

QUIRKY CINEMA: WES ANDERSON (AND BEYOND)

Session Six

Quirky & Politics

Department of Film & Audiovisual Culture,

Masaryk University

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Agenda

1. Quirky as Apolitical Cinema
2. Political Quirky
3. Quirky and Politicized Audiences



Today's Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

- I. Why quirky cinema is often considered apolitical.
- II. Why some quirky films do engage with serious socio-political concerns.
- III. Why this engagement is sometimes presented obliquely in the films.

Quirky and the (Not) Political (Enough)

Critics often complain quirky films' focus on personal issues like psycho-social development and taste renders them apolitical



This exemplifies a broader clash of values between Anglophone entertainment sector and much of the Anglophone critical sphere



It has arisen because the critical sphere has become increasingly leftist in its cultural politics, whether knowingly or otherwise



Marxist preoccupations with social groups and power dynamics have come to dominate popular (and academic) film criticism



Some leftists are critical of Hollywood as they feel it depicts the personal impact of phenomena over their broader social impact



Quirky and the Masked Political

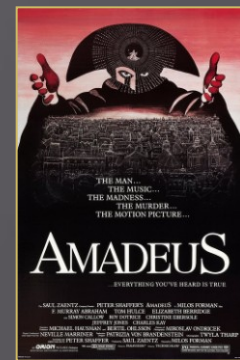
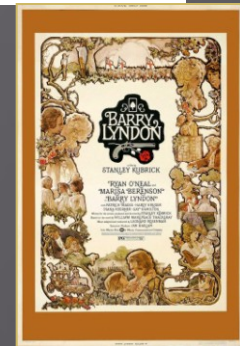
Whether we subscribe to such views on filmed entertainment, claims of Quirky cinema's apoliticality are rather overstated

After all, many quirky films thematize serious sociopolitical issues, especially those important to their target audiences

Many quirky films made before Anderson rose to prominence were ignored, others were labelled differently if overtly political

This begets a bizarre logic dictating the quirky format is apolitical, then a political quirky film is not really a quirky film

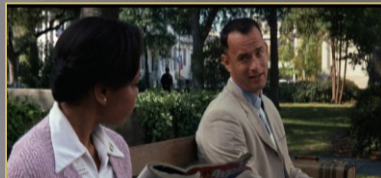
Take a renowned ironic-sincere film about the intersection of the personal and the political, that is rarely if ever labelled quirky



The Biggest Quirky Film (N)Ever Made

THE SINCERE-PERSONAL

THE IRONIC-POLITICAL



Matthew Bannister, *Jojo Rabbit*, and Politics

Bannister's chapter is a rare academic discussion of a quirky film that centres on its relationships to politics, on the screen and in front of it

His brief pairing of the reception of *Jojo Rabbit* and his own insights on the film opens up a different way to examine this type of film

1. How did issues of social critique factor into the popular reception of *Jojo Rabbit*?
2. What does Bannister feel about the film's socio-political engagement?
3. Where do you stand on this issue?

A Cluster-Cuss of Failings

Bannister suggests that *Jojo Rabbit*'s quirkiness – its indie branding and use of irony – prevented it being received as a successful satire

He suggests this was exacerbated by a vague marketing campaign, and questions over whether its director was satirizing racism or anti-racism

He adds the film's satirical potential of showing Nazism through a child's eyes was undermined by its inclusion of over-the-top caricatures

He suggests the buffoonish characterization of the Nazis undermines an appreciation of the seriousness of Nazi atrocities needed for satire

He also suggests a focus on unrequited young love imbues the film with a sincere dimension that overwhelms detached political satire

Screening I: *Jojo Rabbit* (2019)

1. In terms of socio-political themes, what is this film really about?
2. How does this film use historical narratives to speak to contemporary socio-political issues?
3. What does it suggest art/media like itself can contribute to socio-political problems?



Because its Not Really About Then and There

I propose that it is less the film per se, than critics like Bannister that struggle to reconcile *Jojo Rabbit*'s irony with its sincerity



Their troubles evidently derive in part from their mistaken view that the film's principal satirical target is the Third Reich



Rather, this film allegorizes current rightwing radicalization in the US, under Trump's sway; hence the US-German references



It imagines a contemporary US where authoritarian ideology warps reality to generate anti-humanistic, pathological tribalism



Casting Waititi as Hitler, implicates the media industries therein, suggesting they must reevaluate their sociopolitical engagement



Screening II: *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014)

1. In terms of socio-political themes, what is this film really about?
2. How does this film use historical narratives to speak to contemporary socio-political issues?
3. What does it suggest art/media like itself can contribute to socio-political problems?



“Glimmers of Civilization Left in This Barbaric Slaughterhouse that Was Once Known as Humanity”.

