

QUIRKY CINEMA: WES ANDERSON (AND BEYOND)

Session Five

Father Figures

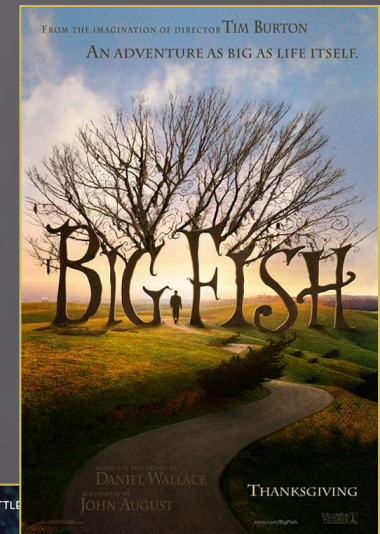
Department of Film & Audiovisual Culture,

Masaryk University

Dr. Richard Nowell

Agenda

1. Quirky and “Problematic” Fatherhood
2. Quirky and Fatherly Redemption
3. Quirky as Father-Child Therapy



Today's Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

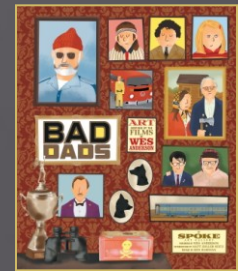
- I. How quirky films are argued routinely to critique father figures.
- II. More sensitive depictions of father figures in these films.
- III. How address to older audiences drives more positive depictions.

Quirky, Fatherhood, and Critical Quicksand

Along with MPDGs, father figures represent the most discussed characters of Wes Anderson films and Quirky Cinema generally



Academic and popular stakeholders invariably frame quirky's fathers negatively, whether they appear on the screen or not



This represents a critical double-bind of Quirky Cinema; exclude father figures and they are deemed guilty of abandonment

If featured they – but rarely mothers – are deemed culpable for the personal development issues of quirky cinema's protagonists



This critical quicksand casts Quirky Cinema as a veritable outlier to recent American cinema's general championing of fatherhood

Chris Robe and Andersonian Father Figures

Robe's essay on the depiction of patriarchs in early Wes Anderson films offers an exemplary view on father figures in Quirky Cinema generally

Its explanatory value is limited as it only links film content and themes to broad cultural forces, but it still offers us a useful springboard, so...

1. What psychological shortcomings characterize older males in Wes Anderson's films?
2. Why do they suffer from these issues?
3. How do these issues affect their conduct as fathers?

Bad, Sad, Mad Dads.

Echoing claims about Quirky Cinema more generally, Robe argues that Anderson's father figures are characterized by a flawed masculinity

1. They are emotionally detached and alienated from family life as they are trapped by their Victorian anti-emotional masculine performance
2. This performance prevents them from ever mourning, accepting, and moving on from personal losses, leading to a state of melancholy
3. They engage in aggressive acts as a socially-sanctioned substitute for the pain their trauma has caused them but which they cannot express
4. This characterization is supported by these flawed fathers expressing intolerance by way of racist and homophobic rhetoric

Relativizing the Andersonian “Bad Dad”

Robe’s claims are a little guilty of cherry-picking examples, and down-playing character development in the films he discusses



In reality, his examples feature fathers who are well-meaning or who try to address shortcomings to bond with their offspring



Rushmore: Blum is not a bad father per. se., he is depressed at his family; Mr. Fischer is a supportive albeit unambitious father



Royal Tenenbaums: Royal seeks and finds redemption. Chas overcomes his well-meant, trauma-induced overprotectiveness



The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou: Steve overcomes his fears to embrace fatherhood, learning from his role model Esteban.



A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood (2019)

1. How are fathers – literal and symbolic – depicted in this film?
2. How might this material be geared to fathers in the audience?
3. How does this film suggest quirky cinema itself can support fathers in the audience?



