been the first evidence of the impotent rage lurking within the otherwise shy and soft-spoken Barry. We have cut abruptly to this muted scene from the height of the pandemonium that inevitably followed Barry’s outburst, incredulous choruses of ‘What the *fuck* is your problem?’ and ‘You *fucking retard*, Barry!’ suddenly giving way to the hushed embarrassment of this fumbling, yet oddly understated, apology. ‘I’m sorry about that’, says Barry. ‘I’m sorry about what I did’. ‘It’s alright’, nods Walter, seemingly unfazed. Barry shifts his weight awkwardly, exhales, and looks down at the floor. He is trying to build up enough courage to broach the real subject. ‘I wanted to ask you something’, he says, looking back up, ‘because you’re a doctor’. ‘Yeah ...’ agrees Walter, slightly hesitantly. Barry exhales another fractured, frightened breath that acts to visibly deflate him. He goes on, ‘I don’t *like* myself sometimes ...’. There is an uncomfortable and long pause; Barry straightens himself up slightly, perhaps hopefully: ‘... Can you help me?’. There is another silence. Walter considers how best to respond.

'Barry, I'm a dentist ...' eventually comes the reply, 'What kind of help do you think I can give you?'. In a few moments, having been pressed to explain what exactly is wrong, Barry confides, 'I sometimes cry a lot ... For no reason', then immediately bursts into silent, congested tears, instinctively covers his face with his hands, and retreats in shame to an adjacent room.



As I have already suggested, the quirky is closely related to the comedic. Its films may fuse comedy and melodrama very intimately (e.g.: *Sideways* [2004], *The Squid and the Whale*, *Lars and the Real Girl*), or they may be more 'pure' comedies (e.g.: *I ♥ Huckabees* [2004], *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Be Kind Rewind* [2008]), but a commitment to a certain comedic mode seems key to the sensibility.⁴ One obvious marker of the relationship with comedy is the number of actors with backgrounds in stand-up and sketch-comedy who have starred in quirky films, such as Bill Murray (all Wes Anderson's films from *Rushmore* [1998] onwards, *Broken Flowers* [2005]), Will Ferrell (*Winter Passing* [2005], *Stranger Than Fiction* [2006]), Jim Carrey (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [2004]), Adam Sandler (*Punch-Drunk Love*), Ben Stiller (*The Royal Tenenbaums*), Steve Carell (*Little Miss Sunshine*), Jack Black (*Be Kind Rewind*), and Maya Rudolph (*Away We Go* [2009]).⁵ This attachment to an essentially comedic mode, however heavily qualified by melodramatic elements, is undoubtedly one of the reasons why quirky has proved one of the more popular sensibilities in American 'indie' cinema. Equally, when the quirky is criticised, its connection to the supposedly inoffensive mode of comedy also tends to be treated as a cause for scorn, used as evidence of a timid and comforting safeness that stops these films from ever becoming truly transgressive: '[q]uirk is odd, but not *too* odd', says Michael Hirschorn in a 2007 piece from the *Atlantic Monthly* called 'Quirked Around'; '[t]hat would take us all the way to *weird*, and there someone might get hurt' (2007: 1). Similarly, in a review of *Juno* (2007) that makes reference to Hirschorn's article, Elbert Ventura contemptuously characterises the sensibility's ethos as, '[p]lay everything for laughs, make sure it's weird but not too weird ... as long as it's funny' (2007: 1).

Having acknowledged the comedic nature of these films, however, we must first ask what approach is being taken to the comedy. The scene from *Punch-Drunk Love* described above provides us with some hints. Barry's apology for the havoc he has just wreaked is an example of an understated style of deadpan that we find across a number of the films. It is dry, perfunctory, excessively functional, taking a situation and line that we might expect to be made dramatic (particularly following the hysteria of the previous scene) and downplaying them almost to the point of absurdity.⁶ We could name numerous other examples like this: in *Rushmore*, Max (Jason Schwartzman) calmly tells Herbert (Bill Murray), 'I was going to try to have that tree over there fall on you'. 'That big one?' asks Herbert, unruffled,



'That would've flattened me like a pancake'. The titular character of *Lonesome Jim* (2005) (Casey Affleck) responds to some terrible news his father gives him by asking, almost unrhethorically, 'Are you joking?'. 'Does it *look* like I'm joking?' counters his father (Seymour Cassel). 'I don't know', replies Jim, 'Maybe'. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, surly teenager Dwayne (Paul Dano), who has taken a vow of silence, writes 'I Hate Everyone' on his notepad. 'What about your family?' asks Frank (Steve Carell); Dwayne underlines the last word of his message. Such humour mines a tradition of deadpan that achieves its effect through deliberate incongruity, juxtaposing histrionic subject matter with dampened execution, draining expected emotions from the potentially melodramatic. A similar approach is also evident in the quirky's fondness for playing inflated artistic pretension for laughs: 'Get the rage on the page', advises awful poet and poetry teacher Deirdre (Annette Bening) in *Running With Scissors* (2006). 'It's my response to the issue of a woman's right to choose', declares an art student in *Ghost World* (2001) of her sculpture consisting of two coat-hangers: 'It's something I feel super-strongly about'. 'You don't know how lucky you are being a monkey', failing puppeteer Craig (John Cusak) tells his pet in *Being John Malkovich*, 'Because consciousness is a terrible curse ... All I ask in return is the opportunity to do my work. And they won't allow it; because I raise *issues*'.

Such comedy, which is emphatically based on distancing our knowledge and emotional experience from those of the characters, might suggest that the quirky's preferred comic style is primarily a cold or detached one. Yet the deadpan moment in *Punch-Drunk Love* is then quickly followed by another kind of comedy also often favoured by the sensibility: an uncomfortable and painful humour resulting from a character's emotional distress being situated as simultaneously pathetic *and* poignant. We are encouraged (mainly through the nuances of Sandler's performance) genuinely to feel Barry's deep vulnerability when he admits to depression and asks for help, then nevertheless be amused when the 'dentist' punchline arrives, before finally letting out a laugh that stems mostly from surprise and empathetic embarrassment when he bursts into inopportune tears. There is, then, a dual register of feeling to this comedy that requires us to both laugh at Barry's situation and feel an allegiance with him: we are invited to laugh not at his pain, but only perhaps a little at his naïveté (asking a dentist for professional advice on mental health), and the unbearable awkwardness of his predicament. It is a testament to this fact that when Barry starts crying we are likely to want him to escape Walter's gaze as much as he himself does: we laugh, in a sense, partly out of a nervous desire for the cause of the laughter to stop. This kind of awkward emotional comedy is evident across many quirky films. For example, the entire narrative of *Lars and the Real Girl* revolves around the repressed and delusional Lars' (Ryan Gosling) relationship with a sex doll he believes to be real, a set-up exploited concurrently for

humour and pathos. In *Buffalo '66* (1998) the equal parts narcissistic and depressive Billy Brown (Vincent Gallo) begins to feel nauseous at the thought of seeing his unloving parents again, asking his companion Layla (Christina Ricci), 'Would you hold me for a second?' before immediately pushing her away with a petulant cry of, 'Don't touch me!'. In *Year of the Dog* (2007), Peggy (Molly Shannon), a woman who feels infinitely more comfortable with pets than people, answers the question of whether she has ever been married with 'No, no ... That, I mean, I never, you know, I guess I never ... that ... *that* ... that never happened. But I think some people just aren't as ... *you* know. I don't know ... It's like that, I guess' while her date (John C. Reilly) looks on, perplexed. This, then, is a comedy inextricably fused with relating to pain and embarrassment, and, as such, with empathy.

Another style of comedy commonly used by the quirky is slapstick. At one moment in *Punch-Drunk Love* Barry finishes a phone call in his office, plays a few calming notes on the harmonium he has on his desk, turns to exit the room, and strides forcefully into a closed glass door with a muffled yelp of pain. He takes a step back, shakes out his right arm in an exaggerated gesture of nonchalance, and continues calmly on his journey. Such physical comedy often occurs in quirky films. For instance, in *Lars and the Real Girl*, Lars is given a flower with the instruction to give it to 'someone nice'; when a girl who has previously shown interest in him (Kelli Garner) then greets him warmly, he becomes petrified, flings the flower roughly away (with an accompanying slightly exaggerated sound effect), and runs off stiffly and at speed. In *I ♥ Huckabees*, environmental activist Albert (Jason Schwartzman) makes an anti-corporate protest by planting a baby sapling in a mall car park, only for a security guard to come running suddenly into frame and, with a cry of 'You don't plant no tree in the parking lot!', energetically take him out with a clothes-line. In *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, Steve (Bill Murray), disappointed that a rescue mission has failed, tells his crew (with a too-apt pun on the fact that they are in an abandoned hotel), 'Alright, let's *check out*', before toppling head over heels down a staircase. Isolated instances of this type of comedy tend to emerge completely unannounced in quirky films. They surprise us with their suddenness and seeming inappropriateness in a manner not usually available to more conventional 'slapstick comedies' (which come with

