

# QUIRKY CINEMA: WES ANDERSON (AND BEYOND)

## Session One

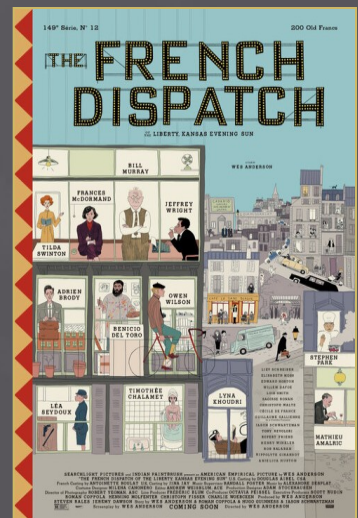
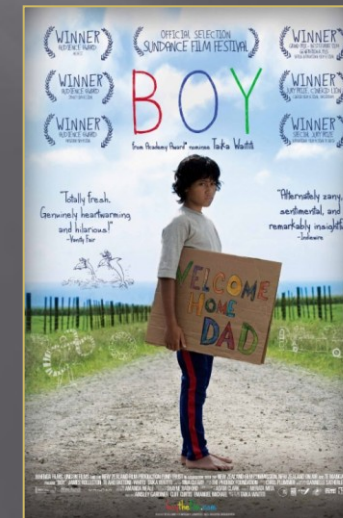
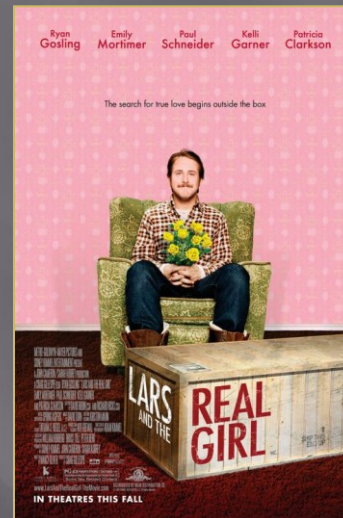
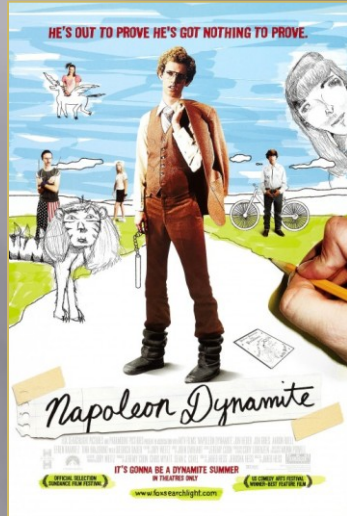
### The Quirky Model