“I Love You Too, Dad”

This film clearly responds to the notion that the father figures Robe describes are typical of Anderson’s (and quirky) films



Mr. Rogers represents a positive masculinity that addresses trauma, embraces emotionality, and help others to do the same



His masculine sincerity is contrasted to two fathers: both angry, hurt, emotionally distanced and suffocated by irony



Their unresolved traumas doom them to cause their children emotional suffering, perpetuating a generational cycle of pain

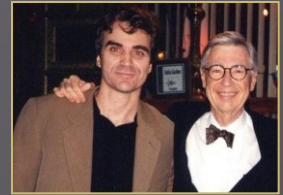


Through their engagement with Mr. Rogers, they too are able to come to terms with their demons, and become better fathers



“Its Not Really About Mr. Rogers. I Mean It Is. But It’s So You”.

The film addresses the tensions between irony and sincerity characterizing the Quirky model it uses and comments on



It suggest that, when it comes to close interpersonal familial relations, such tensions need resolving through sincerity



Its overarching themes and narrative arc concern the capacity for sincere media to help us overcome generational grievance



Lloyd learns to overcome his cynicism towards Mr. Rogers, recognizing that his persona is not to be processed ironically

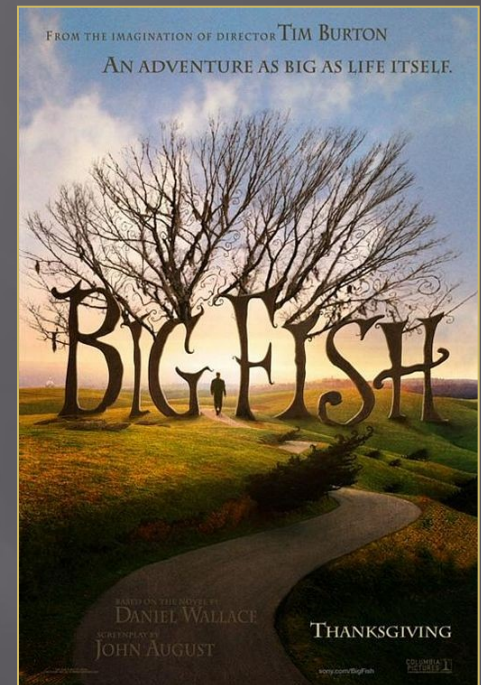


This position in turn encourages audiences to overcome their irony to appreciate the film’s own sincere father-child advice



Big Fish (2003)

1. How are fathers – literal and symbolic – depicted in this film?
2. How might this material be geared to fathers in the audience?
3. How does this film suggest quirky cinema itself can support fathers in the audience?



“A Man Tells His Stories so Many Times That He Becomes The Stories”.

This film broaches similar themes albeit more obliquely; i.e. relations between fatherhood, forgiveness, and quirky media



It suggests quirky storytelling catalyzes such things, providing indirect means to confront painful or banal personal realities



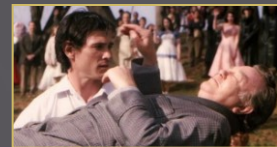
It links family fables to the irony and sincerity of the quirky model; Ed's fantasies serve similar functions to the film itself



It also frames imminent fatherhood as a time to reflect on ones upbringing, striving for understanding, and ending grievances



Will realizes his father uses quirky stories – like we may do this film – to cope with our insecurities, worries, and traumas



Recent American Cinema and Fatherhood

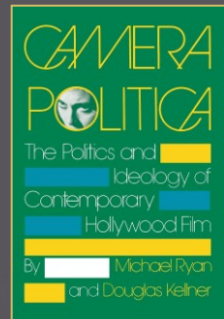
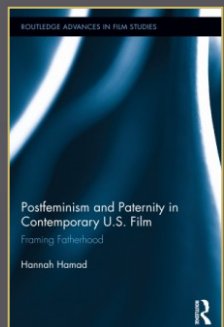
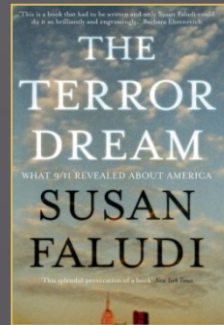
If true, Quirky cinema's negative depictions of father figures counters Hollywood's generally positive depictions of fathers