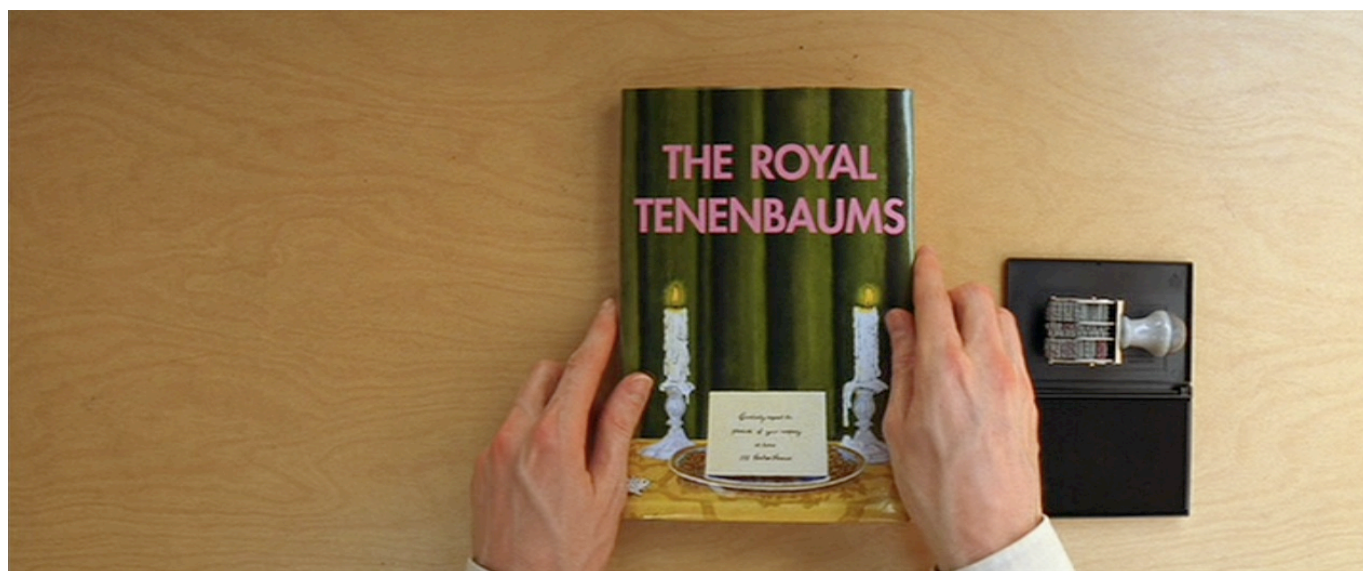
expectations that such gags will regularly occur), and thus help establish a faint sense of surrealism through their incongruity. Although these moments need not necessarily arise frequently within individual films, they can have a diffuse influence on our relationship with the action, bringing with them a hint of the absurd, making us understand that we are to an extent dealing with a special kind of 'artificial' world in which slapstick like this may occur without any real consequences.

While none of these approaches is in itself unique to the quirky, I would suggest that their particular construction here, and the common decision to combine them in one film, is. The effect for the viewer of relating to characters in a manner allowing for this particular brand of deadpan, as well as this kind of acutely awkward comedy of embarrassment, *as well as*, occasionally, slapstick is one that I would argue is relatively uncommon outside of the sensibility. It is, crucially, a comic address that requires we view the fiction as simultaneously absurd *and* moving, the characters as pathetic *and* likeable, the world as manifestly artificial *and* believable. The tensions resulting from this effect are very important for the construction of tone, as I will explore shortly. First, though, I will discuss another element of the films whose handling also has tonal ramifications: style.

Quirky and Style

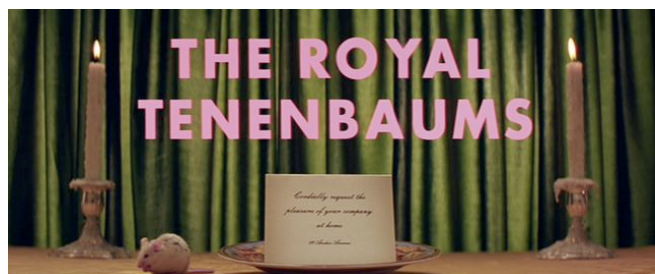
Richard Maltby once suggested that, 'whatever *film noir* is, *Out of the Past* is undoubtedly *film noir*' (1992: 39). That is to say: here is a film that captures so much of what we instinctively think of as *noir* that, whatever definition of the term we use, it must be one that positions *Out of the Past* (1947) at or near its centre. Paraphrasing Maltby, we might say that, whatever quirky is, *The Royal Tenenbaums* is undoubtedly quirky. Indeed, the work of Wes Anderson as a whole would seem to provide us with the most consistent, as well as probably the most extreme, embodiment of the quirky sensibility.

The self-described 'Prologue' of Anderson's third film constitutes a veritable crash course in the stylistic conventions of the quirky, albeit in one of its more exaggerated incarnations. The film begins with an overhead close-up of a pair of hands placing a book entitled *The Royal Tenenbaums* onto a table. The book's front cover carries a painting of an immaculate table set up in front of a



The opening shot of The Royal Tenenbaums (Wes Anderson, 2001)

green curtain; in the very centre of the table sits an invitation card, and equidistant on its left and right stand two ornate candlesticks. A second pair of hands enter from the opposite side of the frame, turn the book around 180 degrees, open it, stamp it with a library stamp, close it, and swivel it back round. We now cut through two production company credit screens placed against a backdrop of multiple, tiled images of this book's cover. From these, we cut to a live action recreation of the cover, the only difference being that the objects are now joined by a black-and-white spotted mouse sniffing around the tabletop, and



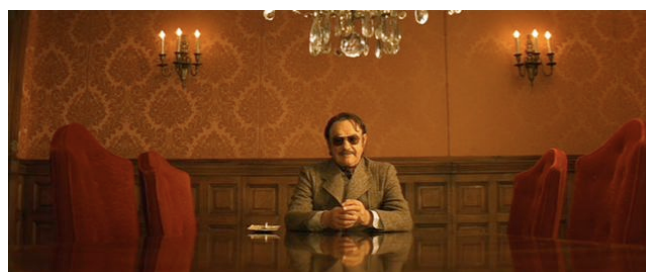
that it is now the film's own superimposed title credit that announces *The Royal Tenenbaums*. We move from this image to an extreme close-up of what we assume to be the first page of the book; the word 'Prologue' is superimposed next to a simple, cartoon-like line drawing of (we will soon discover) the three Tenenbaum children, and below are the first few lines of the book's text, which begin, 'Royal Tenenbaum bought the house on Archer Avenue in the winter of his 35th year'. There is then a cut to a close-up of a both incongruously grand and sweetly unsophisticated pink flag emblazoned with the letter 'T' (probably made by a Tenenbaum child) fluttering from a spire atop this house. Over this image, the voice of a narrator (Alec Baldwin) repeats the lines we have just read: 'Royal Tenenbaum bought the house on Archer Avenue in the winter of his 35th year'.



One of the first things one takes from this prologue is its extreme – one might say *excessive* – neatness. The business with the book, for example, has an extraordinary formality to it. The tabletop is a spotless, shiny surface, and the shot gives the impression of being pointedly 'flat', angled directly downwards, barely allowing us to see objects as three-dimensional. Once the first pair of hands has deposited the book they then retreat from the image as quickly as they entered so as not to clutter its composition. Both times the book is rotated on the spot the action is executed with geometric calculation, the spine only allowed to be at anything other than right angles to the frame (and the carefully-placed ink blotter) for the shortest of moments. The whole of the ten second shot bespeaks an overall fastidiousness that borders on the obsessive-compulsive. This aesthetic of exquisitely mannered tidiness is then replicated in the design of the book's cover, the tiled images on which the production credits appear, the dramatisation of the book's cover on the title screen, the tight close-up of the

opening page, and the fact that the spoken reference to the Tenenbaum house coincides with an image of a 'T'-initialed flag flying from this building.

It is also continued into the film's first scene, in which Royal (Gene Hackman) breaks to his three young children the news that he and their mother will be separating. Our first clear view of any of the film's characters is a flat medium-long shot of the three Tenenbaum children sitting at one end of a table and looking out towards the camera, evenly composed so that they each occupy almost exactly a third of the frame's horizontal plane. Three wooden panels



behind them match precisely the positioning of their heads, and two candlesticks flank Chas (Aram Aslanian-Persico), the central child, with meticulous exactitude. 'Are you getting divorced?' asks Margo (Irene Gorovaia). We now cut to the direct reverse-angle of this shot, showing the children's father, Royal, seated at the opposite end of the table, two pairs of chairs arranged at regular intervals between him and the camera, two lamps on the wall behind him placed at exactly corresponding distances from the edge of the frame, and a chandelier protruding in from the top and very centre of the image. 'At the moment, no', he answers, 'but – it doesn't look good'.