Department of Film & Audiovisual Culture,

Masaryk University

Dr. Richard Nowell

# Quirky Cinema





# Agenda

1. Brief Course Overview
2. Conceptualizing Quirky
3. Applying the Quirky Model



# **Course Details**

**Structure**: 6 2-hour sessions [22.09; 29.09; 20.10; 03.11; 24.11; 08.12]

**Methods**: Integrated seminar discussions and framing lecturettes

**Preparation**: 2 x screenings & 1 x reading with preparatory questions

**Organization**: All screenings and readings will be discussed in depth

**Slides**: Uploaded to MS TEAMS soon after each session takes place

**Assessment**: 1 x 1500-2000-word essay (choice of five prompts)

**Feedback**: One-page grade explanation emailed soon after receipt

# **Topics and Goals**

**Topic**: Anglophone Quirky Cinema (mainly late 1990s to the present day)

**Methods**: Conceptual, textual, industrial, and social

**Aim**: Facilitate revisionist understandings of Quirky Cinema

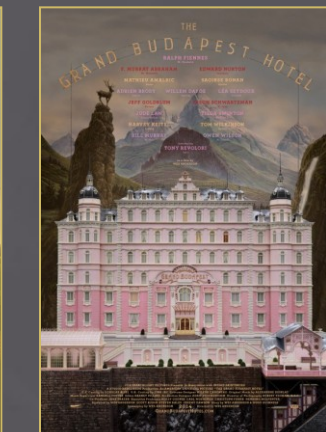
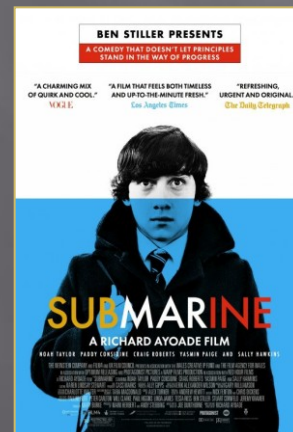
**Approach I**: Moving beyond “Auteurist” accounts of Quirky Cinema

**Approach 2**: Questioning commonplace discourse about Quirky films

**Outcome**: Integrate other themes, target audiences, and industry positions



# 1. Model; 2. Branding; 3. Audience Targeting, 4. Manic Pixie Dream Girls; 5. Fathers; 6. Politics



# **Today's Targeted Learning Outcomes**

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

I: Quirky cinema's distinctive content.

II: Quirky cinema's distinctive themes.

III: Quirky cinema's distinctive modes of address.



# Quirky, Auterism, Genre

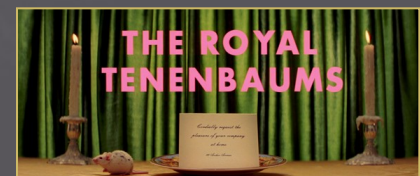
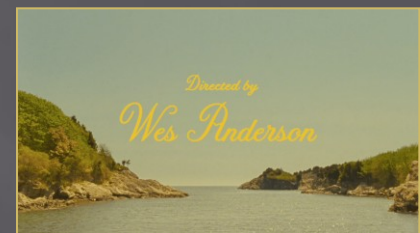
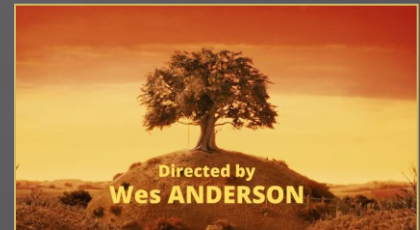
Perhaps more so than any other genre, Quirky Cinema has been imagined through the prism of Auterism

This approach emphasizes a supposedly visionary director building a coherent, distinctive body of work

The filmmaker who has become synonymous with Quirky Cinema is of course the American Wes Anderson

But quirky extends beyond Anderson: it is a genre or a format that has been used internationally for 60 years

Conflating Quirky Cinema with Auteur filmmaking risks misrepresenting this form of genre cinema in 3 key ways





# **Limitations of Auterist Approaches to Quirky**

1. They risk misrepresenting a longstanding example of formula filmmaking as the topical vision of a single creative talent (Session 1)
2. They also risk misrepresenting tried-and-tested branding strategies as the unique worldview of that particular talent (Session 2)
3. The risk misrepresenting audience-targeting strategies as a cultural-insider's intuitive contribution to their taste community (Session 3)

In order to develop a deeper understanding of Quirky Cinema, we really should confront three issues inherent in Auterist conceptions

Addressing them promises to generate more historically, culturally, and industrially sensitive understandings of this important format

# **MacDowell and Conceptualizing Quirky**

When it comes to conceptualizing Quirky Cinema as a format that includes Anderson's films, MacDowell has proven especially insightful

He argues that the makers of quirky films employ a content-tailoring model that invites viewers to consume them in a distinctive fashion ...

**1. What content distinguishes quirky cinema?**

**2. What are quirky films about?**

**3. How do quirky films encourage audiences to evaluate or process this material?**

# The Quirky Model: Diluting High-Stakes Emotional Melodrama

THEMES: The films centralize painful psychosocial issues derived from real-world personal development challenges

LOOK: But they wrap this potentially painful subject matter in an aesthetic conveying innocence and artificiality

COMEDY: The films also use various types of comedy to partially distance the audience from this serious material

TONE: They mix irony and sincerity to prompt sympathy for characters but also derision as we feel superior to them

AFFECT: This invites us to view the films both in ironic detached fashion and at times through sincere engagement