Ryan & Kellner traces this back to cultural shifts embodying the hypermasculinity of the Reagan Whitehouse (1981–1988)

Moreover, Hannah Hamad has argued that the 2000s saw a surge in films that showcased the redemption arcs of father figures

Echoing Susan Faludi, Hammad casts this shift as part of a post-9/11 American cultural rehabilitation of traditional paternity

Such accounts sidestep industry logic though, presenting a form of calculated content-tailoring as osmosis of the zeitgeist



Retaining Gen-X Parents (To Be)

More convincing accounts also involves considering the films' targeted audiences and the topics thought to concern them



These films were partly envisaged for the Gen-Xers who drove indie culture, and had reached parenting age as quirky surged



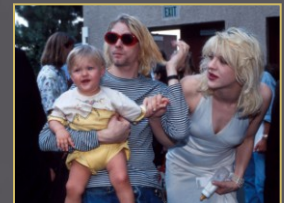
They were seen as emotionally scarred as their boomer parents had put professional ambition before hands-on parenting



Gen-Xers were avid media consumers set to undergo a lifestyle change that had traditionally curtailed moviegoing: parenting



By depicting the challenges and rewards of parenting, the films employed a means of retaining the interest of this key audience



Capturing Millennial Youth

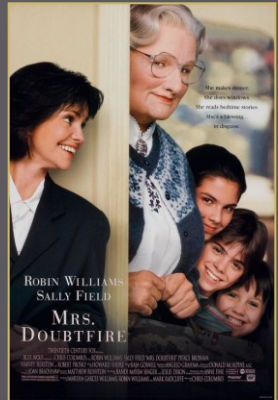
Due to its structurally-bound themes of challenging personal development, Quirky Cinema is also a youth-oriented format

A central concern of postwar youth-oriented cinema has been youth's relationships to the adult-world, esp. to their parents

Such relationships were often presented as antagonistic, using generational conflict to brand the films as youth-oriented

But millennials were the first kids raised with Family Films that targeted families with tales of multigenerational growth

Such themes also became more prevalent in non-quirky films aimed at this generation as it entered into childrearing age



Quirky and/as Parent-Child Therapy

These conditions, fragile hipster identity, and quirky's focus on personal growth have encouraged a cinema of family therapy

Consequently, quirky films often signify a point of convergence with the Hollywood Family Film; itself a therapeutic cinema

Divergence lies in their modes of address: family films address kids and parents separately; quirky films address them as one

Thus, the youth and post-youth target audience is addressed as both wounded offspring and budding parents aiming for better

These conditions have incentivized a more balanced picture of fatherhood, spotlighting failings, forgiveness, and aspiration



In Sum

One of the most prevalent discussion points around Quirky Cinema has been the negative depictions of father figures as absent or deeply flawed

This position often lays the blame at old fashioned masculinity wherein emotional detachment prevents processing loss, leading to aggression

But quirky films often depict fathers sympathetically; as struggling, as overcoming parenting challenges, and as misunderstood support systems

Such portrayals represent an effort to appeal to Gen-Xers and millennials who have become parents or who expect to do so in the future

Seen this way, quirky fatherhood is less about enabling self-pitying hipsters than promoting intergenerational understanding and forgiveness

Next Time...

This focus on interpersonal and psychosocial challenges has led some to claim Quirky is guilty of sidestepping serious political engagement

Topic: Quirky and Politics

Readings: Bannister, 214–224.

Home Screenings: *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014)
Jojo Rabbit (2019)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 8 December