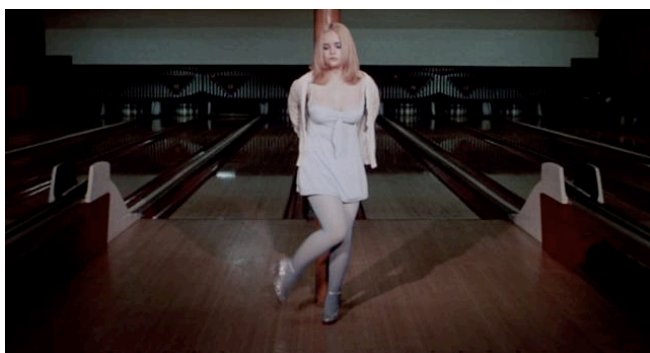
If a viewer of *The Royal Tenenbaums* were unfamiliar with Anderson's work or the quirky more broadly, it might come as a surprise to find that the excessive formality of the film's opening moments carries over into the style of this scene. The baldly presentational nature of the prologue thus far could easily be understood as a variation on the conventionally 'self-conscious' rhetoric often adopted by title sequences generally: its measured regularity, for instance, partially evokes the graphic arts in a manner not entirely unrelated to, say, a Saul Bass credit sequence. However, to discover that these formal strategies were instead merely the precursor to a stylistic register that will come to be used across the entire movie is to recognise that this will be a very particular kind of film. The links between the initial aesthetic and the presentation of the dramatic action proper begin during the establishing shot of the Tenenbaum house, which fleetingly reveals Margo, Chas, and Richie (Amedeo Turturro) framed by their respective windows in such a way as to recall the hand-drawn picture from the 'Prologue' title screen. Guided by this visual echo, it is then not difficult to see the influence of portraiture again on the next two shots (of the Tenenbaum children and Royal), both of which feel almost confrontational in their rigidly posed symmetry.⁷ This aesthetic has two immediate



Lena (Emily Watson) and Barry (Adam Sandler) kiss in *Punch Drunk Love* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2002)

effects on the way we view the scene. Firstly, it encourages us to grant at least as much attention to the precision of its representational strategies as we give the world it is representing. Secondly, it acts – rather like the style of deadpan addressed earlier – to incongruously flatten, and in the process make dryly comic, a situation that could easily be treated as deeply dramatic, or even tragic.

Similar shots to those of the Tenenbaum children and Royal are exceedingly common in Anderson's work, and also recur fairly regularly across the quirky landscape as a whole; that is: static, flat looking, medium-long or long shots that feel nearly geometrically even, depicting isolated or carefully arranged characters, sometimes facing directly out towards us, who are made to look faintly ridiculous or out-of-place by virtue of the composition's rigidity.⁸ For instance, in *Punch-Drunk Love*, Barry and Lena's (Emily Watson) first kiss in Hawaii is filmed with the couple in long shot, centre frame, and silhouetted against a window through which we have a view of a colourful and slightly too-neat beach; in *Buffalo '66*, when Layla performs a tap-dance in a bowling alley she is framed centrally in an extended long shot, facing out towards the camera, the receding lanes behind her acting to reinforce the image's



symmetry; the first shot of *Napoleon Dynamite* sees Napoleon standing centre frame at the end of a garden path, again facing directly forwards, the house behind him appearing flat, and the path running straight down the middle of the image. While such shots are not necessarily found in every quirky film – nor do other filmmakers use them so consistently as does Anderson – they are nevertheless common enough to be suggestive of the

sensibility's aesthetic inclinations. Like the uses of slapstick, they can also have a pervasive effect on our relationship with the rest of films they feature in, encouraging us to relate to the fictional world in a highly specific way.

Other than their neatness, one of the most striking aspects of these kinds of shots is their apparent 'self-consciousness'. This is brought out in part simply through the act of having characters look out towards the camera – not because this necessarily breaks an imaginary 'fourth wall', but because it is a convention unavoidably associated with styles of presentation (soliloquies, musical performances, speeches, newsreading, portraiture, etc.) involving an acknowledgement of the audience. The effect is to imply that these characters are facing this way *for us*. A rhetoric of 'self-consciousness' is also created through the fact that such overtly studied and meticulous compositions – sometimes, as in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, symmetrical virtually to a matter of millimetres – cannot help but encourage us to notice that they have been constructed especially for the camera (and for precisely *this angle*), thus forthrightly asking us to appreciate their staged and artificial nature.⁹



This kind of 'self-consciousness' demands to be related to the concept of the 'smart film', a term coined by Jeffrey Sconce. Sconce describes 'smart' as a trend in 90s and 00s 'indie' cinema – mostly made, he argues, by and for 'Generation X' – which identifies itself as being in opposition to the supposed 'dumbness' of contemporary Hollywood (2002: 350). I will return to this category in greater depth when I discuss the issue of tone, but

something important to engage with at this stage is Sconce's notion of smart's 'blank style', one aspect of which he identifies as, 'a form of 'tableau' presentation,' using 'static long-takes shot with straight-on, level framing' (2002: 359). Using Todd Haynes' *Safe* (1995) as his main example, Sconce argues that these kinds of shots create a 'dampened affect', signifying a 'dispassion, disengagement and disinterest', which ultimately 'cultivates a sense of distance in the audience' (2002: 359-60). While I do not believe that the quirky sensibility can be aligned with the extremes of 'dispassion' Sconce argues for (as I will explain later), it is certainly true that the stylistic features I have described do indeed court a degree of aesthetic 'distance'. This in turn can be linked with the prevalence of 'meta-cinematic' devices in these movies, such as films opening by showing us texts bearing the same name as those we are watching (*The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*), films beginning with theatre curtains opening onto

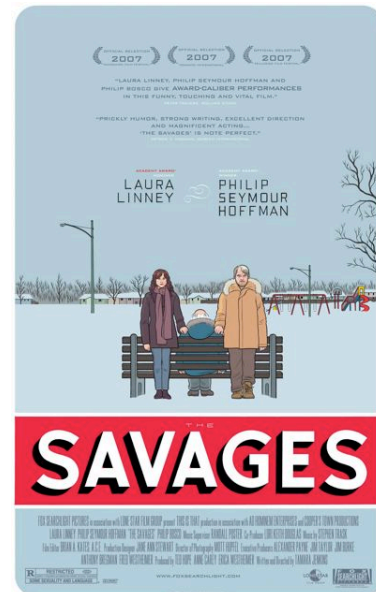


the action (*Rushmore*, *Being John Malkovich*), playful intertitles hinting at the hand of an omnipotent director (*The Unbelievable Truth*, *Magnolia* [1999]), films being about filmmakers (*Me, You and Everyone We Know*, *Be Kind Rewind*), the blurring of lines between characters and their real life counterparts (*Adaptation*, *American Splendor* [2003]), and distinctions between truth and fiction breaking down within narratives themselves (*Stranger Than Fiction*, *Synecdoche, New York* [2008]). Clearly, the pointed artificiality of some elements of the quirky's style must be seen as an extension of the sensibility's frequent eagerness to be seen as in some sense 'self-aware'.¹⁰

As well as conveying knowingness, however, there is another important, and almost contradictory, pull in these shots towards the construction of a particular kind of *naïveté*. The boldness, simplicity, and measured beauty of the compositions mean that they are largely untainted by the sense of disorder that will inevitably accompany any more 'realistic' a style. Indeed, it is central to how this aesthetic works that it makes messiness seem to be not only absent, but also feel consciously and overtly *resisted*, in favour of this neat artificiality. It forces us to be aware that neither in life, nor in many other live action movies, have places and people ever appeared quite so distilled or orderly. I would argue that this encourages us to see the compositions not only as excessively calculated, but also as somehow intentionally purified. It bespeaks an effort to remake the world in a less chaotic, more simplified, and, in a paradoxical sense, a more unaffected, form – one that in fact shares some family resemblances with various other non-cinematic media associated with the sensibility.