# Quirky Cinema vs. Smart Cinema

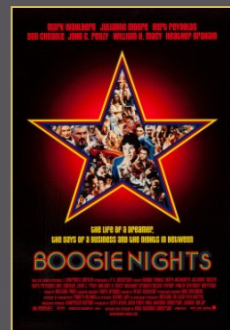
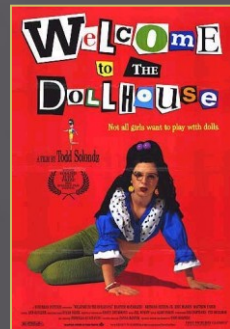
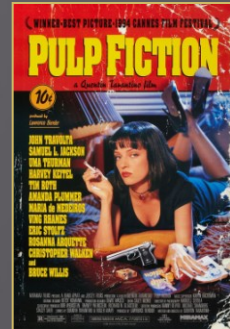
Quirky Cinema's cultivation of sincere engagement alongside ironic detachment sets it apart from another prominent film trend

Smart Cinema was a production trend that peaked in the 1990s and 2000s, slightly before Quirky Cinema rose to prominence

It included films like *Kids* (1995), *Trainspotting* (1996), *Fight Club* (1999), and those of the writer-director Quentin Tarantino

Smart Cinema mixed emotional detachment, amorality, dark humor, cynicism, and irony (but very little emotional sincerity)

Such films were targeted at the Gen-X youth subculture, which was also seen to possess this exact combination of traits



# Screening I: *Rushmore* (1998)

1. How does this film use the Quirky Model aesthetically, narratively, thematically?
2. How did you respond emotionally to the characters and situations in this film?



# A Surprisingly Sad Film at its Core

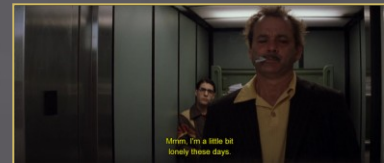
Narratively, this film presents an allegory of how Quirky films are intended ideally to operate in the real world

It does so by suggesting that building communities around media arts like itself can help to heal damaged people

After all most of the characters suffer emotional pain from human connections that have been broken over time

These include divorce, betrayal, and rejection, but most significantly bereavement (both Max and Miss Cross)

The characters grow to accept each others flaws, forging a community around the cathartic experience of Max's play





# Preventing Viewers from Wallowing in Human Tragedy

The film uses other parts of the quirky model to avoid overly saddening audiences with its emotionally raw core

It distances the audience from this material by presenting the whole film as if it was a play and not “real-life” events

This involves organizing the story into acts, showcasing highly ordered sets, and centralizing stage production

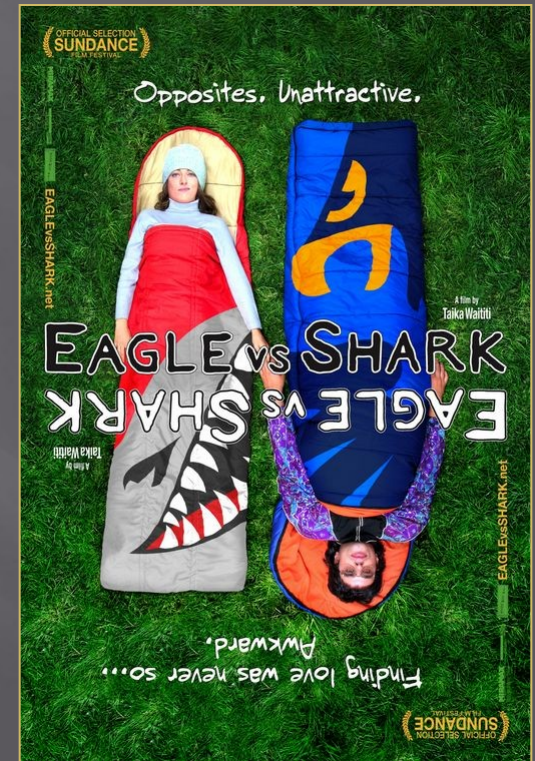
It also offers a timeless upper-class fantasy of antiquated architecture/interiors, thrift-store chic, and guitar rock

And it depicts its central characters as sub-heroic; their flaws prevent us from being overly invested in their pain



# Screening II: *Eagle Vs. Shark* (2007)

1. How does this film use the Quirky Model aesthetically, narratively, thematically?
2. How did you respond emotionally to the characters and situations in this film?
3. Did you react differently than you did to *Rushmore*?