This film offers a promotion of Quirky Cinema as a means of addressing and coping with traumatic oppression of all types



The film tells its story via memories fragmented and shaped by traumatic retreat into fantasy and media representations



One strand concerns coping strategies developed by those directly effected by extreme discrimination like the Holocaust



Another draws parallels between anti-LGBTQ+ practices and the Holocaust by centralizing a persecuted queer character



The cathartic protection of the painting and the hotel conveys a general promotion of therapeutic media ... like the film itself



Quirky and Satire

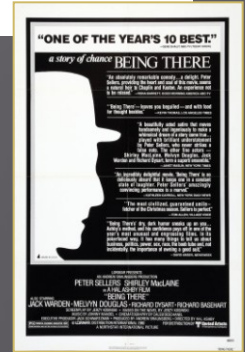
Quirky has long boasted a politically engaged wing that invites audiences to consider pressing sociopolitical issues of the day

These films invariably examine topics relevant to the changing concerns and values of their young hipster targeted audience

What this means is that sometimes folks forget or simply do not know how important certain topics once were to this audience

Debate raged about whether *Scream* was parody or straight; it was a quirky satire of real-world debates on media and violence

Folks underestimate the extent to which the personal issues in quirky films profoundly impact swathes of western societies



From Personal Challenges to Political Ones

The quirky format lends itself ideally to political satire, due to its modes of engagement, artificial aesthetics, and core themes



They harmonize with satire's distanced allegorical critique of issues, enabling a bearable engagement with tough themes



Quirky's structurally-bound themes of personal development challenges are easily recalibrated to focus on societal issues



Its aesthetics' insulation of viewers from personal development themes is transferable to moderating political themes' impact



Its ironic-sincere mode is thus ideally suited to provoking bona fide outrage and distanced bewilderment at political absurdities



Quirky and Targets of Critique

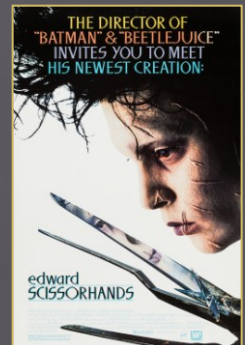
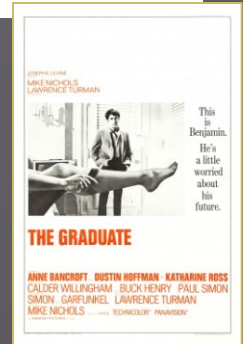
Newman notes Quirky's cultivation of hipsters incentivizes films' engagement with left-liberal positions and interests

Early cases examined countercultural issues like middle-class anomie, corruption, and family as oppressive structure

1990s films satirized rightwing America, including an allegory of suburban conformity in *Edward Scissorhands*

Recent cases centralized major topical socio-political issues pertinent to liberals values, including those of activist Gen Z

As we have seen, newer films condemned the intersection of politicized discrimination based on race and sexual identity



In Sum

Quirky Cinema has long been accused of prioritizing issues of personal development and taste over broad-scale socio-political engagement

This position derives from, and reinforces, the association of the films with hipster audiences often dismissed as self-absorbed fashionistas

However, it is clear that some quirky films seek to pair their structurally-bound themes of personal development to serious issues of their day

Quirky's ironic-sincere mode of representation and engagement echoes the ironic-sincere modes of satire, facilitating socio-political engagement

This shift may indicate the future of quirky, with youth audiences seen as increasingly engaged in issues related to identity politics and democracy

Course Summary

1. Less a product of a distinctive directorial vision, Quirky is an industry format inviting a combination of ironic detachment and sincere engagement
2. Driven less by directorial tastes, Quirky uses indie branding to position the films as authentic, autonomous, alternatives to an imagined mainstream
3. Less a coincidence of shared tastes between creatives and audiences, quirky represents a calculated effort to target-market films to youthful hipsters
4. While condemned as sexist conduits of male self-betterment, Quirky's MPDGs are usually depicted in ways that echo this oft-unfounded critique
5. While often associated with ineffectual fathers, Quirky often addresses audiences of parenting age with themes of rehabilitating flawed fatherhood
6. While often condemned for prioritizing personal matters and taste, Quirky sometimes centralizes socio-political topics, including its roles therein

Final Paper

Topic: Choice of Five Prompts (derived from sessions 2-6)

General Qualities: Focused, direct, well-supported, argument-driven

Scholarly Engagement: Relevant essential set readings for top grades

Targeted Learning Outcomes/Areas of Assessment: See Syllabus

Wordcount: circa 1500-2000.

Due Date: Midnight CET Sunday 8 January 2023

Feedback: One-Page spotlighting strengths, shortcomings, tips