Comics are important here, particularly the alternative comics associated with artists and writers like Harvey Pekar and Daniel Clowes, whose works have been adapted into the films *American Splendor* and *Ghost World* respectively. By their nature as cartoons, the aesthetics of such comics are simplified and two-dimensional; they also characteristically take contemporary urban and suburban

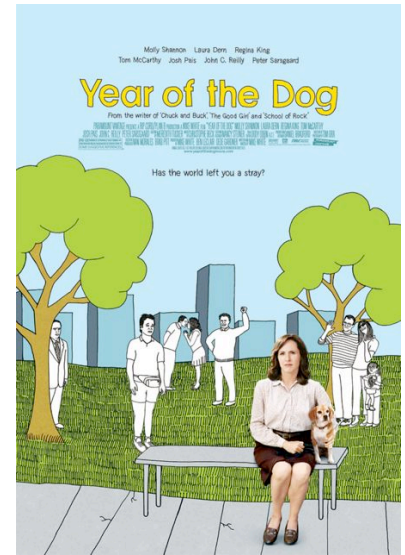
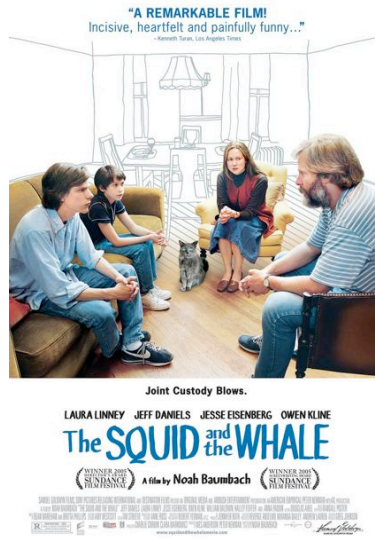
workaday America as their setting, thus continually rendering familiar and 'realistic' spaces 'unrealistic' (if also still determinedly mundane) via the imposition of this style. As well as occasionally inspiring the films themselves, drawings comparable to those used in these comics are common in the advertising for quirky movies: the poster for *The Savages* (2007), for example, was designed by the



cartoonist Chris Ware, and many others use the convention of placing a film's actors against a cartoon backdrop depicting an everyday setting (*Napoleon Dynamite*, *The Squid and the Whale*, *Year of the Dog*, *Lars and the Real Girl*, *Away We Go*).¹¹ Naïve, childlike line drawings are also relatively common to the quirky: as I have mentioned, *The Royal Tenenbaums* features one such drawing in its prologue, and also has the character of the younger Richie (Amedeo Turturro) paint multiple simplistic portraits of his adopted sister, Margo (Irene Gorrovaia); childish drawings are also found in *Pumpkin* (2002), *About Schmidt*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, and *Eagle vs. Shark* (2007).¹² Similarly, *Juno's*



opening credit sequence is an animation in an analogous style, and resolutely simple sketches of characters and objects are also the focus of posters for *Sideways* and *Thumbsucker*. Other visual forms we might relate to the 'purified' quirky aesthetic include the model theatres seen in *Being John Malkovich* and *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the hand-made toys, props and other amateurish *objet d'art* in Michel Gondry's *The Science of Sleep* and *Be Kind Rewind*, the childlike rod puppets in *Paper Heart*, as well as the stop-motion animation featured in *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, *The Science of Sleep*, *Eagle vs. Shark*, and *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009).



This courting of the pointedly simple – or even simplistic – is reflected in the films’ music too. Whether specially composed, compiled from pop songs or both, it is common for the music of the quirky to favour the sweet and simple, and the continual repetition of the sweet and simple, via delicate patterns played at the higher end of the musical register, often (though not always) in a 3/4 waltz time signature. Jon Brion’s scores for *Punch-Drunk Love*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and *I ♥ Huckabees* are exemplary of this (particularly in the pieces ‘Overture’, ‘Telephone Call’, and ‘Monday’, respectively), as is much of Mark Mothersbaugh’s work for Wes Anderson’s films (especially representative are ‘Sparkplug Minuet’ from *The Royal Tenenbaums*, and ‘Zissou Society Blue Star Cadets/Ned’s Theme Take 1’ from *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*), but other examples can also be found in *Buffalo ’66*, *Being John Malkovich*, *About Schmidt*, *Thumbsucker*, *Me, You and Everyone We Know*, *The Science of Sleep*, *Lars and the Real Girl*, and *The Savages*. The pitch, repetitiveness, and insistent prettiness of much of this music often lends it a sound and feel reminiscent of the tinkling purity of a child’s music box. Songs that are either actual children’s songs, songs about childhood, or which take a childlike view of romance are also occasionally featured in the films, as in *Buffalo ’66* (‘Moonchild’, ‘Sweetness’), *Rushmore* (‘When I Was Younger’), *Punch-Drunk Love* (‘He Needs Me’), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat’), *Napoleon Dynamite* (‘We’re Going to be Friends’), *The Science of Sleep* (‘If You Rescue Me’), *Juno* (‘Anyone Else But You’), and *Synecdoche, New York* (‘Little Person’). Of course, such pieces of music (particularly the scores, which occur repeatedly across entire movies) inevitably colour emotional response, and can thus have a very important role in constructing the mood of a quirky film.

The style of much of the quirky, then, often tends towards both a forthright artificiality and a simplified purity. As with the approaches to comedy, at its most successful this aesthetic can create productive tensions. It may encourage a degree of ‘distance’, yet one that is prevented from producing merely ‘dampened affect’ because it tends to be qualified by an appreciation for the particular kind of naïve beauty brought out by the compositions and music. Needless to say, these tensions have important consequences for tone, and I will expand on this shortly. Before this, though, I wish to engage briefly with one

noteworthy thematic preoccupation of the sensibility, towards which my discussion of style has already pointed.

Quirky and Childhood

In *The Science of Sleep* Stéphane (Gael García Bernal), a young man in his 20s, returns to his childhood home in order to spend time with his mother following his father’s death. On arriving in the apartment, he surveys his half-remembered surroundings, accompanied all the while on the soundtrack by a high-pitched and faintly otherworldly piano refrain. He handles an Action Man figurine found in his old room, staring at it as the recorded voices intones, ‘Come in, Action 2: can you complete the mission?’ He smiles as he looks at a framed photograph of his younger self, lovingly rearranging the porcelain figures of happy Mariachis standing beside it. He inspects some snapshots pinned to the refrigerator, one depicting some schoolchildren wearing



hand-made animal masks, another showing his mother surrounded by a classroom of kids; he checks the back of one of them for a date. He comes across boxes filled with objects collected and saved for making arts and crafts: toilet rolls, sweet wrappers, pine cones. He recovers an old jacket and puts it on, the fit proving noticeably tight. Finally, he repairs to his room; it is bedecked with a rug designed to look like a cartoon bird’s-eye view of a town, toys laid out on shelves, and children’s drawings on the walls. The bed is bright blue and uncomfortably small, the pillows bearing images of brightly coloured cars and trucks. After disrobing he arranges his clothes and shoes on the floor in human form, as if they were still being worn, an action carried out with a learned (or remembered) precision. Lying in bed, he turns off the light, instinctively remembering how to use the

elaborate pulley system hooked up to a hammer suspended above the switch, which we can comfortably assume he constructed as a boy. The whole sequence suggests nothing so much as a treasure trail of rediscovery that serves as a quasi-magical voyage into the past. By situating Stéphane as both beyond, and in the process of being irresistibly drawn back into, a world made up of sights, sounds and textures of childhood, this nostalgic journey is made to appear both melancholic and comforting.

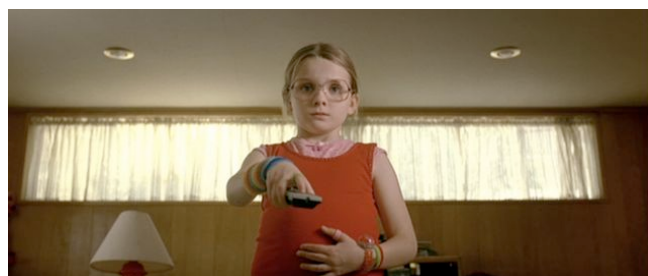
The language of ‘naïveté’, ‘simplicity’, and ‘purity’ that I feel compelled to employ in describing the visual and musical styles of the quirky hints that underlying much of the sensibility are the themes of childhood and ‘innocence’ – the links with comics, childlike drawings, animation, and toys in the films’ advertising and mise-en-scène only heightening this connection. At moments of crisis for characters these themes can even emerge as virtual non-sequiturs in the dialogue, as when Donnie (William H. Macy) drunkenly exclaims, ‘It is *not* dangerous to confuse children with angels!’ to a busy bar in *Magnolia*, when Susan (Meryl Streep) impotently intones, ‘I want it back before it all got fucked up. I want to be a baby again – I want to be *new*’, after the death of her lover in *Adaptation*, and when Steve tearfully confesses that eleven and a half was ‘my favourite age’ in *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*. It is perhaps telling in light of this that the most recent films from two of quirky’s leading lights, Wes Anderson and Spike Jonze, are adaptations of children’s books (*The Fantastic Mr. Fox* and *Where The Wild Things Are* [2009], respectively). A thorough interpretation of what the recurrence of these themes means for the quirky in terms of its ethos will be a necessary task for future critics of the sensibility, though not one this article can undertake. For the purposes of my current project, it is for now enough to note some of the ways in which childhood and notions of ‘innocence’ are touched upon in the films.

As the scene from *The Science of Sleep* described above suggests, characters in quirky films often cling to objects and artefacts from childhood. The nostalgia Stéphane exhibits upon encountering the detritus of his early years is widespread: in *The Royal Tenenbaums* the adult Richie (Luke Wilson) sleeps in a tent he used when camping out in the New York Public Archives in his youth; in *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* Ned (Owen Wilson) has kept a letter he received from Steve as a boy; in *Buffalo ‘66* we see that the inside of Billy’s locker at the bowling alley is loaded with trophies he won as a young bowler. Equally, adult characters may acquire objects with childhood associations, such as Joel’s (Jim Carrey) potato sculptures in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the animal costumes



in *Eagle vs. Shark*, or the punctuality award badge Max gives Herbert in *Rushmore*. The fact that these objects appear in the films at all means that they lend a material

element of nostalgia to the mise-en-scène. Equally though, having older characters interact with them simultaneously renders the adults somewhat childlike themselves, and acts to stress their distance from a state of childhood, thus creating a sense that this state may be being longed for, whilst reminding us that it can, of course, never be retrieved.