# **“I Suffer from Depression. It makes me pretty intense. I Just do stuff without thinking”**

I feel this film leans more heavily than *Rushmore* into quirky’s thematic core of human pain and trauma

Here involvement in media arts is portrayed as desperate; as a delusional regression into (unhappy) childhoods

It also replaces the figure of the youthful rebel with that of the emotionally and socially immature (wo)man child

Less single-minded eccentrics, these are awkward people suffering from low self-esteem and few real prospects

This is a sad world of bullying, festering rage, suicide, bereavement, paternal failure, alienation, and suffering





# “I Guess I’ve Got to Keep Creating or I’ll Die”

The film’s differently constructed artificial look supports its more ironic/less sincere use of the Quirky model

The heritage, wealth, and prestige of *Rushmore*’s look is replaced by a look that is impoverished, outdated, messy

Unlike *Rushmore*’s context of privilege, this film prevents its damaged souls from being romanticized as eccentrics

The film balances this bleak content with cute animation, uplifting guitar pop, and a hyper-sincere empathic heroine

It also regulates its tone with increased slapstick comedy, comedy of embarrassment, and taboo-busting comedy



## **Quirky Before Anderson (and Co.)**

The emphasis placed on Anderson (and his peers) also risks distorting quirky cinema's historical trajectory within Anglophone film industries

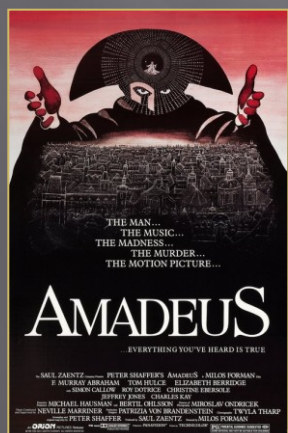
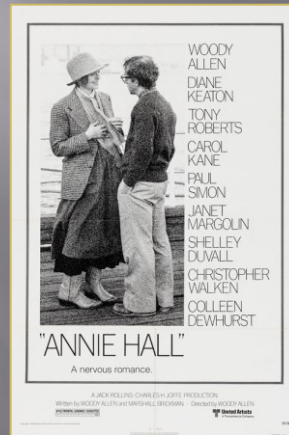
Granted, the 2000s represented a highly visible and prolific period of Quirky Cinema production, but such films were made before this too

Anderson's predecessors – Hal Ashby, Stanley Kubrick, Woody Allen, and Milos Foreman – dabbled in quirky cinema in the 1970s and 1980s

Crucially, one of the most visible and celebrated directors of the last forty years has consistently used the Quirky Model: Tim Burton

And, reflecting broader cultural blind-spots about American-branded cinema, the Quirky Model has been used for some major blockbusters

# Before Wes Anderson, there was Quirky





## **In Sum**

While usually associated with a small group of directors including Wes Anderson, Quirky Cinema is also a longstanding media industry format

The Quirky Model was used by some of Anderson's directorial peers, but its use in Hollywood also predates their output by at least thirty years

The Quirky Model pairs emotional drama of developmental struggle with a stylized faux-naïve aesthetic and various forms of comedic content

By inviting us to cheer on the characters, and look down on them, quirky cinema oscillates between ironic detachment and sincere engagement

This combination of elements provides an entertainment safe space for folks to reflect on painful life issues without being overwhelmed by them

# **Next Time...**

Historically, film makers and marketers have combined the Quirky Model with a sophisticated branding strategy ...

Topic: Quirky and Indie Branding

Readings: Newman (2009), Indie Culture.

Home Screenings: *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl* (2015)  
*The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 29 September