Young children sometimes feature prominently in narratives (for example, Grace in *Bottle Rocket*, Stanley in *Magnolia*, the young Tenenbaums in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Robby and Sylvie in *Me, You and Everyone We Know*, and Olive in *Little Miss Sunshine*), thus causing films to engage directly with childhood as a subject. More common, however, is a focus on adolescents who have one foot on either side of the divide (see: Max in *Rushmore*, Enid in *Ghost World*, Justin in *Thumbsucker*, Peter in *Me, You and Everyone We Know*, Hal in *Rocket Science* [2007], Dwayne in *Little Miss Sunshine*, Vanessa in *Smart People* [2008], and the titular characters of *Igby Goes Down* [2002], *Juno*, and *Charlie Bartlett* [2007]) – figures who may be on the verge of entering the adult world, yet are also capable of behaving like the children they almost still are, whether that be through starting a petty war over the object of their affections (*Rushmore*), impishly impersonating people in chat rooms (*Me, You and Everyone We Know*), or still sucking their thumbs (*Thumbsucker*). As with the childhood objects, an important function of such characters is their embodiment of an uneasy tension between maturity and immaturity.

Along similar lines, it is quite often revealed that adult characters are still plagued by some form of trauma they experienced as children, which occasionally seems to have left them with a degree of emotional immaturity. Examples of this include Billy being mocked by his childhood crush in *Buffalo ‘66*, Donnie’s parents stealing his money in *Magnolia*, Barry’s teasing by his sisters in *Punch-Drunk Love*, Clementine’s ‘ugly girl doll’ in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Lars’ mother’s death during childbirth in *Lars and the Real Girl*, and Jim’s parents who ‘shouldn’t have children’ in *Lonesome Jim*. Again, an important function of these neuroses is clearly to stress the persistence of childhood through into adulthood, and often to suggest a dialectic that has yet to be fully worked through.¹³

Finally, adult characters will often behave like children. One way in which this repeatedly happens is through their attitudes to love and romance. When Stéphane falls for his next-door neighbour, Stéphanie (Charlotte Gainsbourg), in *The Science of Sleep*, his chosen methods of seduction include encouraging her to build a toy boat with him, giving her a homemade ‘one second time travel machine’ (‘for the occasion that you are pretty’), requesting that she marry him when they are seventy, singing a song about kittens whilst dressed as one, and initiating mutual games and play-acting scenarios. His view of romance is also made to seem more ‘innocent’ by contrast with his ‘sex maniac’ boss, and we might note that over-sexed cads appear too in *Magnolia*

(Frank [Tom Cruise]), *Adaptation* (Charlie's agent [Ron Livingston]), *Sideways* (Jack [Thomas Haden Church]), and *Adventureland* (2009) (Mike [Ryan Reynolds]), similarly functioning as contrasts to comparatively chaste romantic dreamers (Jim [John C. Reilly], Charlie [Nicholas Cage], Miles [Paul Giamatti], and James [Jesse Eisenberg] respectively). Similarly, in *Me, You and Everyone We Know*, the first flirtation between Christine (Miranda July) and Richard (John Hawkes) involves them make-believing that a walk they take to the end of the street represents the lifespan of their relationship. Meanwhile, in the most overt encapsulation of this tendency to date, Joel and Clementine (Kate Winslet) in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, are actually able to play together as children in Joel's mind, prompting the former to lament, 'I wish I knew you when I was a kid'. Other moments that see adults indulging in the childlike are Royal's go-karting with his grandchildren in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Lars taking 'Bianca' to a tree he used to climb as a child in *Lars and the Real Girl*, and Albert and Tommy (Mark Wahlberg) repeatedly hitting one another in the face with a space hopper in *I ♥ Huckabees* (regarding this last example: we might see the quirky's use of slapstick as a whole as evidence of a more generalised rhetoric of regression, and of a revelling in the proudly 'childish'). Once again, these examples suggest a refusal to entirely let go of childhood once in adulthood, as well as often the unattainable desire to map the former onto the latter.¹⁴



Despite believing it significant, it should be said that I regard the explicit evocation of childhood as one aspect of the quirky that is certainly non-compulsory, and the reader could not be faulted if s/he were already composing a mental list of films that make minimal gestures towards this theme (*Sideways*, *Broken Flowers*, *Stranger Than Fiction*, *Year of the Dog*, etc.). As I claimed at the outset, however, it seems perfectly possible for a film to use relatively few of the conventions I am setting out and still be considered a participant in the sensibility. The reason for this is that perhaps the most important feature of the quirky, which I have been building towards throughout this article, is its tone. Like the approaches to comedy and style, then, the theme of childhood (and its thematic bedfellow 'innocence') is finally less essential in-and-of itself than for what it allows the films to achieve tonally. I will now expand on precisely what I consider important about the tone of the quirky, as well as on the ways in which mode, style, and theme help contribute to its construction.

Quirky and Tone

Adaptation tells the story of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's (Nicholas Cage) attempts to write a movie based on Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*, a work of investigative journalism about an eccentric collector of rare flowers, John

Laroche. In a meeting with a studio executive early in the film, Charlie makes it clear that he doesn't want to change Orlean's work into something 'artificially plot-driven', explaining, 'I just don't want to ruin it by making it a Hollywood thing, like an orchid *heist* movie or something, or, you know, changing the orchids into *poppies* and turning it into a movie about drug-running'. He goes on, 'I don't want to cram in sex, or guns, or car chases, or characters ... you know, learning profound *life-lessons*, or *growing*, or coming to *like* each other, or overcoming obstacles to *succeed in the end* ...'. Parallel to the story of Charlie, *Adaptation* also follows Orlean (Meryl Streep) as she meets Laroche (Chris Cooper), and works on the *New Yorker* article that formed the basis for her book. As time goes on, Charlie begins to have trouble with his screenplay, and, in a fit of frustration, eventually writes himself as a character into Orlean's narrative. When he reaches a block, he first visits a screenwriting seminar run by Robert McKee (Brian Cox), then turns for help to his twin brother, Donald (Nicholas Cage) – also a writer for the movies, though a far more 'commercially-minded' one. As Orlean and Laroche's storyline develops, elements begin to creep in that are very reminiscent of Charlie's artistic *bête noires*: Laroche's Ghost Orchids turn out to have psychotropic properties and he begins manufacturing drugs from them, Orlean begins an affair with Laroche, and so on. After a time it becomes clear that Donald has not only taken over Charlie's screenplay in the world of the film, but is also, as it were, 'writing' the film that we are watching. The narrative ultimately builds to a climax in which Charlie and Donald are chased through a South Florida swamp by Orleans and Laroche (both wielding guns), Laroche gets killed by an alligator, Charlie crashes a car, and Donald dies with Charlie saying tearful goodbyes by his side.

Following Donald's death, the penultimate scene of the film sees Charlie sitting at an outdoor restaurant with his friend, Amelia (Cara Seymour), with whom he has been infatuated for some time but has been too afraid to approach romantically. They make small talk as they are preparing to say goodbye. Amelia tells him about a trip she recently took to Prague with her boyfriend: 'There's *amazing* puppet theatre there', she enthuses, 'and there's this church that's decorated with, like, human skulls and bones ... With a *thousand* skulls and bones!' She pauses. 'I thought about you when I went there...'. We cut in to a close-up of Charlie. He looks at Amelia intently for a moment, trying to



build up courage, before eventually leaning in and kissing her, one hand coming up gently to her face. Strings begin to swell softly on the soundtrack. Following the kiss, Amelia smiles for a moment, before her expression falls; 'Charlie, I'm *with* someone ... Why are you doing this now?'. Charlie looks at her. 'I love you', he says, the gaze with which he fixes her confirming that he means it. '... I should

go', Amelia says awkwardly, after a beat, extricating herself and moving off to a nearby escalator, 'stuff I have to do ... A million things ...'. Before she reaches the top, though, she turns, looking down nervously at her hands and



fiddling. Still looking downwards, she quietly and uncertainly says, 'I love you too, you know', her eyes coming up to meet his on her last word. As the score subtly builds, we cut to Charlie: he is clearly overcome with emotion, though trying to contain it; his body shakes slightly, he nods faintly, his mouth seeming to struggle with the possibility of speech; apparently on the verge of tears, he finally smiles a small, grateful smile. Amelia smiles too, sweetly, slightly embarrassedly, then turns awkwardly, half-waving a farewell, and moves towards the escalator.



We now cut to Charlie in his car, preparing to drive out of an underground parking lot. He is framed in close-up as he waits for the barrier to lift, a look of serenity on his face. In voice-over we hear him say, 'I have to go right home. I know how to finish the script now. It ends with Kaufman driving home after his lunch with Amelia, thinking he knows how to finish the script ... It feels right: *conclusive* ... Anyway, it's done, and that's something'. As he pulls out of the dark lot and into the sunshine, he continues, 'So: Kaufman drives off after his encounter with Amelia, filled for the first time with hope'. Outside now, we see his car drive away down an L.A. road. 'I like this', he says as the 60s pop song 'Happy Together' begins to fade up on the soundtrack, 'This is good'. As his car disappears away from us, the camera cranes slightly down and discovers a cluster of daisies in close-up protruding incongruously from the bottom of the frame. While the song builds, gradually bringing in more and more brass instruments and repeating the phrase 'happy together', we shift to a register of 'time-lapse' photography that lets us see the flowers' life cycle speed up greatly, their petals opening and closing in response to sunlight and darkness as the hours and days rush by; cut to black.

In his aforementioned piece on 'smart' cinema, Jeffrey Sconce says that the films belonging to this 'sens-

ibility' (2002: 350) are concerned with 'experimenting with *tone* as a means of critiquing 'bourgeois' taste and culture' (352; emphasis in original). Throughout the article he uses various words to describe the tone of the smart – words such as 'detachment' (352), 'dispassion' (359), 'disengagement' (359), 'disinterest' (359), and 'disaffection' (350). The most repeated and privileged word, however, is irony: as he says at one point, '[s]mart cinema might be ... described as dark comedy and disturbing drama born of ironic distance' (358).¹⁵ Irony is always a potentially slippery term, but it is clear from the way Sconce uses it, and from the other words he relates to it, that for him irony constitutes a mode of address that 'sees everything in "quotation marks"', and is opposed to 'sincerity', 'positivity', and the opposite corollaries of the words singled out above: 'engagement', 'passion', 'affect', and so on (358). For the sake of comparative clarity, this is the sense in which I too will be using the term.

It seems to me that Sconce's definition captures well the tone of many of the films he addresses, particularly the three that serve as the article's starting point: Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998), Neil LaBute's *Your Friends and Neighbours* (1998), and Peter Berg's *Very Bad Things* (1998) – dark comedies that play for (extremely uncomfortable) laughs such subject matter as paedophilia, unrestrained misogyny, and the accidental killing of a stripper, respectively. I also find Sconce's piece useful for the clear way it identifies a definitely observable type of recent American movie that markets itself as being in opposition to the mainstream because too 'clever' for it. Viewed in this very broad sense, we might even say that the quirky is actually a particular type of smart film. One thing I want to take issue with, however, is Sconce's desire to define all the films he mentions in relation to the tone of the smart as he sets it out – in particular those of P. T. Anderson, Wes Anderson, Hal Hartley and Spike Jonze (as well as Terry Zwigoff's *Ghost World*).¹⁶ All these directors seem to me to be firmly tied to the quirky, a sensibility that has a much more complicated relationship with 'the trope of irony' (2002: 353) than does the smart, and which comes far closer to expressing precisely those attitudes – 'sincerity', 'positivity', 'passion' – to which the smart is contrasted. Indeed, this is in fact something Sconce might be seen to hint at himself when he is compelled to use phrases like 'bittersweet' (2002: 350) and 'surprising sentimentality' (2002: 351) to describe the work of Wes Anderson and Terry Zwigoff respectively.¹⁷

The scene from *Adaptation* described above displays for us particularly clearly some characteristic tenets of the quirky's approach to tone. Clearly, the whole film is absolutely steeped in the potential for it to be seen within perpetual 'quotation marks': it is explicitly 'meta-cinematic' in the sense that (1) the main character is modeled on the film's own screenwriter, Charlie Kaufman (who did indeed initially attempt to adapt *The Orchid Thief* [Fleming, 2002: 1]), (2) that this character then writes himself into his (and thus *Adaptation's*) screenplay, and (3) that the film we are watching appears to be hijacked at a certain point by Donald (who, despite being fictional, is listed as a co-writer in the film's own credits). The ending is also rife with this potential. As with the climax that preceded it, the epilogue must be viewed in light of Charlie's earlier wish for his script to not become 'a Hollywood thing', featuring characters 'growing', 'coming to like each other', or 'overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end'. Though we may wish to question the strict accuracy of Kaufman's caricature of Hollywood

convention, it is plain both that it contains elements of truth, and that the conclusion self-consciously alludes to this caricature through its intimation of a romantic relationship for Charlie and Amelia. As well as this, we also have Charlie's final voice-over, which allows his ideas for the script to coincide precisely with these ideas being played out on screen. We are given the *option*, then, of taking this ending, as Peter Marks does, as 'one of the most ironic finales in modern American cinema history' (2008: 19). Yet this would not do justice to the far more complex tone at play here.

Given the commonly held opinion that 'few conventions of the Hollywood cinema are as noticeable to its producers, to its audiences, and to its critics as that of the happy ending' (Bordwell, 1982: 2), it is unsurprising that this trope has frequently come in for ironic treatment. The ending of *Adaptation*, however, is not like that of, say, *Wayne's World* (1992), which first 'ends' excessively unhappily, only for Wayne (Mike Myers) and Garth (Dana Carvey) to turn to the camera and say, 'As if we'd end the movie like *that!*' before ushering in 'the mega happy ending'. Nor, to draw a less extreme comparison, is it quite like the 'self-consciously artificial' (Mercer & Shingler, 2004: 60) or 'unmotivated' (Bordwell, 1982: 2) 'happy endings' often attributed to classical Hollywood (most famously in relation to the melodramas of Douglas Sirk), which ensure that 'you don't believe the happy end and you're not really supposed to' (Halliday, 1997: 68). In these instances, irony is for the most part treated as the privileged tonal quality, often to the exclusion of an emotional engagement with the optimism promised by the 'happy ending'. The conclusion of *Adaptation*, meanwhile, is characterised by an extraordinarily balanced rhetorical combination of an ironic detachment from, and a sincere engagement with, its 'happy ending'. In other words, we are never allowed to forget the *potential* for ironic appreciation, yet are encouraged to be genuinely moved nonetheless.

Speaking of the latter stages of *Adaptation*, Geoff King writes, '[w]e are invited to be emotionally engaged in ... on-screen events, even if from one perspective they have been flagged to us as an over-the-top confection' (2009: 53). The response King describes here is specifically the result of tone. In the film's final scene this tonal balancing act is achieved in large part through the judicious underplaying of what could easily be treated – were irony the primary or only goal – as exaggerated. For example, this is not the ecstatic beginning of a new relationship for Charlie and Amelia, but the tentative *possibility* for a new relationship, offering not emphatic happy closure but instead cautious hope for the future.¹⁸ The performances of Cage and Seymour are not self-consciously melodramatic (as they are, say, in *Wayne's World*), but awkward and tender, allowing for fumbled speech, anxious fiddling and nervous glances. The dialogue is not profound, assured, or elegant, but charmingly clumsy – Amelia's talk of being reminded of Charlie when visiting the Ossuary in the Czech Republic, for instance, being placed as both sweet and touchingly maladroit. Equally, Carter Burwell's musical score, although emotive, is also relatively modest: it is strikingly low in the mix, arranged not for full orchestra but only a small string section, consisting of a few chords rather than a defined melody or theme, and, while it reaches a crescendo on 'I love you too, you know', it is a minute one. Similarly, in its last moments the film comes to rest not on an image of an embrace, a kiss, or a movement off into the sunset, but on the shot of the flowers – an image that, while, again, mobilising cliché to a degree, also invites us to notice that

these flowers are pointedly *not* the variety of orchids repeatedly made to represent transcendental beauty throughout the film (the Ghost Orchid), but rather ordinary, garden variety daisies. By the same token, while the ideas for the script heard in the voice-over may be dramatised in Charlie feeling hopeful and driving away, they do not account for all that this ending contains: we do not hear, for instance, 'Crane down to reveal flowers; cut to black,' which would assuredly make the conclusion seem far more solipsistic and 'self-conscious' than it ultimately does. Instead, the song, flowers and 'time-lapse' presentation are allowed to seem as if they have to some extent escaped Charlie's film within a film, and are thus permitted to feel not merely the cynical fulfillment of a predetermined ending, but rather (as it were) a final, affecting, conclusion of the film *Adaptation* itself.



Together, these strategies combine to create a tone ensuring that Amelia's declaration of love, Charlie's optimism, and the convention of the 'happy ending' as a whole, are not merely parodied, but rather put forward for us to accept sincerely *even whilst* we see them to a certain degree in 'quotation marks'. More to the point, the relatively understated execution means that what is moving here is not only the abstract notion of an implied gulf between what might happen in 'real life' and what may happen in movies, but also in large part the events of the dramatic fiction themselves. This, specifically, is how Kaufman avoids the predictable accusation leveled at him by critics such as Kirk Boyle that, 'instead of giving us the reality, he buys into the fiction to wield the phallus and reaps the rewards provided by ideological irony' (2007: 19), thus proving himself 'subjectivised by the ideological state apparatus ... of the Hollywood dream factory' (2007: 5). By virtue of the underplaying of what could be exaggerated, this ending becomes not merely a 'cop-out' happy ending treated with 'ideological irony', but also a sincere invocation of an external 'reality' of which it is true to say that, as Robert McKee put it earlier in the film, sometimes, indeed, 'people find love'. In this way, the film provides us with an especially overt demonstration of a tonal register that we find constructed in various ways and to varying degrees throughout the quirky: the tension between an ironic or 'detached' perspective being combined with a sincere emotional engagement that is not to any significant degree lessened – only made *different* – by such irony and detachment.

Adaptation is particularly suited to striking such a tone due to its central conceit, but quirky films consistently find a variety of other ways to achieve similar ends. At one point in *Magnolia*, a nurse, Phil (Philip Seymour Hoffman), is trying to track down the estranged son of a dying man in his care; pleading with a telephone operator who has the power to put him through to the son, he says, 'I know that I might

sound ridiculous – like this is the scene in the movie where the guy is trying to get hold of the long-lost son ... But: this is *that scene* ... And I think that they have those scenes in movies because they're *true* – you know, because they *really happen*; and you've got to believe me: this is *really happening*'. *About Schmidt* creates an analogous tone through the entirely different strategy of intermittently accompanying its action with a voice-over representing Schmidt's (Jack Nicholson) letters to a Tanzanian boy called Ndugu, whom he has recently started sponsoring via a charity. In these letters Schmidt assumes an air of excessive familiarity, often becoming inappropriately personal, writing things such as, 'Dear Ndugu, I hope you're sitting down, because I'm afraid I've got some bad news. Since I last wrote to you, my wife Helen, your foster mother, passed away very suddenly from a blood clot in her brain.' We are thus invited in both these examples to feel simultaneously distanced from the emotions of characters – in *Magnolia* by the oblique reference to the cinematic convention being enacted, in *About Schmidt* via the gentle mocking of Schmidt's incongruous intimacy – yet are also challenged to qualify this sense of distance through the characters' disarming emotional honesty and vulnerability.

Equally, a similar attitude is often taken towards characters' successes. Max's Vietnam War play performed towards the end of *Rushmore* (entitled *Heaven and Hell*) is clearly placed as somewhat naïve and pretentious, and yet we are also asked to appreciate both its passion and the fact it moves Herbert, a veteran, to tears. The dance Napoleon (Jon Heder) performs in front of the school at the climax of *Napoleon Dynamite* is amusingly inept, though in a very particular way that marks it as 'transfixingly, transportingly wrong', ultimately winning Napoleon both our respect and that of the girl he likes (Hirschorn, 2007: 1). Similarly for the 'sweded' films in *Be Kind Rewind*: they are both preposterously amateurish and uniquely loving in a manner that persuades us to see their creators, Jerry (Jack Black) and Mike (Mos Def), at once as comically deluded and admirably impassioned. These examples thus require that we be ironically distanced from both characters' emotions and their levels of self-knowledge (we laugh at failings in their work that they cannot see), yet without losing our respect or empathy for their quixotic stabs at greatness. To relate this back to my earlier discussion of theme: we might say that these characters are not simply mocked for being ignorant, but rather are gently joshed for being 'innocent'.

As my earlier analyses have already suggested, a comparable tension can also result from approaches to comedy, style, and theme. Quirky's comedy works by distancing us from characters' emotions through deadpan, and occasionally by undermining the credibility of its fictional world through slapstick, yet also through encouraging empathy via an awkward comedy of embarrassment. We can therefore simultaneously regard the world of *Punch-Drunk Love* as partly unbelievable, laugh at its flat treatment of melodramatic situations, *and* be moved by Barry's tears. Similarly, the style of the quirky can both provoke an awareness of artificiality *and* promote an appreciation of charming *naïveté*. Thus, the 'T' flag on the Tenenbaum house can be made to appear too-neat in its dramatising of voice-over at the same time as its simplistic beauty is presented as endearing, even amusingly valiant. Equally, the recurrent themes of childhood and 'innocence' often invite us to regard characters' attachments to a childlike view of the world as both misguided and poignant, thus requesting we simultaneously be critical of *and* feel for their emotional state. This means that we can both consider

Joel's imagined reversion to childhood with Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of Spotless Mind* problematically sentimental *and* find it touching that he is able to live out his wish of having known the woman he loves in his younger years.

Ultimately, all these elements help construct what is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the quirky: a tone that exists on a knife-edge of judgment and empathy, detachment and engagement, irony and sincerity.

Conclusion

As I made clear towards the start of the article, I see the quirky as offering a sliding scale of representational possibilities, a spectrum upon which films can be placed closer to one end or another. Though this placement may be dictated by many things, I would suggest that an important question is a film's degree of ironic detachment from its characters' experiences. The extremes of this spectrum, meanwhile, are probably best marked by a film such as *The Squid and the Whale*, on the one hand, and one like *Napoleon Dynamite* on the other. While *The Squid and the Whale* encourages a continual ironic awareness of, say, both Bernard's (Jeff Daniels) outrageous pretentiousness and his son Walt's (Jesse Eisenberg) emulation of him, it comes nowhere close to achieving the degree of distance *Napoleon Dynamite* takes to all its characters, which results in even its hero being treated as an object of ridicule for everything from the way he dresses to his congested breathing (though *not quite* for his dancing abilities). It is perhaps not coincidental that these films also exist at opposing ends of the scales of comedy, style, and theme: one (*Napoleon Dynamite*) contains far more deadpan and slapstick than comedy of embarrassment, while the other tends towards the latter; one is dedicated to an extremely simplified and artificial aesthetic, while the other privileges conventional markers of cinematic realism such as hand-held camera; one constructs a world in which almost every character appears to be in a state of arrested development, while the other focuses on the traumas of adolescence and touches only tangentially on childhood. Determining whether such relationships to these conventions consistently result in similar tonal registers may be one direction in which work on the quirky could develop.

A further task for future study will clearly be to attempt to place the quirky within its broader cultural and ideological context. The sexual, racial, and class politics of quirky films are certainly in need of attention: while they assuredly express nothing like a single, coherent ideology, it also seems unlikely that their shared traits will yield *no* such connections. Another context we might bring to bear is the industrial framework of 'Indiewood', the intersection of Hollywood and 'independent' American cinema at which films often desire to, as Geoff King puts it, 'work both ends' – that is: be both within and without of the 'mainstream' (2009: 93). One other possible approach might be to ask where else we can see the sensibility and its tone at work in contemporary culture: for instance, in television (perhaps in *Flight of the Conchords* [2007-], *Pushing Daisies* [2006-], etc.), 'indie' music (e.g.: The Polyphonic Spree, Sufjan Stevens, etc.), fiction (e.g.: Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer), radio (e.g.: *This American Life* [1995-]), and so on. Pursued with requisite sensitivity to the particulars of the quirky, any of these approaches could produce useful insights into the sensibility's position within, and wider significance for, American popular culture.

To suggest one other possible avenue of enquiry: perhaps particularly well-suited to the conceptual study of a

sensibility defined in large part by its tone may be Raymond Williams' famous notion of 'structure of feeling' (understandably, a term also used by Sconce in his definition of smart [2002: 351]). Williams describes this concept as being:

as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization. And it is in this respect that the arts of a period, taking these to include characteristic approaches and tones in argument, are of major importance. (1965: 64)

Clearly, part of the appeal of Williams' term is, as Sconce says, 'the phrase's ability to combine sociological concerns for cultural formation with the ineffable 'feeling' of being in the world at a particular historical moment' (2002: 351). Even though we may wish to narrow this definition – from 'world' to people living in a particular part of the world, within particular class and generational groupings, and possessing particular 'cultural capital' – it is in fact unlikely that a trend as specific and widespread as the quirky *will not* tell us something about its sociohistorical moment. It would seem that commentators on many of the films I have been discussing would agree, and have felt the need to make gestures towards relating the quirky to one famous recent structure of feeling in particular.

Specifically, this has been the result of critics attempting various ways of describing the tonal tensions between irony and sincerity that I have been analysing. For instance, Lynn Hirschberg has said of Charlie Kaufman's work that it is 'wildly self-conscious while at the same time inching toward some postironic point of observation' (2000: 1). Also speaking of Kaufman, Colm O'Shea proposes the term 'braiding' to describe the way the writer 'tightly entwines profundity with bathos' (2009: 1). Mark Olsen has written of Wes Anderson that, 'unlike many writer-directors of his generation, [he] does not view his characters from some distant Olympus of irony. He stands beside them – or rather, just behind them', using the term 'the New Sincerity' to summarise this position (1999: 13).¹⁹ Meanwhile, Jesse Fox Mayshark has recently used the term 'post-pop cinema' in relation to many of the directors of the quirky, whose work he sees as 'taking aim in a variety of ways at the tyranny of irony' (2007: 5).

Perhaps predictably, something clearly underlying all these descriptions – whether 'postironic' or 'post-pop', 'braiding' or 'New Sincerity' – is the spectre of a buzzword whose ubiquity over the last few decades has rivalled that of quirky itself: postmodernism. Specifically, there seems a desire here to stress the ways in which these films appear to reflect a structure of feeling that is somehow 'beyond postmodern' (Dempsey, 2004: 1) or 'more than post-modern' (Mayshark, 2007: 13). While such pronouncements have the allure of the new about them, it is worth pointing out that the tenor of the arguments in fact share something with the considerably more old-fashioned concept of 'romantic irony' developed by German Romanticism, a project described by Schlegel – in a phrase that could just as easily apply to the quirky – as the 'eternal oscillation of enthusiasm and irony' (De Mul, 1999: 10).²⁰ This is a concept that has only recently begun to make its way into film studies, through books such as Richard Allen's *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony* (2007), and Eric G. Wilson's

The Strange World of David Lynch: Transcendental Irony from Eraserhead to Mulholland Dr. (2007), and it would seem to be one that could well offer useful ways forward in our examination of the quirky as a tone, and, perhaps, as a contemporary structure of feeling.

Whether or not it will prove fruitful to pursue the quirky's relationship with postmodernism, romantic irony, or indeed any of the frameworks suggested above, is something that only responsible, theoretically informed, criticism will be able to determine. It has been beyond the remit of this article to engage in depth in such work, though I hope my analyses have managed to hint at some potentially productive directions in which study could develop. What I think should already certainly be beyond doubt, however, is that there is once again 'a new sensibility at work in American cinema' (Sconce, 2002: 350), that this sensibility is identified in large part by its tone, and that, at the very least, it is one that deserves our attention.

James MacDowell

This article has benefited from the intellectual generosity of a number of friends and colleagues, and I would like to thank Martin Pumphrey, James Zborowski, Tim Vermeulen, Johnny Parry, Robert and Sylvia MacDowell, John Gibbs and Ed Gallafent for the parts they played in the piece's conception and evolution.

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[Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism](#), 1.

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¹ The term is now so well-established that it can even be referred to in a quirky film itself, as happens in *Paper Heart* (2009) when Michael Cera jokingly surmises that the semi-fictional, semi-documentary film he is in is 'a quirky comedy ... That's perfect: it's just what America needs'.

² This is not to say that 'quirky' has not, and could not, be applied to other kinds of film. However, while it might be argued that my definition is too narrow, I would suggest that any more inclusive a conception would likely risk banality, and thus redundancy.

³ This is complicated further in this case because, unlike ‘camp’, there are many closely related words that might seem to serve just as well: for instance, terms like ‘off-beat’, ‘off-kilter’, and ‘off-centre’, also regularly appear in reviews of the kinds of movies with which I am concerned. All these terms (‘quirky’ included) can only make sense in relation to an implied ‘norm’ from which a break is apparently being enacted. I am choosing to continue using the term ‘quirky’, however, in part because it places less emphasis on this unspoken, and potentially conceptually troubling, ‘norm’. It contains within it no specific reference to a hypothetical ‘beat’, ‘kilter’, or ‘centre’ that may in fact be largely imagined (or at the very least amorphous), and which would thus be distracting to have as a central point of reference.

⁴ I use these terms in the sense laid out by Deborah Thomas in *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy and Romance in Hollywood Films* (2000), in which she argues that Hollywood cinema will usually operate within one of two modes – the comedic and the melodramatic – which tend to present worlds that act in different ways. Broadly, the comedic world will appear mainly benevolent, safe and liberating, while the melodramatic constructs a claustrophobic and antagonistic world that serves to frustrate characters’ desires. However, the quirky attests to the fact that, as Thomas acknowledges, these modes are by no means always mutually exclusive, and can permeate one another within the space of individual films. While the comedic need not always also be comic – i.e.: humorous – it will tend to be in the case of quirky, as my examples suggest.

⁵ Clearly this list shows that *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) has provided the quirky with an important pool of talent.

⁶ It is not only performances and dialogue that can create this type of humour: the abrupt cut from the heated passions of the previous scene to the calm of this one is itself a form of *stylistic* deadpan.

⁷ Here and elsewhere, the rigid frontal arrangement of characters calls to mind the blank simplicity of composition that makes the Grant Wood painting *American Gothic* (1930) so notable (and so easily parodied).

⁸ A particular form of what David Bordwell (2007) has called ‘planimetric’ shots.

⁹ In keeping with my notion of the quirky offering a spectrum of possibilities, it is worth mentioning that shots recognisably of this type can be made to feel either more or less ‘self-conscious’. They may encompass compositions as emphatically studied as those in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, but can equally be used as they are in *The Squid and the Whale*, which features a shot of Bernard (Jeff Daniels) and (Laura Linney) sitting in comically undersized school desks for a parent-teacher meeting. Here, again, the characters are centrally positioned, looking out at us from a medium-long two-shot, in such a way as to create a sense of the awkwardness of their setting; yet the image has none of the calculated ‘flatness’ that often accompanies more extreme uses of the style. This shot thus uses the convention’s comic stiffness and slight absurdity, but, because of the whole film’s greater commitment to a rhetoric of ‘realism’, little of its potential for pointed artificiality.

¹⁰ I would suggest that this self-awareness manages to avoid the heights of Sconce’s ‘dispassion’ in part because it will tend largely to be used for its comedic, rather than alienating (as in *Safe*), potential, befitting the sensibility’s overall commitment this mode. This in turn relates to Thomas’ argument that ‘[the] world of comedy appears to be safe partly because we perceive it as a fictional world with a benevolent director pulling the strings’ (2000: 12).

¹¹ It is worth noting that the convention of characters being presented in flat, face on long shots is also commonly replicated on such posters, thus reinforcing its centrality to the quirky.

¹² While *Eagle vs. Shark* was made in New Zealand, it is so clearly influenced by the films of Wes Anderson and Jared Hess that it can undoubtedly be considered a member of the sensibility. Another recent non-American film strongly influenced by the quirky is the British film *Bunny and the Bull* (2009), which also features stop-motion animation and self-consciously simplified and artificial sets.

¹³ As well as highlighting the recurrence of childhood trauma, a number of these examples also suggest how concerned the quirky is with the associated theme of the American family. For more on this, see Gry Rustard (2009), who goes so far as to define many of the films I am calling quirky (e.g.: *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Squid and the Whale*, *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, *Thumbsucker*, *Little Miss Sunshine*) as ‘post-classical family melodramas’.

¹⁴ One influence on the quirky that probably demands acknowledging in relation to its childhood themes is that of J. D. Salinger. *The Royal Tenenbaums*’ child geniuses and *Magnolia*’s ‘What Do Kids Know?’ game show are clear descendents of Salinger’s Glass family and their radio show ‘It’s a Wise Child’ (from *Franny and Zooey*, among others), while the fetishising of childhood artefacts and innocence more generally is of course central to *Catcher in the Rye*. See Anderson (2000) for an interview in which P. T. Anderson acknowledges the influence of Salinger, and Matt Zoller Seitz (2009) for a discussion of the influence of the author on Wes Anderson’s work.

¹⁵ The centrality of irony to Sconce’s definition stems partly from his desire to relate smart cinema to ‘the larger panic over ironic culture’ (354) that he sees as taking place in America during the 90s and 00s. Within this discourse he includes claims made by Patrick Buchanan at the 1992 Republican National Convention that there exists a ‘culture war’ in the U.S. between Christian conservative moralists and secular-humanist relativists (353), predictions of the ‘death of irony’ following 9/11 (354), and outraged pieces by Kenneth Turan (1998) and Manohla Dargis (1998) concerning smart films – the last two of these serving as the starting point for Sconce’s article.

¹⁶ I should mention that I would certainly exclude Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* (2008) from the quirky, for reasons that should be obvious to anyone who has seen the film.

¹⁷ It is perhaps worth pointing out that, while certainly active in 2002, the quirky appears to have gained much greater momentum and produced many more films since Sconce’s article was published. It seems quite possible that, were he writing today, Sconce would feel the need to contrast the smart with this other reigning sensibility of the American ‘indie’ landscape, which has earned so much exposure in recent years (through, for example, the ‘Best Original Screenplay’ Oscars won by *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Juno* in 2007 and 2008).

¹⁸ King describes this ending (‘no unqualified ‘happily-ever-after’ for the couple, but more than a hint that it remains a distinct possibility in the near-future’) as an example of ‘a typically Indiewood limbo’ (55). It is equally a typically quirky limbo: *Magnolia*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Sideways*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Me, You and Everyone We Know*, and *Lars and the Real Girl*, for example, all end their romance plots in comparable ways.

¹⁹ This term was originally used by Jim Collins (1993) to refer to another sector of recent Hollywood film, namely updates of ‘classic’ genres, which he says tend to employ either ‘eclectic irony’ or ‘new sincerity’ (1993: 257). Olsen, however, seems to be using the term in a slightly different way.

²⁰ I use the translation offered by Jos De Mul (1999) in *Romantic Desire in (Post)modern Art and Philosophy*, in which he suggests the usefulness of the concept for contemporary art’s current need (as he sees it) to move beyond the postmodern.